



MARYLAND MILITARY COALITION

Serving Veterans through Legislative Advocacy

June 10, 2024

Via Email

The Honorable Anthony Woods
Secretary, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs
16 Francis Street, 4th Floor
Annapolis, MD 21401

Subject: Maryland Military Coalition Recommendations for Consideration by the Maryland Commission on Veterans and Military Families

Dear Secretary Woods,

On behalf of the membership of the Maryland Military Coalition (MMC) and as its President, I write to submit our recommendations for consideration by the Maryland Commission on Veterans and Military Families, which was established on June 1, 2024, and of which you are its Chair. The MMC believes these recommendations are consistent with the objective of the commission: the development and implementation of a strategic plan to make Maryland the best state for veterans and military families.

As Comptroller Brooke Lierman pointed out in two recent reports on the Maryland economy¹: “. . . stubborn economic headwinds have constrained Maryland’s growth prior to and coming out of the pandemic, despite the overall strength and resilience of the state’s economy. Notably, **population growth** has been nominal or negative for each of the past five years and **labor force participation has not recovered from a four percentage-point decline at the onset of the pandemic**. Together, these trends have stymied Maryland’s post-pandemic recovery, continuing a streak of sluggish economic performance that began in 2016. Since the end of 2016, Maryland’s gross domestic product (GDP) has grown by 1.6% and employment by 1.0%. During the same period, overall U.S. GDP has grown by 13.9% and employment by 7.4%.” **Without the implementation of a strategic plan for veterans and military families, our state will continue to lag many other states in not only retaining but also attracting this valuable human capital that can ultimately contribute to the growth of Maryland’s economy.**

The MMC recommendations that follow are not only legislative and budgetary in nature but also for changes in policies that support the Commission’s objectives. They support the current initiative of the Moore Administration—the Year of the Military Family—beyond 2024. We

¹ <https://www.marylandtaxes.gov/reports/static-files/SOTE.pdf>, Maryland 2023, *State of the Economy*; <https://www.marylandtaxes.gov/reports/static-files/research/immigration-economy.pdf>, *State of the Economy Series: Immigration and the Economy*, April 2024

have not prioritized these recommendations as we believe that will be accomplished by the Commission. Please note, however, that we have indicated that some have been MMC legislative goals during past sessions of the Maryland General Assembly and will be goals proposed for future sessions, beginning in January 2025.

The MMC recommends the following:

Eliminate the tax on military retirement income.

The MMC recommends that the current 55-year-old age restriction be eliminated and the tax on military retirement pay be phased out over three years. This has been a previous legislative goal for the MMC and will be a future goal because of its significance. Legislation proposing this was filed in the 2024 session of the Legislature (SB0346/HB0952) with the knowledge of the state's current fiscal condition. Currently, 38 states have no age restriction and do not tax military retirement income. Except for Delaware, Maryland's current laws regarding the taxation of this income lag behind the contiguous states of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. MMC testimony in support of SB0346/HB0952 provides data that supports the elimination of the age restriction and taxation of military retirement income. Most notably, the MMC has pointed out that the elimination of the taxing of military retirement income will be significantly offset, if not neutral, by tax receipts from second career, civilian salaries from not only the military retiree but also a working spouse and additional sales, excise, and property taxes generated.² In short, implementing this legislative recommendation will help retain veterans and attract retirees of the uniformed services and their families, especially those under the age of 55, to remain in Maryland after retiring from active duty.

Expedite professional licensure and certification of health occupations for spouses of members of the uniformed services.

The MMC recommends that there be a focus on improving the portability of the licensing and certification of the following health occupations by joining the following six interstate licensure compacts: advanced practice registered nurse; dental and dental hygienist; dietician; emergency medical services; physicians associates; and school psychologists. This has been a previous legislative goal for the MMC and will be a future goal because of its significance. As the MMC pointed out in testimony on this issue during the past session, the unemployment rate for spouses of members of the uniformed services is at least 19 percent, making it one of the highest unemployment demographics in the U.S. Data shows that it can take up to seven months or more for spouses to secure a new job after moving to a new duty location³. In addition, legislation to join these compacts is in line with § 705A of Title VII of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act, Portability of Professional Licenses of Servicemembers and their Spouses. Focusing on legislation to have Maryland join the interstate licensure compacts for the above occupations will serve to expedite employment opportunities for qualified spouses when they relocate, under orders, to Maryland.

