



# MARYLAND MILITARY COALITION

*Serving Veterans through Legislative Advocacy*

February 25, 2025

The Honorable Joseline A. Pena-Melnyk  
The Honorable Bonnie Cullison  
House Health and Government Operations Committee  
240 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

Subject: Request for a **FAVORABLE Report with Amendments - HB 699 – General Provisions – Veterans Benefits – Honorable Discharge**

Dear Chair Pena-Melnyk, Vice Chair Cullison and Distinguished Members of the House Health and Government Operations Committee:

On behalf of the members of the Maryland Military Coalition (MMC), I write to recommend a **FAVORABLE REPORT** with **AMENDMENTS** by the Committee on **General Provisions – Veterans Benefits – Honorable Discharge**. This bill is designed to allow a veteran who has a “covered mental health condition” or has been a victim of a sexual trauma, to apply for state veteran benefits while awaiting a federal discharge upgrade. This bill seeks to assist in making a veteran “whole” after trauma.

However, the bill needs amendments:

1. The citation currently in the bill is incorrect. The citation should be 38 U.S.C. §1166 (not 1720 which deals with nursing home transfers).
2. The following should be amended to more clearly adhere to the citation.

(3) BASED ON AN INCIDENT OR INCIDENTS RELATING TO:

- (I) Diagnosis of ~~post traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury~~ a **"covered mental health condition"** disclosed to an individual licensed to provide health care services **at a hospital of the Armed Forces** or at a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs facility, that the Secretary determines to be related to military sexual trauma. **"Covered mental health condition" means post- traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, or other mental health diagnosis described in the current version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders (published by the American Psychiatric Association).**
- (II) An experience of sexual trauma, as described in 38 U.S.C. ~~§1720~~ **§1166** disclosed to an individual licensed to provide health care services **at a hospital of the Armed Forces** or at a U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs facility. **The term “military sexual trauma” means, with respect to a**

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veteran, a physical assault of a sexual nature, battery of a sexual nature, or sexual harassment during active military, naval, air, or space service.

According to the [Cost of War Project](#):

- In 2013, the Department of Defense reversed a ban on women in combat.
- From 2016 onward, all military jobs were opened to women.
- Recently released Department of Defense (DoD) data shows that 29,000 military personnel were sexually assaulted in 2023. In addition, during the same period, close to 25% of active-duty women were sexually harassed (a decrease from 28.6% in 2021).
- Independent data shows ever higher rates than DoD estimates.
  - 75,569 cases in 2021
  - 73,695 cases in 2023
  - **On average, during the period of 2001-2021 twenty four percent (24%) of active-duty women and 1.9 percent (1.9%) of active-duty men experienced sexual assault.**
  - Racial minority and LGBTQ+ service members face the greatest risk of sexual assault.
- While these numbers are horrible, they follow a decade of interventions intended to address the sexual assault crisis:
  - 10 DoD Inspector General reports
  - 60 Government Accountability Office recommendations
  - Over 200 government panel and task force recommendations
  - 150 Congressional provisions, including passage of the **“I am Vanessa Guillen Act” (Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act) in 2023**, which removes commanders authority over sexual assault cases and hands it to independent prosecutors. SPC Guillen was murdered at Fort Hood, Texas after suffering multiple incidents of sexual harassment.
  - More than 50 Secretary of Defense initiatives

### Sexual Assault in the Military: Estimates



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Sexual trauma is a wound that doesn't show and is difficult to "heal". Often victims are unwilling to seek assistance because they fear retaliation. Many times, victims become isolated, leading to more problems in their conduct while in service. Many are removed from service under less than honorable conditions.

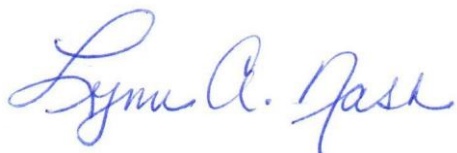
The Coalition seeks an **amendment to clarify the citation and definitions offered**. There is no fiscal note at this time, however, costs should be minimal, as this bill simply affords a service member earlier access to healing services.

The Maryland Military Coalition supports the intent of **HB 699** and asks for a **FAVORABLE report with AMENDMENTS** to allow veterans to seek access to benefits they have earned. These amendments have been coordinated with the Department of Veterans and Military Families as well as the bill sponsors.

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.

We want to thank Delegate Allen for his on-going support of **ALL** of the uniformed services community in Maryland.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lynn A. Nash". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lynn A. Nash PhD, RN, PHCNS-BC, FAAN  
CAPT (R), U.S. Public Health Service  
Communications Director



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## 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

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 Association of 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