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## The Senate of Maryland

ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

### SB 277 - "Health Equality for Servicemembers Act"

I am Senator Bryan Simonaire presenting SB 277.

I am very excited to be presenting a package of bills that represents the most comprehensive overhaul of military law in our state's modern history.

The package consists of 8 bills:

At the core is SB 275 - Modernization of Military Laws Act

Along with 7 other bills covering all of Maryland Laws

I have worked directly with the Uniformed Services, military advocates, federal and state agencies, military legal experts and our DLS legal counsel to draft a consensus and workable solution.

This being the first bill hearing of the package I wanted to give you an overview of what the package does:

1. **Completely restructures** Maryland's military law into the 21st century with modernized and standardized terms that are also strategically centralized in one location
2. **Establishes consistent and equal benefits** among all 8 Uniformed Services branches and reserve units, and
3. **Authorizes the Department of Veterans and Military Families** to provide support to our service members, in addition to our veterans.

The advantages are namely:

1. Updates current laws to **provide over 100 additional benefits** that were being denied to various former and current service members simply because of inconsistent and outdated terminology.
2. **Creates a centralized structure** that facilitates easy, consistent and standard military laws for future revisions.
3. **Codifies the Department's authority and duty** to support the service members.

To get an **idea of the magnitude** of this package, every legislator received a memo this past November from the Department of Veterans and Military Families highlighting 34 sections in our laws with inconsistencies in military terminology.

**In contrast**, this comprehensive legislative package updates more than 230 sections with over 500 revisions touching nearly every article.

**But first a brief refresher** on terms so my presentation makes sense:

The term '**Uniformed Services**' is comprised of 8 federal branches.

There are **6 military** branches of the Uniformed Services (~ 1.3 million active duty):

Referred to as the '**Armed forces**':

Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marines, Navy and Space Force

There are **2 non-military** branches of the Uniformed Services (~6,000 active duty nationwide)

- Commissioned Corps Officers of the Public Health Services (PHS)
- Commissioned Corps Officers of the National Oceanic Atmospheric and Administration (NOAA)

I am sure we are all familiar with what our military branches do, but some may not realize what the other non-military branches do to protect our nation.

I won't discuss all PHS and NOAA responsibilities, but I will highlight a few tasks.

PHS sent hundreds of officers over to Afghanistan to assist during the war. Additionally, they were sent over to Africa to help when there was an Ebola outbreak to contain it.

NOAA is involved in almost every mission performed by our military through its coordination of their satellites and weather capabilities. Additionally, you may not know that NOAA was in the Gulf helping sweep for mines during the war.

**And that brings me to SB 277.** which updates the Health Articles primarily.

The Health General Articles updates extend current benefits to all our service members, such as:

1. No fee collected for birth certificates,
2. Recording all veterans admitted to hospitals,
3. Consideration for relocation to our state or temporary deployment out of our state,
4. Making behavioral health services available, and
5. Providing access to PTSD treatments for all service members.

A recent study showed how Commissioned Corps Officers of PHS are dealing with PTSD in their stressful line of work across the world.

The other section of this bill dealing with the Health Occupations Article simply updates the 'Servicemember' definition to refer to the US Code's 'uniformed service' definition opposed to just the 'armed forces' and aligns with Federal law and thereby include all branches of the uniformed services of the United States.

The Health Occupations Article provisions updated in this Article all apply to 6 of the 8 Unformed Service branches. This bill updates these current provisions to all 8 of our service members, such as:

1. Revising terminology so all service member spouses are treated equally,
2. Board to consider giving credits for training and education received in the Uniformed Services,
3. Board to give consideration during renewal of license when service member deployed overseas,
4. Providing the Health Occupation Board with information on culture in the Uniformed Services, and
5. Waive the optometry examination if certain standards met for all service members.

Lastly, I would note that in general, these bills are **not changing the underlying policy but providing equality among our service members**. And worked very hard to keep the **fiscal note to zero** or within all the Department's current budget.

I could go into much greater depth but will stop there and say, "For all these reasons, I ask for your favorable consideration."