

VeteransCaucusLegislationSupportLetter_SB6.pdf

Uploaded by: Benjamin Brooks

Position: FAV



MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY
VETERANS CAUCUS

January 21, 2025

Senator Brian Feldman, Chair
Education, Energy & the Environment Committee
2W Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

Re: SB6, State Government – Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman – Establishment
Hearing Date: January 30, 2025

Dear Chairman Feldman,

Please let this letter serve as notice of the support of the Maryland General Assembly Senate Veterans Caucus for Senate Bill 6.

After review by our respective legislative committee, the Senate Veterans Caucus believes that the above-mentioned legislation would provide a valuable benefit to the veterans of the State of Maryland and requests a favorable report.

With kindest regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Benjamin F. Brooks".

Senator Benjamin Brooks
Senate Chair

cc: Senator Johnny Ray Salling

Maryland Military Coalition SB0006 Written Testimo

Uploaded by: DAVID Dragics

Position: FAV



MARYLAND MILITARY COALITION

Serving Veterans through Legislative Advocacy

January 28, 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** – SB0006 – State Government – Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman – Establishment

Dear Chair Feldman and distinguished members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

On behalf of the members of the Maryland Military Coalition (MMC), I write to recommend a **FAVORABLE report** by the Committee on **SB0006 – State Government – Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman – Establishment**, sponsored by Senator Johnnie Ray Salling. This bill establishes an ombudsman position within the Department of Veterans and Military Families (“DVMF”) with the primary mission of serving as a resource to veterans and military families regarding their rights and access to services.

SB0006 will **help strengthen the link** between the DVMF and the state’s approximately 360,000 veterans,¹ 35,700 active-duty service members, and 25,600 National Guard and Federal Reserve members.² The value of establishing an ombudsman position is that it will **offer a neutral, confidential space for veterans and members of the uniformed services community of Maryland** to raise concerns, investigate complaints, and facilitate conflict resolution without the fear of retaliation. Establishment of an ombudsman position **will also result in providing feedback to the DVMF and the Legislature** about issues affecting the uniformed services community in Maryland so that proactive steps can be taken to address them.

The Maryland Military Coalition **strongly supports** SB0006 and asks for a **FAVORABLE** report from the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee.

¹ <https://veterans.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/04/2024-Annual-Report-FINAL-4.pdf>, Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families 2024 Annual Report

² <https://statepolicy.militaryonesource.mil/state/MD>, Demographic Data, DMDC, December 31, 2023

January 28, 2025

Subject: Request for FAVORABLE Report – SB0006 – State Government – Veterans and Military Families –
Ombudsman – Establishment

The Maryland Military Coalition is a registered non-profit, non-partisan advocacy organization comprised of 22 prominent Maryland-based veteran and military groups, representing over 150,000 service-connected individuals, including those currently serving, veterans, retirees and their families, caregivers, and survivors. Visit our website at <https://www.mdmilcoalition.org/>.

We want to thank Senator Salling for sponsoring this legislation and for his support of the uniformed services community in Maryland.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "David L. Dragics".

David L. Dragics
COL (Ret), U.S. Army
Legislative Director



Member Organizations of the Maryland Military Coalition

Air Force Sergeants Association
American Military Society
American Minority Veterans Research Project
Association of the United States Navy
Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service
Disabled American Veterans
Fleet Reserve Association of Annapolis
Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A
Maryland Air National Guard Retirees' Association
National Active and Retired Federal Employees, Maryland Veterans
Maryland Veterans Chamber of Commerce
Military Officers Association of America
Military Order of the Purple Heart
Military Order of the World Wars
Montford Point Marines of America
National Association of Black Veterans
National Active and Retired Federal Employees, Maryland Veterans
Naval Enlisted Reserve Association
NOAA Association of Commissioned Officers
Platoon 22
Reserve Organization of America
Society of Military Widows
Veterans of Foreign Wars

SB6_AARP_FAV.pdf

Uploaded by: James Campbell

Position: FAV



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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.

Senator Salling Senate Bill 6 Veterans Ombudsman W

Uploaded by: Jarrett Hartsock

Position: FAV

JOHNNY RAY SALLING
Legislative District 6
Baltimore County

Budget and Taxation Committee

Public Safety, Transportation,
and Environment Subcommittee



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JohnnyRay.Salling@senate.state.md.us

THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

Chair Brian J. Feldman

Vice Chair Cheryl C. Kagan

2 West Miller Senate Office Building

Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present Senate Bill 6 - Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman – Establishment.

Senate Bill 6 establishes the Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman within the Department of Veterans and Military Families. This Ombudsman will be a dedicated and impartial resource to our veterans and will help them navigate and access the services and support they deserve.

The Ombudsman will serve as a direct point of contact and source of knowledge for veterans and military families, providing information on their rights and eligibility for services, as well as pointing veterans to programs at both the state and federal level. The Ombudsman will also work with other entities, including private organizations, to ensure that services are provided as intended. This bill also requires that the ombudsman establish a toll-free number in English and other appropriate languages, that will allow veterans and their families to easily connect with someone who can provide assistance.

