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Testimony of Gabriel Botero Jr., MSW Student, in regards to Senate Bill 202 before the Veterans' Affairs Committee – February 17, 2015

Good Afternoon, Senator Flexer, Representative Hennessey and Members of the Veterans Affairs Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to come before you and testify in regards to the bills being reviewed for this legislative session.

My name is Gabe Botero and I am a second year graduate student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. I currently work full-time for U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal as his Military and Veterans Outreach Aide. I am also a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and a former member of the Connecticut Army National Guard. I am here today to testify in SUPPORT of SB 202, An Act Concerning the Motor Vehicle Property Tax Exemption for Veterans.

Current state law allows veterans to apply for a tax exemption that can be applied towards property or motor vehicle taxes. The local government (city/town offices) regulates this exemption. Veterans have to submit their DD-214 to the local office before December in order to receive the exemption on that year's tax bill. There are several issues with this process that I believe SB 202 will help to address.

First, there have been issues with the type of documentation that is accepted. One local government will accept a DD-214 (discharge certificate), while others will accept a DD-256 (certificate of release) and still others will accept a copy of military orders. There is no uniformity among the local governments in terms of what is allowed and what is not allowed. I have personally gone to City Hall with a Certified True Copy from the National Personnel Records Center (agency which keeps all veteran records) to apply for the tax exemption. I was told that they couldn't prove the authenticity of the document (despite a stamped letter from NPRC stating its origin) and that I would have to go get it notarized before they would accept it. I understand the importance of checking for authenticity of military records but the simple truth is that these local officials are not qualified to check for these records and don't seem to know the difference between one document over the other.

Second, there seems to be issues with approving the tax exemption. In 2009, I was deployed to Kuwait. While in country, my mother forwarded me a tax statement that had been mailed to me from the town for motor vehicle taxes. I found a contact with the local office, explained to them my situation and was told I could settle the exemption upon returning home. I attempted to settle the bill in August 2010 after coming home but was told they could not apply the exemption to the account. Despite having a copy of my DD-214 showing that I had just come off active duty (and was out of the country during the time frame when I could have submitted the documentation) they refused to apply the tax exemption and had me pay the full amount.

I was surprised to find out that I was not the only veteran who encountered this problem. In my official capacity, I have had numerous individuals contact the office asking for assistance with this problem. They too had submitted their documentation but because of processing errors by the local administrators they were also forced to pay the full amount.

Less than one percent of our nation currently serves in the military. The State of Connecticut honors this service by providing this incentive to those who sacrifice so much for state and nation. Why should veterans then not be allowed to receive these benefits because of clerical errors and a lack of understanding of military service among the local offices?

I believe that SB 202 will help to end these issues. By streamlining the process at the Department of Motor Vehicles, the DMV can create a policy of uniformity in terms of what documents are accepted for veteran's tax exemption verification. This bill will also help end issues with miscommunication at local offices. Too many veterans submit the right documentation on time to be later told that they are not eligible for the exemption because the city/town does not have them on record.

I hope that the Committee will see the importance of helping to simplify the process of applying for Veterans motor vehicle tax exemptions and support SB 202. Thank you for your consideration.