Expand the number of certified Maryland Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) and locations.

The MMC recommends expanding the number of certified Maryland VSOs and locations to meet the growing demand for health and disability compensation concerns of Maryland veterans

² https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmt_e_testimony/2024/bat/1-Dw1PJxZy0fa8DwemzqZQegfCg1IQ2Pj.pdf, MMC written testimony, dated January 23, 2024, submitted to the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee.

³ <https://armedservices.house.gov/news/press-releases/quality-life-panel-releases-bipartisan-report>, Quality of Life Panel Report, House Armed Services Committee, April 8, 2024

potentially exposed to toxic substances during military service. This need is a result of the signing into law the Honoring our PACT Act of 2022. Underscoring the need for expansion of VSOs is the example provided to the MMC by member organizations that indicates that veterans and their families in Cecil and Harford counties, parts of Baltimore County, and sometimes Delaware are being under-served due to a shortage of certified VSOs. This recommendation is both a legislative and budgetary one. The benefit of expanding the number of certified Maryland VSOs will complement the efforts of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and serve the state's veteran population in a timelier and more efficient manner.

Enact legislation that regulates persons providing veterans benefits services and veterans benefits appeals services.

The MMC recommends enacting legislation that addresses unscrupulous entities, called “Claim Predators” by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, who charge veterans fees for accessing their benefits or helping veterans file initial claims. This recommendation will be a legislative goal of the MMC due to its significance. The number of these entities has grown as a result of signing into law the Honoring our PACT Act of 2022. The MMC supported similar legislation (SB0831/HB0875) during the 2024 session of the MGA⁴. This legislation was also supported by Maryland’s Office of the Attorney General⁵ and the national office of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW)⁶. A recent Washington Post article detailed the growth of unaccredited VA benefits for profits companies since the PACT Act was signed, describing their false promises and abusive practices and handcuffed agencies unable to hold them accountable due in part to a decision by Congress in 2006 to remove criminal charges from the law forbidding entities from charging veterans for claims help.⁷ Given the federal situation, states including Maine, New York, and New Jersey “have banned or restricted for-profit claims companies, and similar bills are pending in at least five other states.”⁸ The MMC believes that the Commission should recommend similar legislation, despite current litigation pending in the U.S. Third District Court of Appeals. SB0831/HB0875 did not prevent these entities from operating in Maryland, it only prohibited them from charging a fee or receiving compensation, except as authorized under federal law, for providing veterans benefits services and veterans benefits appeals services.

Enact legislation that enables county and local jurisdictions to provide the same benefits to military spouses as those in the Families Serve Act of 2024 and the Time to Serve Act of 2024.

The MMC recommends that the Families Serve Act of 2024 and the Time to Serve Act of 2024 be amended to include enabling legislation that grants county and local jurisdictions the ability to provide the same benefits as those at the state government level. This recommendation will be a legislative goal of the MMC due to its significance. Amending the above two bills would establish a hiring preference for spouses of members of the uniformed services at the local level, as in the case of SB0478/HB0604, and would increase the maximum number of days of paid leave from 15 to 30 days for uniformed services training or active uniformed services duty in a

⁴ https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2024/hgo/1IbRhP11jci-4kkECKioS0WvM63RFbe_u.pdf, MMC written testimony, dated February 27, 2024, submitted to the House Health and Government Operations Committee.

⁵ https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2024/hgo/12a0HYgXntD76l4wvtQUcvmneWCFRjFMp.pdf, written testimony submitted February 27, 2024.

⁶ https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/cmte_testimony/2024/hgo/1tvBx4qGQUqL3OWEibQCgTeGh2AIO3UjR.pdf, statement of Patrick Murray, Director, National Legislative Service, VFW of the US, February 27, 2024.

