

SENATE BILL 654

P1
SB 948/21 – EHE

2lr1253
CF HB 279

By: **Senator Klausmeier**

Introduced and read first time: February 4, 2022

Assigned to: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

A BILL ENTITLED

1 AN ACT concerning

2 **Veterans Affairs – Office of Communications and Public Affairs – Veterans**
3 **Advocacy and Education Act**

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

13 BY repealing and reenacting, with amendments,
14 Article – State Government
15 Section 9–940 through 9–944 to be under the amended part “Part V. Office of
16 Communications and Public Affairs”; and 9–946
17 Annotated Code of Maryland
18 (2021 Replacement Volume)

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

21 **Article – State Government**

22 Part V. [Outreach and Advocacy Program] **OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND**
23 **PUBLIC AFFAIRS.**

24 9–940.

EXPLANATION: CAPITALS INDICATE MATTER ADDED TO EXISTING LAW.

[Brackets] indicate matter deleted from existing law.



1 (a) In this part, ["Program"] **"OFFICE"** means the [Outreach and Advocacy
2 Program] **OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS**.

3 (b) There is an [Outreach and Advocacy Program] **OFFICE OF**
4 **COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS** in the Department.

5 (c) The purpose of the [Program] **OFFICE** is to ensure that:

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

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

10 9-941.

11 (a) The Secretary shall appoint a director for the [Program] **OFFICE**.

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

13 (c) The director shall administer and coordinate the [Program] **OFFICE**.

14 9-942.

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

18 (1) tax benefits;

19 (2) health care benefits;

20 (3) disability benefits; **AND**

21 (4) pension benefits[; and

22 (5) education].

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

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

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

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

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

7 9-943.

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

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

14 (i) enter into contracts; and

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

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

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

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

28 (ii) a regular ELECTRONIC newsletter;

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

31 (iv) other measures the director considers appropriate.

32 (c) The Department shall [develop and maintain a database of veterans in the

1 State] **COMMUNICATE WELCOME HOME INFORMATION TO VETERANS RETURNING TO**
2 **THE STATE.**

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

8 (e) The [Program] **OFFICE** shall:

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

13 (2) [provide wounded or disabled veterans with information on available
14 services and benefits and support in obtaining these services and benefits] **COORDINATE**
15 **THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF VETERANS' SERVICES SPECIALISTS DESIGNATED UNDER**
16 **§ 9-944 OF THIS SUBTITLE; AND**

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

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

22 9-944.

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

26 (b) Each governmental unit shall:

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

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

32 (3) post on the unit's website:

- 1 (i) all services available for veterans from the unit;
- 2 (ii) the contact information for the unit's veterans' services
3 specialist; and
- 4 (iii) a link to the Department with the contact information for the
5 director of the [Outreach and Advocacy Program in the Department] **OFFICE**.

6 (c) The veterans' services specialist shall:

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

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

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

14 (e) The Department shall:

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

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

21 Part VI. Reporting.

22 9-946.

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

25 (1) the number of:

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

27 (ii) [veterans, veterans' dependents, and veterans' survivors helped]
28 **PUBLIC CONTACTS MADE** by the [Outreach and Advocacy Program by category] **OFFICE**
29 **OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS**;

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

1 category;

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

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

6 (IV) VETERANS RECEIVING BENEFITS;

7 [(4) (2) the average amount of disability and pension benefits received
8 by qualified individuals in this State compared to individuals in other states;

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

11 [(6) (3) an account of the costs of operating the [Outreach and Advocacy
12 Program] OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS;

13 [(7) (4) a status of the accomplishments for, efficacy of, efficiency of, and
14 level of resources available for each of the following programs:

15 (i) cemetery;

16 (ii) memorial;

17 (iii) service;

18 (iv) veterans homes; [and]

19 [(v) outreach and advocacy;]

20 (V) OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS;

21 (VI) MARYLAND VETERANS SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAM AND
22 FUND; AND

23 (VII) VETERANS' SERVICES SPECIALISTS;

24 [(8) (5) a general assessment of the status of veterans in the State;

25 [(9) (6) the estimated impact current military operations are likely to
26 have on the needs of veterans in the future;

27 [(10) (7) the status of federal veterans programs as they relate to

1 Maryland veterans; and

2 [(11)] (8) any other issues concerning veterans that the Secretary
3 considers appropriate.

4 SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect July
5 1, 2022.