

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2022 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
Enrolled

Senate Bill 654 (Senator Klausmeier)

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs

Health and Government Operations

Veterans Affairs - Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program -
Veterans Advocacy and Education Act

This bill renames the Outreach and Advocacy Program within the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) to be the Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program. The program, 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 program 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, 2022.**

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 program must refer veterans, veterans' dependents, and 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 program 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 program; (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 communications, outreach, and advocacy; 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: HB 1358 of 2021 was referred to the House Health and Government Operations Committee, but no further action was taken. Its cross file, SB 948, passed in the Senate and was referred to the House Health and Government Operations Committee, but no further action was taken.

Designated Cross File: HB 279 (Delegate Rogers, *et al.*) - Health and Government Operations.

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

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 8, 2022
fnu2/jc Third Reader - March 21, 2022
Revised - Amendment(s) - March 21, 2022
Enrolled - April 4, 2022

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