

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2021 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 1358 (Delegate Rogers)
Health and Government Operations

Veterans Affairs – Office of Communications and Public Affairs – Veterans
Advocacy and Education Act

This bill renames the Outreach and Advocacy Program within the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) to be the Office of Communications and Public Affairs. The office, in collaboration with the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC), must actively help veterans and their dependents become aware of and access education and training benefits to which they are entitled. The bill alters and expands the responsibilities of MDVA and the office as they relate to veterans services, including the contents of the department’s annual report. The bill also makes stylistic and conforming changes. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2021.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: The bill does not substantially change State activities or operations. MHEC can collaborate with MDVA using existing budgeted resources. Revenues are not affected.

Local Effect: The bill is not anticipated to materially affect local government operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary: The director of the office must refer veterans, veterans’ dependents, or veterans’ survivors to the appropriate governmental unit for claim assistance. The director must serve, as necessary, as the Secretary’s designee to appropriate commissions, workgroups, and councils.

The office must (1) manage the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program and Fund; (2) coordinate the responsibilities of veterans' services specialists; and (3) manage specified communications mediums, customer service training, and intergovernmental relations.

MDVA must communicate welcome home information to veterans returning to the State.

The bill also alters the contents of the department's annual report to the Governor and the General Assembly by requiring the inclusion of information on the number of (1) public contacts made by the office; (2) veterans enrolled in the U.S. Veterans Health Administration; and (3) veterans receiving benefits. In addition, the annual report must include a status of the accomplishments for, efficacy of, efficiency of, and level of resources available for the office, the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program and Fund, and veterans' services specialists.

Current Law: Chapter 290 of 2006 established the Outreach and Advocacy Program within MDVA. The program ensures veterans are informed of available federal and State services, benefits, and assistance and brings issues related to veterans' needs to the attention of the Governor and the General Assembly. The program must help veterans and their dependents access specified benefits. The director of the program (who is appointed by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs) must develop mechanisms for outreach, and MDVA must develop and maintain a database of Maryland veterans.

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs must report annually by December 31 to the Governor and the General Assembly on, among other things, the outreach and advocacy program, the benefits that have been requested and received by veterans and their families, the status of various veterans programs, and the estimated impact of the current military actions on the needs of veterans in the future.

Chapter 416 of 2017 established the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program and Fund. The program is designed to refer eligible veterans to selected nonprofit training organizations to be paired with "service dogs" or "support dogs" and facilitate their training. MDVA must select at least one nonprofit training entity that meets specified qualifications to carry out elements of the program. Chapter 465 of 2019 expanded the program to include nonprofit training entities that use trained therapy horses for interaction with veterans. Revenue from the fund may be used only to pay a nonprofit training entity and for administrative costs of the program. Expenditures from the fund may be made only in accordance with the State budget.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Designated Cross File: SB 948 (Senator Klausmeier)(By Request - Departmental - Veterans Affairs) - Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs.

Information Source(s): Maryland Higher Education Commission; Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs; Department of Legislative Services

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rh/jc

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