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**SB6 State Government – Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman -Establishment
FAVORABLE
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
January 30, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee. My name is Jim Campbell, President Emeritus for AARP Maryland, and a former Maryland State Delegate. AARP Maryland represents more than 850,000 members statewide and is the largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization advocating for Marylanders aged 50 and older, as well as their families. representing 850,000 members. AARP Maryland supports SB6 and thanks Senator Salling for sponsoring this legislation.

SB6 establishes the office of Ombudsman for Veterans and Military Families within the Department of Veterans and Military Families. The Ombudsman will provide information on the benefits and services available to veterans and their families. Among other responsibilities, this office would be a trusted source to advise members of the military on application for benefits.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

According to the Veterans Administration (VA) website, more veterans are getting VA healthcare and benefits than ever before. Unfortunately, this has led to a rise in the number of “shady individuals and companies”—not accredited by the Veterans Administration—who are offering claims assistance and charging hefty fees for their efforts. These companies are also misleading veterans to think it’s OK to exaggerate disability symptoms to get higher benefits.

The Veterans Administration says that veterans should never pay to file an initial claim for benefits unless it’s through a Veterans Administration accredited attorney, claims agent, or Veterans Service Organization representative. Connecting members of the military and the benefits due them is one of AARP’s four priority goals. The other three are caregiving, fighting fraud, and helping with career and employment opportunities through Veteran and Military Spouses Job Center. AARP’s nationwide membership includes more than six million individuals with current or former military service. The scope and scale of their service and retirement conditions warrant intentional and coordinated services to effectively and efficiently ensure these veterans connect with the benefits they have dutifully earned.

SB6 would provide a distinct trusted source for veterans and their families to learn about the benefit application process and other services available to them. For these reasons, AARP Maryland respectfully asks the Committee for a favorable report on SB6. Please contact Tammy Bresnahan, Senior Director of Advocacy at tbresnahan@aarp.org. or by calling 410-302-8451 with any questions.