

Russ Ware, DVMF Cemetery and Memorial Program Director  
TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF Senate Bill 237  
Burial Equity Act  
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee  
February 6, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and distinguished members of the committee.

I am Russ Ware, the Director of Cemetery & Memorial Programs for the Maryland Department of Veterans & Military Families, and I am here today to speak in favor of SB237 as amended, which will allow National Guardsmen and members of the military reserves to be buried in our state veteran cemeteries, along with their eligible family members. It also removes the state residency requirement for veteran interments, which is necessary for our State to receive VA cemetery grants, as well as for the eligible dependents of out-of-state veterans.

I served 25 years of active duty in the United States Air Force, and during that time, I witnessed firsthand the incredible sacrifices made by National Guardsmen and Reservists. Their dedication to our country is no less significant than that of active-duty personnel, and it's time that we recognize their sacrifices by providing them with the honor of being buried in a state veteran cemetery.

While the federal government provides burial rights for veterans, it does not currently extend this same privilege to Guardsmen and Reservists. This bill will share that privilege and will also remove the existing requirement for veterans to be current or previous Maryland state residents, a change that is necessary to meet the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' eligibility criteria for cemetery grants. This change ensures that all veterans who have served, regardless of where they call home, and their eligible dependents, have access to burial benefits and places a greater focus on honoring their service rather than their residency.

Passing this bill will not only generate revenue for the state cemetery program by regaining the ability to apply for federal cemetery expansion grants but will also help sustain the system and ensure its continued operation for future generations. Also, the program will receive federal funding to cover the costs of out-of-state veterans' burials; however, there will be a financial impact on state funds for the burials of out-of-state dependents, the cost of supporting the growth and expansion of the cemetery program by extending benefits to dependents of out-of-state veterans.

By supporting this bill, Maryland demonstrates that we honor the service of all veterans, whether they served on active duty, the Reserves, or the National Guard. I respectfully ask for a favorable report on SB237 as amended, as it ensures that all who served this nation are given the respect and dignity they have earned.

Thank you for your time and consideration.