

Chapter 73

(Senate Bill 654)

AN ACT concerning

**Veterans Affairs – ~~Office of Communications and Public Affairs~~  
Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program – Veterans Advocacy and  
Education Act**

FOR the purpose of altering the name of the Outreach and Advocacy Program in the Department of Veterans Affairs to be the ~~Office of Communications and Public Affairs~~ Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program; requiring the ~~Office Program~~, in collaboration with the Maryland Higher Education Commission, to actively help veterans and their dependents become aware of and access certain benefits; altering certain responsibilities of the director of the ~~Office Program~~; repealing a certain requirement that the Department develop and maintain a certain database of veterans in the State; altering certain responsibilities of the Department; altering certain responsibilities of the ~~Office Program~~; and generally relating to the ~~Office of Communications and Public Affairs~~ Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program.

BY repealing and reenacting, with amendments,

Article – State Government

Section ~~9-940 through 9-940~~ and ~~9-942 through 9-944~~ to be under the amended part “Part V. ~~Office of Communications and Public Affairs~~ Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program”; and 9-946

Annotated Code of Maryland  
(2021 Replacement Volume)

BY repealing and reenacting, without amendments,

Article – State Government

Section 9-941

Annotated Code of Maryland  
(2021 Replacement Volume)

SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND,  
That the Laws of Maryland read as follows:

**Article – State Government**

Part V. ~~[Outreach~~ **COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH,** and Advocacy Program] ~~OFFICE  
OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS.~~

9-940.

(a) In this part, ~~["Program"]~~ ~~"OFFICE"~~ means PART, "PROGRAM" MEANS the ~~Outreach~~ COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, and Advocacy Program] ~~OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS.~~

(b) There is ~~an A~~ ~~Outreach~~ COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, and Advocacy Program] ~~OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS~~ in the Department.

(c) The purpose of the ~~Program]~~ ~~OFFICE~~ is to ensure that:

(1) veterans are informed of the services, benefits, and assistance available to them from the State and federal government **AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS;** and

(2) general issues relating to veterans needs are brought to the attention of the Governor and the General Assembly in order for them to be addressed.

9-941.

(a) The Secretary shall appoint a director for the ~~Program]~~ ~~OFFICE.~~

(b) The director is entitled to the salary provided in the State budget.

(c) The director shall administer and coordinate the ~~Program]~~ ~~OFFICE.~~

9-942.

(a) The ~~Outreach and Advocacy~~ Program] ~~OFFICE~~ shall actively help veterans and their dependents become aware of and access any service or benefit to which they are entitled including:

- (1) tax benefits;
- (2) health care benefits;
- (3) disability benefits; **AND**
- (4) pension benefits]; and
- (5) education].

**(B) THE ~~OFFICE~~ PROGRAM, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE MARYLAND HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION, SHALL ACTIVELY HELP VETERANS AND THEIR DEPENDENTS BECOME AWARE OF AND ACCESS EDUCATION AND TRAINING BENEFITS TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED.**

**[(b)] (C)** The director of the ~~Program]~~ ~~OFFICE~~ shall:

(1) support veterans and their dependents through the service or benefit process; and

[(2) keep in contact with the appropriate governmental unit as to the status of each claim of a veteran, a veteran's dependent, or a veteran's survivor.]

**(2) REFER VETERANS, VETERANS' DEPENDENTS, AND VETERANS' SURVIVORS TO THE APPROPRIATE GOVERNMENTAL UNIT FOR CLAIM ASSISTANCE.**

9-943.

(a) (1) For the purposes of reaching any veteran, veteran's dependent, or veteran's survivor in need of assistance in obtaining services or benefits granted by the law, the director shall develop and implement [an outreach] **A COMMUNICATIONS AND ~~PUBLIC AFFAIRS~~ OUTREACH** plan.

(2) In order to carry out the director's responsibilities under paragraph (1) of this subsection, the director may:

(i) enter into contracts; and

(ii) work with governmental units and community-based organizations, including the Maryland Department of Health, the Department of Aging, faith-based groups, veterans groups, senior centers, adult day care centers, institutions of higher education, and other entities the director considers appropriate.

(b) (1) The director shall develop mechanisms for outreach to be disseminated by direct mail and through community-based veterans organizations, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Human Services, the Maryland Department of Health, and any other State agency or unit the director considers appropriate.

(2) [The mechanisms for outreach] **COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS** shall include:

(i) [the development of a pamphlet] **DESIGNING MARKETING MATERIALS** describing the services provided by the [~~Outreach and Advocacy Program~~] **DEPARTMENT**;

(ii) a regular **ELECTRONIC** newsletter;

(iii) brochures describing various benefits or any other issue or benefit of interest to veterans or their dependents; and

(iv) other measures the director considers appropriate.

