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**TESTIMONY OF COMMISSIONER LINDA S. SCHWARTZ,
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Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs
Presented to the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee
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RHB 5367: AN ACT CONCERNING VETERAN TUITION WAIVERS

Chairwoman Handley, Chairwoman Willis and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee, I am Commissioner Linda Schwartz of the Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs and I am pleased to offer this testimony in support of RHB 5367, *An Act Concerning Veteran Tuition Waivers*. I have recently provided similar testimony before the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs on parallel legislation contained in RSB 215.

This legislation provides important clarifying language to the state statutes regarding veterans' eligibility for tuition waivers at our state colleges and universities. The lifetime benefit of free tuition for state residents who have earned veteran status for service in a time of war is a substantial and valuable benefit. In this difficult time of reduced budgets and limited resources – faced by all state agencies to include the college and university systems – it is more important than ever that we work together to ensure that benefits are reaching those for whom they were intended.

There are several types or categories of active duty utilized by the Department of Defense. These different categories can cause great confusion when attempting to identify an individual as being a veteran. For purposes of Federal veterans' benefits, the military service that qualifies an individual as being a veteran is defined in Title 38, Chapter 101 of the United States Code.

RHB 5367 brings the state definition of veteran for the purposes of the tuition waiver benefit appropriately in line with Title 38.

The additional legislative language contained in RHB 5367 makes it clear that what is known as "active duty for training" - the primary category that service members are in when they attend formal military schools and training, to include attendance at the U.S. service academies –

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does not qualify an individual as a veteran and therefore, does not make him eligible for free tuition at state colleges and universities.

Simply put, under Federal law, being in a training status on active duty does not qualify an individual as being a veteran. You must serve on regular active duty – outside of a training status – or receive an injury during training that leads to a disability rating to be recognized as a United States veteran. It is only appropriate that the same standards should apply under state law.

The intent of the Connecticut veterans' tuition waiver is to encourage veterans who have returned to our state after having served their country on regular active duty during a period of war to pursue higher education. It is a significant benefit that recognizes the sacrifices of being away from family and friends serving in uniform, often under difficult, life-threatening conditions. Like the Federal GI Bills throughout our nation's history, the tuition waiver is designed to assist those who have had to delay or suspend their educational goals to serve in uniform the opportunity to achieve equality with their peers who have not served.

This eligibility clarification is not meant to take away from the dedication and patriotism of the majority of young service academy cadets and graduates of basic and individual training who have made the patriotic decision to serve their country. In fact, with our nation still at war, the large majority of these young trainees will go on to serve on regular active duty and earn veteran status. However, pursuing a college degree at a military academy or completing basic training at a base in the United States simply does not equate to serving overseas in a combat zone – and does not legally make you a veteran.

I support the clarifying language contained in RHB 5367 and RSB 215. It will greatly assist college and university officials in determining eligibility for the tuition waiver benefit. In turn, the finite resources of our state will be appropriately used to support those who have sacrificed and earned the right to be called an American veteran.

Thank you for your consideration of support for this legislation and I would be happy to address any questions that you may have.