The Ombudsman shall be appointed by the Secretary of the Department for a five-year term. This position shall be filled by a veteran, which ensures that the ombudsman has the necessary experience and understanding of the veteran community's needs.

To conclude, our veterans have given us so much. It is only right that we give back to them by providing the greatest possible access to the services they and their families have earned. Thank you for the opportunity to present this bill and I urge a favorable committee report.

Sincerely,

Senator Johnny Ray Salling

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Johnny Ray Salling".

Testimony in support of SB0006 - State Government

Uploaded by: Richard KAP Kaplowitz

Position: FAV

SB0006_RichardKaplowitz_FAV
01/30/2025

Richard Keith Kaplowitz
Frederick, MD 21703

TESTIMONY ON SB#/0006 – FAVORABLE

State Government - Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman - Establishment

TO: Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Education, Energy and the Environment Committee

FROM: Richard Keith Kaplowitz

My name is Richard K. Kaplowitz. I am a resident of District 3, Frederick County. I am submitting this testimony in support of SB#0006, **State Government - Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman - Establishment**

While the different branches of the services have ombudsman this bill will supplement the services the state of Maryland can provide to affected veterans and military families. The function of an ombudsman in the military varies by service. What are the functions of an Ombudsman? An Ombudsman communicates regularly with command families, provides information and outreach to command families, provides appropriate referral resources, and acts as an advocate for command families. This bill will standardize the role regardless of the service of the affected clients.

This bill will establish the Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman within the Department of Veterans and Military Families and establish the purpose of the Ombudsman to serve as a resource to provide information and support to veterans and military families regarding their rights and access to services. To better related to people seeking the Ombudsman service this bill will require the Ombudsman to be a veteran. The methodology for provision of services will require the Ombudsman to arrange for a toll-free telephone number to assist any individual seeking information or advice about available services. Finally, to aid the state to control and evaluate successes and failures of the office it will add a requirement for the Ombudsman to submit an annual report.

The more the state of Maryland does for our veterans and their families the stronger the bond between those who serve and those who honor and respect that service. Maryland can be a leader in our care for these affected individuals and families.

I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on SB#0006.

DVMF SB6 Oppose.pdf

Uploaded by: Morgan Murphy

Position: UNF



**Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families
Office of the Secretary**

WES MOORE
GOVERNOR

ARUNA MILLER
LT. GOVERNOR

ANTHONY C. WOODS
SECRETARY

**Senate Bill 6 - State Government - Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman - Establishment
OPPOSE**

January 27, 2025

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

Dear Chair Feldman and Committee Members,

The Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families (DVMF) is committed to leading veterans and their families through life's transitions, making Maryland the best state for the military-connected communities. DVMF fulfills its mission through five core programs: the Service and Benefits Program, which helps veterans access federal, state, and local earned benefits; Charlotte Hall Veterans Home, offering assisted living and skilled nursing care; the Cemetery and Memorial Program, providing dignified resting places and maintaining memorials honoring Maryland's veterans; the Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program, fostering connection and awareness; and the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund, offering financial assistance to veterans and their families in need. These programs reflect Maryland's commitment to honoring and empowering its military-connected community.

Although the department opposes SB6, we appreciate Delegate Miller and Senator Salling's intention to establish an ombudsman within our department to serve as a resource for veterans. However, this proposed position duplicates functions that the Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families (DVMF) already fulfills through its established Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program (COA) and the Constituent Services Program. Additionally, the department already provides direct support through existing toll-free numbers: 1-866-793-1577, the main department office number, and 1-800-446-4926 ext. 6450, which connects individuals directly to our Constituent Services Program. These resources ensure that veterans and their families can access the support they need without additional duplicative roles.

The Constituent Services Program is a vital resource for veterans, service members, and their families, offering comprehensive assistance in navigating benefits and addressing critical needs. In the past year alone, the program has successfully resolved 739 cases encompassing issues such as obtaining DD214 records, coordinating appointments with service offices, providing emergency financial assistance, addressing housing insecurity, and accessing state veterans' benefits. Nearly 70% of inquiries come

THE WINELAND BUILDING, FOURTH FLOOR
16 FRANCIS STREET, ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

TOLL FREE: 866-793-1577 • ANNAPOLIS: 410-260-3838 • FAX: 410-216-7928

veterans.maryland.gov
TTY USERS CALL VIA MD RELAY

directly from veterans, while 20% originate from their family members, underscoring the program's broad reach and effectiveness. Moreover, the program's most common assistance requests-accessing VA benefits and financial support-align closely with the proposed duties of the ombudsman.

Establishing a separate ombudsman role would not only create redundancy but could lead to confusion for constituents about where to seek assistance. Additionally, the associated administrative and operational costs would divert resources from existing programs that already deliver results.

Thank you for your consideration of these concerns. I urge the committee to oppose Senate Bill 6.

Sincerely,

Anthony C. Woods
Secretary