

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2006 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 283 (Delegates Kach and Conroy)
Environmental Matters

Vehicle Laws - Vehicle Registration Plates for Recipients of the Purple Heart -
Surviving Spouse

This bill requires the surviving spouse of a deceased holder of a special registration for recipient of a Purple Heart medal to surrender the rear registration plate to the Motor Vehicle Administration (MVA) upon expiration of the registration. The spouse may keep the front registration plate, but may not display it on a vehicle.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: None. The bill codifies existing practice.

Local Effect: None.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Current Law: A recipient of a combat-related, individually earned armed services medal may apply to the MVA for special registration plates for a Class A (passenger) vehicle, a Class E (truck) vehicle with one ton of capacity or less, a Class M (multipurpose) vehicle, or a Class D (motorcycle) vehicle. The applicant must provide proof of the receipt of the medal, and proof of an honorable discharge from the armed services, if the applicant has separated. The applicant must pay an additional fee for the registration plates. The registration plates must depict an emblem or logo that depicts the medal. The MVA may set an additional registration fee for medal plates to recover costs. That fee is not credited to the Gasoline and Motor Vehicle Revenue Account; as such, it is not shared with local governments.

Background: The Purple Heart is awarded to members of the armed forces of the U.S. who are wounded by an instrument of war in the hands of the enemy and posthumously to the next of kin in the name of those who are killed in action or die of wounds received in action. It is specifically a combat decoration.

The Purple Heart is the oldest military decoration in the world in present use and the first American award made available to the common soldier. It was initially created as the Badge of Military Merit in 1782 by one of the world's most famed and best loved heroes – General George Washington. The U.S. War Department revived the Purple Heart decoration on February 22, 1932 to celebrate the bicentennial of Washington's birth.

Since its inception, it is estimated that 1,635,000 Purple Heart medals have been awarded to members of the United States military. In 2003 it was estimated there were 500,000 living Purple Heart recipients.

Forty-nine out of 50 states offer a special registration plate for recipients of a Purple Heart (Hawaii does not have a state central registry for motor vehicles). The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that approximately 15% of Maryland's eligible veterans have obtained specialized license plates. There are approximately 1,567 active Purple Heart registrations in Maryland.

At least three states (Texas, Arizona, and Mississippi) have passed legislation specifically authorizing widows and widowers of recipients of these special plates to keep them as a valid registration for use on a vehicle.

The MVA advises that while it requires a surviving spouse to surrender the registration upon expiration after the death of the recipient, it does allow the surviving spouse as an unofficial policy to keep the front registration plate as a keepsake. The spouse must request the plate at an MVA office, and the front plate is marked as lost in the computer.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Military Order of the Purple Heart, Department of Veterans Affairs, Maryland Department of Transportation, Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 3, 2006
nas/ljm

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