



Department of Veterans Affairs

Testimony of Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi to the Veterans' Affairs Committee

February 18, 2021

**SB 412, SB 414, SB 787, SB 860, SB 869
HB 5732, HB 5738, HB 5739, HB 6316, HB 6315 & HB 6429**

Senator Cabrera, Representative Boyd, Senator Cicarella, Representative Vail and Honorable members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am Thomas J. Saadi, Commissioner of the State Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). I thank you for the opportunity to address you today and thank you for your service to our State and support of our Veterans and Service members.

SB 414 - AN ACT CREDITING MILITARY EXPERIENCE AND TRAINING IN WATER OR WASTEWATER OPERATIONS TOWARD REQUIREMENTS FOR LICENSURE IN CERTAIN OCCUPATIONS.

HB 5732 - AN ACT ESTABLISHING RECIPROCITY FOR CERTAIN LICENSES HELD BY MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES.

HB 6316 - AN ACT RECOGNIZING SKILLS GAINED DURING MILITARY SERVICE.

These bills all relate to the recognition of training and skills developed in the military which is an important part of rapid and effective integration of Veterans into the civilian workforce. Several Connecticut state agencies recognize the training received in the military through various comparative parity licensing and certification processes. These include, but are not limited to, the CT Department of Labor, which may waive certain apprenticeship requirements based on the following: 1) the applicant is a Veteran or a member of the Armed Forces or the National Guard, and 2) received training in the military that is equivalent in content and quality to that required in this state, provided the applicant passes any required exam or evaluation. Current law allows the CT Department of Public Health (DPH) to issue Nurse's Aide and EMS personnel certifications to Veterans trained as a Medic or Corpsman. The CT Department of Motor Vehicles exempts active duty, recently separated from the military, or reserve military personnel from the CDL driving skills test based on their holding of a military license, which authorizes operation of military vehicles that are representative of a commercial motor vehicle of a similar class. Many of these provisions were implemented pursuant to PA 14-131. As there are many such provisions in place, I recommend that the Committee request that the Office of Legislative Research conduct a review of existing comparative certification programs and identify those areas of licensure where enabling legislation is needed in order for a licensing agency to recognize military training.

SB 860 AN ACT CONCERNING THE USE OF MEDICAID, MEDICARE AND TRICARE FUNDS TO PROVIDE CERTAIN VETERANS WITH TRANSPORTATION TO MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS.

The Department appreciates the good intentions behind this Bill as we recognize that transportation can be a challenge for Veterans. However, the DVA does not have the staff or the vehicles to implement such a plan and reassigning current staff would have a significant negative impact on the direct delivery of current programs and services to our Veterans at our Rocky Hill Campus and across the State.

I respectfully request that the Committee consider that to implement this proposal, the DVA would have to establish a new division within the agency responsible for coordinating vehicles and drivers, scheduling trips, verifying eligibility and processing billing and payments. To accomplish this, the DVA would need at least two to three vehicles and the commensurate number of drivers to be assigned to each of our five Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OA&A) districts. We would also need a new staff position for a central transportation coordinator and another new position in our fiscal office to process billing. Centralized transportation coordination would be needed to coordinate vehicles and drivers between the five districts based on transportation needs for a particular day. This translates to a total of 10 to 15 new vehicles and 12 to 17 new staff positions for which the DVA does not have available funding. With regard to funding from the billing of Medicare, Medicaid and Tricare, by law, such funds are not provided directly to the agency but would instead go to the State's General Fund. As such, additional appropriations would be necessary to fund this proposal as they are not provided for in the current budget.

That said, the DVA will continue our work to connect Veterans with existing transportation options available through the Disabled American Veterans, local chapters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion as well as other state and municipal services. I have attached a partial list of these services to this written testimony, which is available through each DVA OA&A office (See Attachment A). Additionally, I have personally written to medical providers, municipal chief elected officials, Municipal Veterans Representatives, statewide Veterans Service Organizations and other stakeholders across the State to provide them the attached listing of Veterans transportation resources and intend to do so again this year along with providing other important benefits information.

SB 412 AN ACT REQUIRING THE PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTION FOR DISABLED VETERANS BE ADJUSTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE COST-OF-LIVING ADJUSTMENT.