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/05/23/va-benefits-for-profit-companies-pact-act/>, *Veterans became eligible for billions. These firms saw a chance to profit.* by Lisa Rein, May 23, 2024

⁸ Ibid.

reserve component unit, as in the case of SB0477/HB0580, also at the local level. Making these amendments further supports the Year of the Military Family at all levels of state government.

Expedite the resource and systemic process improvements to the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund (MVTF).

The MMC recommends a thorough review of MVTF policies, procedures, and processes to address the increasing demand for its services before pausing operation in March of this year. This review should include determining adequate full-time staffing levels, updating and improving current procedures, and automation of the fund's processes starting with the application, i.e., completing it online, to the final disbursement of funds electronically and securely. Doing so will improve the responsiveness of the MVTF to the increasing demand for its services. The Commission's review should result in a plan that includes the estimated budgetary requirements for the necessary improvements for the MVTF to operate efficiently and sustainably.

Expand the "Ask the Question" program to include local urgent care clinics.

The MMC recommends expanding the "Ask the Question" program to address the needs of veterans who have either limited or no access to Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). These individuals are forced to use local urgent care clinics. Expanding the "Ask the Question" program to these clinics will be more responsive to veterans who have to use them and ensure that their staff will better understand the unique healthcare needs of veterans.

Identify future sites for the creation of state veterans homes with at least one in the center of the state.

The MMC recommends that at least one future state veterans home be located in an area of the state where there is a significant number of veterans. Currently, Charlotte Hall, the Sykesville, and the Perry Point sites are in more rural less populated areas of Maryland. By placing a fourth veterans home in the center of the state, i.e., in either Anne Arundel or Montgomery or Prince George's or Baltimore County, it would be more convenient to families of resident veterans in such a location and closer to the VA Medical Centers in the Washington, DC and Baltimore areas. The MMC recommends that a future, fifth state veterans home be considered for Maryland's Eastern Shore, which would also be more convenient to families of resident veterans in that area of the state.

Commit more resources to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs program to reduce veterans homelessness in Maryland.

The MMC recommends that the State of Maryland, through the Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families and other state agencies, commit more resources to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs program to reduce veterans homelessness. As pointed out in a recent article from War Horse, a nonprofit newsroom that reports on the impact of military service, "Coordinated efforts between local, state, and federal agencies can act as safety nets; screening protocols to identify veterans at risk for homelessness; billions of dollars in federal money; and the prioritization of veteran homelessness by lawmakers across political parties has also contributed to that success [of reducing homeless veterans]. To date, 83 communities and the entire states of Connecticut, Delaware, and Virginia have effectively ended homelessness

among veterans.”⁹ Through the increased coordination of a focused program among agencies at the local, state, and federal levels, Maryland would be able to replicate the success of its two neighboring states of Delaware and Virginia.

The MMC appreciates this opportunity to present the above recommendations to the Commission on Veterans and Military Families for its consideration. We believe their inclusion in a strategic plan will serve to help elevate Maryland’s standing with veterans and military families in the state, contribute to its economic growth, and make our state more competitive in attracting and retaining this valuable human capital.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JMS', is positioned below the word 'Respectfully,'.

Jayson Spiegel
LTC USAR (Ret)
President

⁹ https://thewarhorse.org/va-success-reducing-veteran-homelessness-a-nationwide-model/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwxqayBhDFARIsAANWRnR6X08LrhogFggRecE528wX9KBnhOnNEQsHKfqW0GH4GIPN14oJcAgaAksAEALw_wcB, “VA’s Work to End Veteran Homelessness Is a Nationwide Model. Can it Translate to Civilians?”, The War Horse, February 8, 2024

Member Organizations, 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 US Public Health Service

Disabled American Veterans

Distinguished Flying Cross Association

Fleet Reserve Association, Annapolis Chapter

Jewish War Veterans of the USA

Maryland Air National Guard Retirees' Association

Maryland Veterans Chamber of Commerce

Military Officers Association of America

Military Order of the Purple Heart

Montford Point Marines of America

National Active and Retired Federal Employees., Veterans Affairs Directorate,
NARFE MD

National Association for Black Veterans

Naval Enlisted Reserve Association

NOAA Association of Commissioned Officers

Reserve Association of America

Society of Military Widows

Veterans of Foreign Wars