(c) The Department shall [develop and maintain a database of veterans in the State] **COMMUNICATE WELCOME HOME INFORMATION TO VETERANS RETURNING TO THE STATE.**

(d) The Department, in conjunction with the types of community-based organizations listed in subsection (a)(2) of this section, shall develop [a survey] **COMMUNICATION TOOLS** to assist in identifying veterans and dependents who may be eligible for [pension programs] **BENEFITS AND PROGRAMS OFFERED BY THE DEPARTMENT.**

(e) The ~~{Program}~~ **OFFICE** shall:

(1) [in conjunction with other governmental units and community-based groups, seek out veterans and their dependents who may be eligible for pension program benefits; and] **MANAGE THE MARYLAND VETERANS SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAM AND FUND ESTABLISHED UNDER PART VIII OF THIS SUBTITLE;**

(2) [provide wounded or disabled veterans with information on available services and benefits and support in obtaining these services and benefits] **COORDINATE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF VETERANS' SERVICES SPECIALISTS DESIGNATED UNDER § 9-944 OF THIS SUBTITLE; AND**

(3) **MANAGE DEPARTMENT MEDIA RELATIONS, WEB CONTENT, SOCIAL MEDIA, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS, CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING, AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS.**

(F) **THE DIRECTOR SHALL SERVE, AS NECESSARY, AS THE SECRETARY'S DESIGNEE TO APPROPRIATE COMMISSIONS, WORKGROUPS, AND COUNCILS.**

9-944.

(a) In this section, "specialist" means an employee designated by a governmental unit who is responsible for responding to and assisting veterans who are employed by the unit or who contact the unit for assistance.

(b) Each governmental unit shall:

(1) designate an employee of the unit, who to the extent practicable is a veteran, as a veterans' services specialist for the unit and whose duties include the coordination of veterans' services with the Department;

(2) provide the Department with any nonprotected or nonprivate information about services the unit provides to veterans; and

(3) post on the unit’s website:

(i) all services available for veterans from the unit;

(ii) the contact information for the unit’s veterans’ services specialist; and

(iii) a link to the Department with the contact information for the director of the ~~Outreach and Advocacy Program in the Department~~ **OFFICE**.

(c) The veterans’ services specialist shall:

(1) coordinate the provision of veterans’ services available through the unit with the Department; and

(2) attend annual training that the Department provides concerning the coordination of veterans’ services.

(d) On request for services by a veteran, a governmental unit that does not provide services to veterans shall direct the veteran to contact the Department and provide the veteran with the Department contact information.

(e) The Department shall:

(1) coordinate a meeting each quarter, or as otherwise necessary, with governmental units to discuss and receive information concerning the implementation of the requirements of this section; and

(2) on or before January 15 each year, report on the implementation of the requirements of this section to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2–1257 of this article, the General Assembly.

~~Part VI. Reporting.~~

9–946.

The Secretary shall submit a report by December 31 of each year to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2–1257 of this article, the General Assembly, that includes:

(1) the number of:

(i) requests for help in obtaining benefits; [and]

(ii) [veterans, veterans’ dependents, and veterans’ survivors helped]

**PUBLIC CONTACTS MADE** by the ~~Outreach and Advocacy Program by category~~ **OFFICE**

~~OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS~~ BY THE COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, AND ADVOCACY PROGRAM;

[(2) the benefits obtained through the Outreach and Advocacy Program by category;

(3) the average length of time it takes to process benefit requests and for a recipient to access health benefits;]

**(III) VETERANS ENROLLED IN THE UNITED STATES VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION; AND**

**(IV) VETERANS RECEIVING BENEFITS;**

[(4) (2) the average amount of disability and pension benefits received by qualified individuals in this State compared to individuals in other states;

[(5) a detailed description of the outreach plan in the Outreach and Advocacy Program;]

[(6) (3) an account of the costs of operating the ~~{Outreach~~ COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, and Advocacy Program] ~~OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS;~~

[(7) (4) a status of the accomplishments for, efficacy of, efficiency of, and level of resources available for each of the following programs:

(i) cemetery;

(ii) memorial;

(iii) service;

(iv) veterans homes; [and]

~~{(v) outreach~~ COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, and advocacy;]

~~(v) OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS;~~

**(VI) MARYLAND VETERANS SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAM AND FUND; AND**

**(VII) VETERANS' SERVICES SPECIALISTS;**

[(8)] (5) a general assessment of the status of veterans in the State;

[(9)] (6) the estimated impact current military operations are likely to have on the needs of veterans in the future;

[(10)] (7) the status of federal veterans programs as they relate to Maryland veterans; and

[(11)] (8) any other issues concerning veterans that the Secretary considers appropriate.

SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect July 1, 2022.

**Approved by the Governor, April 12, 2022.**