SB 611 AN ACT REQUIRING THE COMMISSIONER OF VETERANS AFFAIRS TO CONDUCT A STUDY OF PROPERTY TAX ABATEMENTS.

SB 787 AN ACT EXEMPTING CERTAIN DISABLED VETERANS FROM PROPERTY TAX.

HB 5738 AN ACT EXCLUDING VETERANS' DISABILITY BENEFITS FROM QUALIFYING INCOME WHEN DETERMINING PROPERTY TAX RELIEF.

HB 5739 AN ACT REQUIRING MUNICIPALITIES TO GRANT A PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTION TO GOLD STAR PARENTS AND GOLD STAR SPOUSES.

HB 6315 AN ACT INCREASING THE AMOUNT OF A PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTION OF CERTAIN VETERANS.

HB 6429 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE TO STUDY THE EXPANSION OF PROPERTY TAX RELIEF FOR CERTAIN VETERANS.

The Department does not take a position on any one standalone proposed Veteran tax exemption bill but instead supports the overall intent of updating Veterans tax and exemption statutes. The Department does however, oppose SB 611, because it would require the Office of the Commissioner to conduct a study of Veteran tax abatements and determine whether they should be increased. The DVA does not have the necessary number of employees nor those with the requisite expertise in taxation and property valuation to conduct such a review. Furthermore, the DVA may not be the appropriate body to recommend potentially sweeping changes in state law regarding tax exemptions. Instead, I support a comprehensive review of Veterans tax exemptions with a view to modernization, such as appears to be embodied in HB 6429, which proposes the creation of a task force on this issue.

Such a task force could include members of the VA Committee, the Commissioners of Veterans Affairs and Revenue Services, the Office of Policy and Management, Statewide Veteran Service Organization Leaders and representatives from the CT Conference of Municipalities and Council of Small Towns. The task force would require some support staff in the form of administrative staff and those with taxing and cost of living and property valuation actuarial expertise.

This task force could conduct a review of existing Veteran tax exemptions for the purpose of determining whether the exemption amounts established years ago properly reflect the value they once did in relationship to the current assessments of real and personal property. Additionally, there are often overlapping exemptions which may also benefit from a review to both simplify and improve the process. The review could also consider permissive approaches that provide municipalities flexibility to adopt increased levels of exemptions based on local capabilities. The task force could provide comprehensive recommendations to the General Assembly and Governor for consideration in the next legislative session.

SB 859 AN ACT CONCERNING CERTAIN DEPOSITS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS INSTITUTIONAL GENERAL WELFARE FUND

This bill relates to the federal reimbursement funds for the pharmaceuticals/prescription drugs the DVA purchases utilizing the federal formulary pursuant to our MOU with the Federal VA Healthcare System in CT. The DVA purchases these prescription drugs with IGW funds and then is reimbursed for approximately 95% of those expenditures, amounting to approximately \$400,000 per year. The reimbursed funds are not deposited in the IGW account but instead are deposited to the State's general fund. There have been discussions among members of this Committee in the past and among our DVA Board of Trustees and Veterans as to whether the reimbursement from the Federal Government can or should be deposited in the IGW account since the reimbursements are for funds paid directly by Veterans into the IGW and not from appropriated funds, so although I would always support additional resources going to veterans, any reduction in the General Fund not in the Governor's proposed budget, including this one, would need to be accounted for in negotiating the final budget.

There are a number of federal reimbursements and per diem payments intended to offset the cost of Veterans' care from appropriated funds that go to the General Fund. For example, the DVA is provided a per diem payment from the Federal Government for each Veteran Resident and Patient which goes to the General Fund, and this is entirely logical as the DVA receives a direct appropriation from the general fund to pay for the salaries and many other items in support of those Veterans. The pharmaceuticals reimbursement is distinct as these items are purchased with funds paid directly to the IGW by Veteran Residents and Patients as part of their monthly facility program fee and from applied income for those on Title 19/Medicaid. Again, as I previously stated, this would have a revenue impact and therefore needs to be negotiated as part of the final budget.

