

TESTIMONY
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Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs
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Chairman Hennessey, Senator Slossberg and distinguished members of the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am Dr. Linda S. Schwartz, Commissioner of the Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA), and I am pleased to offer testimony today on several measures being considered by the Committee today.

Medals for Members of the Merchant Marine.

Both proposed *SB112 and SB 373* task the Adjutant General with providing medals to the Merchant Marine veterans who served in "Time of War". Although this does not directly task the Department of Veteran Affairs, because we were involved in the design and are involved in the distribution of the present Wartime Service Medal. We believe it is important to first say that we deeply respect and honor the service of the members of the Merchant Marine. It is well known that their valiant efforts were key to operations and relief efforts for Great Britain and the Allies during World War II. Our comments are directed toward the practicalities of the proposed Bills and how other legislations guided our thinking on the design of the present Wartime Service Medal.

We moved forward on creating the design of the medal based on the knowledge that "in time of war, the merchant marine is an auxiliary to the U.S. Navy, and can be called upon to deliver troops and supplies for the military. Veteran status was not authorized until 1988 when President Ronald Reagan signed a bill into law granting veteran status to merchant mariners who served in war. Prior to such legislation, they were considered civilians and did not receive any of the veteran's benefits given to members of the U.S. armed forces.

With all respect to the members of the Merchant Marine it was our intention to follow Connecticut's definition of Armed Forces as defined by *CGS Sec. 27-103. (1) "Armed forces" means the United States Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard and Air Force and any reserve component thereof, including the Connecticut National Guard performing duty as provided in Title 32 of the United States Code; (2) "veteran" means any person honorably discharged from, or released under honorable conditions from active service in, the armed forces.*

At the time we were designing the Wartime Service Medal, we discussed this very issue and concluded that the seal of the US Navy, Army and/or Coast Guard actually reflected branch of the Armed Services which issued the required DD 214 discharge papers from the Department of Defense for members of the Merchant Marine. While both measures are well intentioned, we believe recasting the medal or designing a new one for the members of the Merchant Marine would be costly and difficult. We suggest perhaps there is another appropriate public acknowledgment to honor the service of these fine Americans.

Board of Trustees of the Connecticut Department of Veteran Affairs

Both SB 368 and SB374 seek to direct that membership on the Board of Trustees to specific to one or four Veteran Service Organizations. I have had the honor to be a member of the Board of Trustees for the Department of Veteran Affairs since it was first authorized in 1988. My appointment by Governor O'Neil came as a result of dramatic changes in the Statutes and the areas of responsibilities for the newly created "Department of Veterans Affairs". I was part of a cadre of veterans who lobbied hard and heavy for much needed changes at the Veterans Home and Hospital and the creation of the Department of Veterans Affairs. These changes were brought about by a great need to improve the way veterans were being treated, questionable business practices and a great outcry from the public about the administration and operations at Rocky Hill.

At that time, the Legislature replaced the "Advisory Board for the Veterans' Assistance Unit" first appointed by Governor Baldwin in 1943 with a Board of Trustees for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Statutory changes to increase the number of members of the Board of Trustees have subsequently been enacted by this body. However the right of the Governor to appoint the members of the Board was exclusively maintained until 2004 when Statutes 27-103 were again amended to read: *"The board shall be comprised of the commissioner and sixteen members who by education or experience shall be qualified in health care, business management, social services or law and who shall have a demonstrated interest in the concerns of veterans. A majority of the members of the board shall be veterans, including veterans of World War II, the Korean hostilities and the Vietnam era. Members shall be appointed as follows: Ten by the Governor who shall serve at the pleasure of the Governor and one member each by the president pro tempore of the Senate, the speaker of the House of Representatives, the majority leader of the Senate, the majority leader of the House of Representatives, the minority leader of the Senate and the minority leader of the House of Representatives, whose terms shall be coterminous with the term of the appointing authority."*

Although there was never specific direction with regard to organizations being represented on the Board of Trustees, it is important to note that since 1988, there have always been members of the specific organizations named in the proposed legislation. On the Board of Trustees there has consistently been a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), American Legion, Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) appointed each time there has been a change of Governor or in the positions named in the legislation. Presently the sitting Board of Trustees has 6 members of the VFW, 4 Members of the American Legion, 3 members of the DAV and 1 member of VVA. All meetings are open to the public.

However I would be remiss if I did not raise the point that there are over 40 veteran organizations in the State of Connecticut. Although our most pressing needs are to adapt the programs and services offered by the Department to the men and women serving today, there is no required representation from the ranks of our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. I would say that the appointments made by the Governor and leadership of the General Assembly have been a good cross section and representative of the more that 277,000 veterans living in Connecticut.

I would suggest that this Governor and the Leadership of the General Assembly be given the opportunity to continue to exercise their prerogative to make thoughtful and responsible appointments to the Board of Trustees.

Under the system now in place, the Board of Trustees has exercised diligent and informed stewardship of the Department which has resulted in many cost effective, prudent and compassionate improvements in programs and services for all Connecticut veterans.

