



Commissioned Officers Association of the United States Public Health Service

Protecting the interests of the USPHS Commissioned Corps since 1951

February 4, 2025

The Honorable Brian J. Feldman
Chair, Education, Energy and the Environment Committee
2 West Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Subject: Request for **FAVORABLE Report with Amendments** – SB 282 – Recreational Equality for Service Members Act

Dear Chair Feldman and Distinguished Members of the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee:

As the Maryland Military Coalition Director representing the Commissioned Officers Association, I write to request a **FAVORABLE Report with Amendments** for SB 282 – Recreational Equality for Service Members Act. As a retired U.S. Public Health Officer, I have first hand witnessed events where members of my Corps were denied benefits given to other service members because of the language written or more likely omitted in legislation. Over the past several years, I have worked relentlessly to try and remediate legislation before it is enacted to ensure that the correct terms and meaning are understood by everyone. As an example, last session I requested an amendment and succeeded in getting inclusion of U.S. Public Health Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration spouses into the Families Serve Act, where service spouses receive priority hiring for Maryland State Government positions. This session, I am asking for a similar amendment to the Burial Equity Act, to codify what is already happening in Maryland State Cemeteries.

SB 282 updates and changes the application of certain provisions of law governing natural resources to apply to **ALL** uniformed services, including both the U.S. Public Health and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Corps Officers who are NOT members of the armed forces. This is important Maryland Statute General Provisions § 1-117 states:

“With respect to any State program of benefits, rights, or privileges applicable to a veteran under this Code, “veteran” includes, if the individual is eligible under 38 U.S.C. § 101, a member of the commissioned corps of:

- (1) the Public Health Service; or
- (2) the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or its predecessor, the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

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However, 38 U.S. Code §101 (2) is less explicit. It states “the term ‘veteran’ means “a person who served in the active military, naval, air or space service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable”.

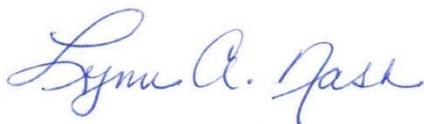
Maryland is home to the headquarters of both the U.S. Public Health Service **AND** National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Corps. In addition to my headquarters, U.S. Public Health Service serve in Department of Health and Human Services operating administrations including the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, the Health Resources and Services Administration, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, as well as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, among others. There are over 1,390 active-duty officers and nearly 7,000 retired officers living in Maryland.

I served for a total of 30 active-duty years in both the Army as well as Public Health. I served under combat during Desert Storm – Desert Shield and also under “combat” fighting public health “wars” including 9/11, the Anthrax Attacks on the Capitol, New York and Florida, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, Ebola and other major public health events. More often than not, my PHS duties placed me in more perilous positions than much of my Army time. I have TWO DD-214s, and by Maryland law, I am a veteran. While I can continue to go about and attempt to right the wrongs of previous legislation on a case-by-case basis, it seems more efficient to update relevant Maryland code to be inclusive of **ALL** uniformed services.

Public Health and NOAA officers work hard and undertake significant activities to improve the health and safety of the Nation. They deserve inclusion in Maryland statute and access to all benefits received by other services. I respectfully request that SB 282 be amended to read that “veteran” has the meaning stated in Maryland Statute General Provisions § 1-117 and request that this Committee give a **FAVORABLE report** to the amended bill.

Senator Simonaire, I am grateful to you for sponsoring not only this bill, but also the other Maryland Statute uniformed services updates that you have offered. I know it took a tremendous amount of work to draft these. Thank you for your on-going support of **ALL** of the uniformed services community in Maryland.

Respectfully,



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