I thank you for your time and your service to our State and its Veterans, and I am happy to respond to any questions you may have regarding my testimony or other concepts under consideration by the Committee.

Attachment A

CT Veteran/Senior/disability Transportation Resources

Federal VA Transportation

- For Appointments at VA Hospital in Newington, CT: 860-666-6951

Disabled American Veterans

Providing transportation for Veterans to Federal VA Hospitals at following locations:

- West Haven VA – 203-932-5711 (Ext 3575)
- Newington VA – 860-667-6759
- Providence VA – 203-932-5711 (Ext 3575)

State of CT, DSS, Non-Emergency Medical Transportation

Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) is an important benefit for Medicaid members who need to get to and from Medicaid-covered medical services but have no means of transportation - State-Wide coverage.

- <https://portal.ct.gov/DSS/Health-And-Home-Care/Non-Emergency-Medical-Transportation>
- <https://www.myplacect.org/services-and-supports/transportation/>

Eastern Connecticut Transportation Consortium, Inc.

Purpose of ECTC is to promote the coordination of transit services in eastern CT. ECTC acts as a broker and operator of transportation services for persons of low-income, elderly, persons with disabilities and others who receive health, social, education assistance services from public and private non-profit agencies. ECTC helps the individual navigate and coordinate available transportation resources in Eastern CT.

- <http://www.ectcinc.com/>

Senior Centers with Transportation

Senior Centers across the state provide a variety of transportation services.

- http://seniorresourcesec.org/images/SENIOR_CENTER_AND_MUNICIPAL_AGENT_DIRECTORY.pdf

Kennedy Center, Inc.

The Kennedy Center is a non-profit agency offering free Travel Training to senior citizens and people with disabilities other than blindness. They provide one-on-one instruction for those with cognitive, sensory, and physical disabilities. The trainer travels along with the individual when he/she uses the transit system and will continue to accompany him/her on trips until he/she reaches a skill and confidence level that enables him/her to ride without assistance.

- Tel: 203-365-8522
- Fax: 203-365-8533
- Email: rcarlucci@kennedyctr.org
- www.thekennedycenterinc.org

Southeast Area Transit District (SEAT)

SEAT consists of member towns: East Lyme, Griswold, Groton, Lisbon, Montville, New London, Norwich, Stonington and Waterford. *ADA - When disability and/or accessibility issues to a destination prevent using the fixed route system, alternative Paratransit service may be available.*

- <https://southeastareatransitdistrict.com>

Windham Region Transit District (WRTD).

WRTD routes include Storrs, Willimantic, North Windham, Norwich, Danielson, Franklin, and Brooklyn. *ADA - Passengers with disabilities may request modifications to access the service.*

- <https://wrttd.org/>

Northeastern CT Transit District

NECTD provides service for pre-qualified elderly and disabled persons on in Brooklyn, Canterbury, Killingly, Putnam, Thompson, Eastford, Plainfield, Pomfret, Woodstock and Union.

- <http://www.nectd.org>

Northwestern CT Transit

NWCT Transit routes include Barkhamstead, Canaan, Falls Village, Sharon, Salisbury, Colebrook, Cornwall, Goshen, Harwinton, Kent, Warren, Litchfield, Morris, New Hartford, Norfolk, Torrington, Winchester and Winsted. Rural Transit Dial-A-Ride, Candy-stripper bus routes.

- <http://www.nwcttransit.com>

Norwalk Transit District

Norwalk Dispatch A Ride, Stamford Easy Access, Westport Door to Door, and Town to Town Services available

- <http://www.norwalktransit.com>

CT Department of Transportation

Human Services Transportation Programs

- <https://www.ct.gov/dot/cwp/view.asp?a=1386&q=415016>

Mobility Ombudsmen in Connecticut connect seniors, veterans and people with disabilities with accessible, reliable transportation so that they are able to participate in their communities.

- <https://portal.ct.gov/DOT/Publictrans/Bureau-of-Public-Transportation/Mobility-Ombudsmen-Assistance-Getting-Around-CT>

Agency on Aging of South Central CT

An additional resource for transportation is the Agency on Aging of South Central CT

- <https://www.aoascc.org/Services/Community-Services-and-Advocacy/Transportation-Services/>