Identification Cards and Contact List With regard to *SB 371, An Act Concerning Identification Cards for Veterans, and SB 369, An Act Concerning the Contact List for Members of the Armed Forces and Veterans*. Although both these bills are well-intentioned, I am testifying in opposition to them in their current form and believe that there are more efficient and useful options which might be considered.

The issue of state identification cards (ID) has grown out of the generosity of many businesses of all sizes that are increasingly offering discounts and specials to both veterans and currently serving members of the Armed Forces. In these tough economic times, more and more citizens are understandably doing whatever they can to control household budgets. The issue is that not all veterans or former members of the Armed Forces are eligible to be issued an identification card through the Department of Defense (DOD) or the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). In fact, there is no Federal government agency source that provides ID cards to all veterans. It has been our experience that most businesses who offer such specials and discounts require positive photo ID of a veteran's status.

SB 371 would require the DVA to offer photo ID to all of the state's estimated 230,000 living veterans who do not qualify for Federal identification cards. It is impossible to estimate the total number of potential customers, but it is safe to say we must be prepared to support tens of thousands. As one of the smallest state agencies with very limited benefits staff, the DVA does not currently have the infrastructure to efficiently or conveniently provide this service to veterans around the state. We estimate our start-up costs to support this legislation at just one location would be approximately \$150,000, and would require new staff hires, with the potential for recurring expenses of at least \$100,000 annually.

I would like to suggest that rather than a separate state veterans' ID with limited applications, that we consider following the lead of many other states and authorize a veterans' symbol or identifier, on the Connecticut drivers' licenses upon renewal. There are currently at least nine states who already offer a veterans identifier on drivers' licenses or that now have legislation presently pending in their state houses to authorize this process. Another nine states are considering similar legislation.

This symbol could not only be used by the veterans for promotional discounts but would be extremely helpful to other groups of individuals who work with and care for veterans including law enforcement officers, court personnel, health care providers, social workers and employers. Identifying citizens in need who are veterans is the most important first step in channeling them to the many programs and services that are available.

Over the last several years, I have worked closely with colleagues at the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, Department of Public Safety, Judicial Branch, Chief Public Defender's Office, Department of Public Health, and Department of Social Services to implement awareness, screening and support programs to assist our growing population of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. One of the first issues we struggle with in designing and executing these programs is how can we efficiently identify veterans in the population?

A veterans' identifier available on drivers' licenses would be a tremendous step forward in matching veterans to the programs and benefits they so richly deserve and have earned.

Working in cooperation with the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), this symbol could also be added to the existing state identification card that is already available through DMV offices to citizens who do not drive or qualify for a license. This option could help identify homeless citizens who are also veterans and who rely heavily on these state identification cards.

The intent of SB 369 could also be accomplished more efficiently by moving forward with a driver's license veteran identifier. As drafted, SB 369 would require DMV staff to query all applicants for drivers' licenses or state identification cards to determine if they are veterans and ask if they would like more information about their benefits. DMV staff would then be required to transmit to the DVA – assuming via paper copies – names and addresses of these veterans which we would have to hand input into our existing Veterans Registry. The intent of SB 369 could be accomplished through the same veteran identifier on licenses, enabling the DMV to simply provide data to DVA on all individuals who have requested the veterans' identifier to be placed on their licenses. This exchange of existing data would save countless hours for both DMV and DAV staff and is authorized under the provisions outlined in C.G.S. Sec. 27-125.

It is imperative that in this time of limited resources and strained budgets that we avoid creating duplicate and inefficient bureaucracies. We must work smarter within the resources and systems we have to sustain and improve services to our citizen customers. I encourage your re-examination of the intent and language of SB 371 and SB 369 and I look forward to working with you to craft a better-government solution.

Award or the Wartime Service Medal. H.B 5115 which seeks to award the "Wartime Service Medal" posthumously to any veteran who served in time of war and *HB 5147* which provides that the "Wartime Service Medal" be presented to each eligible veteran at the time the veteran retires or is honorably discharged from service in the armed forces presents many logistical and financial difficulties for the Department. We believe the cost and resources that would be required to fulfill either one or both of the proposals is prohibitive. As well meaning as these Bills are the reality is that CTVA has one individual assigned to the responsible for validating eligibility, possessing requests and assuring safe delivery for the Wartime Service Medal to the veteran. Since 2005, we have distributed over 27,000 medals and worked with many members of the Legislature to conduct over 50 Wartime Service Medal Ceremonies across this State. However we see that these activities have taken time, funds and resources from our primary mission. We have had to suspend programs aimed at outreach and assisting veterans to access their benefits to meet the constant demand for the Wartime Service Medal. At the present time our Advocacy and Assistance Department which oversees this program, does not have adequate personnel resources or funding to fulfill the mandates of these measures. We estimate that enactment of these measures would require another staff member and a reoccurring cost for distributing the medals of at least \$25,000 annually.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony and I would be happy to address any questions that you may have.