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Healey-Driscoll Administration Unveils Historic Legislative Package for Veterans in Massachusetts

BOSTON — Governor Maura T. Healey today filed legislation to increase benefits, modernize services and promote inclusivity for Massachusetts veterans. [*An Act Honoring, Empowering and Recognizing Our Servicemembers and Veterans \(HERO Act\)*](#) will have positive impacts for hundreds of thousands of veterans living in Massachusetts, including nearly 30,000 women veterans and thousands of LGBTQ+ veterans. This historic legislation marks the first time in 20 years that a Massachusetts Governor has specifically introduced a comprehensive and expansive legislative package dedicated to the welfare of veterans.

Some key provisions of the legislation include expanding access to behavioral health treatment, increasing benefits for disabled veterans, bolstering support for businesses that hire veterans, updating the definition of a veteran, expanding the scope of the Veterans Equality Review Board, initiating a pilot program for LGBTQ+ couples denied IVF reimbursement by the Veterans Health Administration, and codifying medical and dental benefits.

"Our veterans have sacrificed so much for our country, and this transformative legislation marks an important step toward ensuring that Massachusetts supports them in return," said **Governor Healey**. "From day one, our administration has been committed to revitalizing veterans' services in Massachusetts and ensuring that every one of these heroes receives the benefits, resources and support that they deserve. I'm grateful to Secretary Santiago for his leadership of our state's first veterans' secretariat and look forward to collaboration with our legislative partners on this historic bill."

"By promoting inclusivity and expanding benefits, we're not only showing our gratitude to veterans but also addressing their evolving needs," said **Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll**. "This legislative package represents a significant step forward in the care and support we provide to our veterans, particularly for women and LGBTQ+ veterans."

"Modernizing veterans' services is essential in ensuring our veterans receive the support they deserve," said **Secretary Jon Santiago**. "We've identified areas where we can make meaningful changes, from enhancing benefits to providing much-needed behavioral health care."

The HERO Act encompasses 17 spending, policy initiatives, tax credits, and statute changes organized into three categories:

Benefit Expansion

- **Expands access to Behavioral Health Treatment:** Allows veterans to be reimbursed for visits to outpatient behavioral health providers.
- **Increases the Disabled Veteran Annuity:** Increases the annual annuity for veterans with a 100% service-connected disability, surviving spouses, or Gold Star Parents from \$2,000 to \$2,500.
- **Increases the Vet-Hire Tax Credit:** Increases to \$2,500 a tax credit for small businesses hiring chronically unemployed or low-income veterans. Eligible veterans include those receiving SNAP benefits, chronically unemployed veterans, and unemployed service-connected disabled veterans.
- **Increases access to the Active-Duty Buyback program:** Lengthens the timeframe for veterans in public service to participate in the Active-Duty Service Buyback program and allows retroactive participation for veterans who missed the buyback opportunity. This program will enable veterans to purchase up to four years of active-duty service time toward their state retirement.
- **Prevents the "COLA Cliff":** Ensuring that a cost-of-living adjustment in Social Security benefits will not affect veterans' eligibility for Chapter 115 benefits in the middle of the state fiscal year.
- **Increases Local Flexibility for Veterans Property Tax Exemptions:** Creates two separate local options. The first allows municipalities to double the veteran property tax exemption without doubling all other exemption clauses. The second ties the annual property tax abatement amount to inflation, allowing exempted property tax amounts to increase with inflation.
- **Eliminates the Fee for Specialty License Plates for Veterans:** Waives specialty license plate fees on specialty veteran license plates and creates a new woman veteran license plate decal.

Commitment to Inclusivity and Greater Representation

- **Broadens the Chapter 115 Definition of Veteran:** Aligns the state Chapter 115 program definition of a veteran with the United States Department of Veteran Affairs definition. This change allows more veterans to be eligible for annuity, Chapter 115 benefits, access to the Massachusetts Veterans Homes, and other state-provided benefits. This only applies to EOVS programs and does not affect any other agency or entity.
- **Expands the Scope of the Veterans Equality Review Board (VERB):** Expands the scope of the Board beyond 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' discharges to include discharges related to Military Sexual Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, mental health conditions, or HIV discharges.
- **Expands the definition of a veteran dependent:** Expanding the Chapter 115 definition of "dependent" to support more dependents based on the Family Court definition.
- **Updates Dependent Residency Requirements to Align with Current Practices:** Updating dependent residency requirements to align with current practices.

- **Implements IVF Reimbursement for Same-Sex Couples Denied Reimbursement by VA:** Launching a pilot program to provide IVF reimbursement to affected veterans while establishing a working group to explore long-term solutions in response to the federal policy excluding same-sex couples.

Modernization of Veterans Services

- **Codifies Dental Assistance Benefits:** Ensuring veterans receive essential dental care by codifying dental benefits for Chapter 115 recipients.
- **Codifies Medical Assistance Benefits:** Providing consistent care to veterans by codifying medical assistance benefits.
- **Codifies Authority for Veterans Cemeteries:** Ensuring proper management and care of veterans cemeteries by codifying the authority for EOVS to continue administering and maintaining the state's two Memorial Veterans Cemeteries.
- **Modernizes statute language for inclusivity and standardization:** Revise Chapters 115 and 115A to ensure gender-neutral and inclusive language while removing antiquated references.
- **Initiates a Study on the Use of Alternative Therapies for Veteran Mental Health Disorders:** Establishing a working group to study the potential benefits of alternative therapies, such as psilocybin, in treating veterans suffering from mental health disorders.

A full breakdown of the legislation provisions can be [found here](#).

Statements of Support:

Patrick George, President, Massachusetts Veteran Service Officers:

"We would like to thank the Administration for providing a seat at the table when drafting The HERO Act. This legislation provides sensible yet substantive policy changes that aim to improve the lives of all veterans and their families in the Commonwealth."

Bill LeBeau, Adjutant, Massachusetts Veterans of Foreign Wars:

"We're grateful to Governor Healey and her team for recognizing the need for giving back to the heroes who have served our country, both at home and overseas. With this bill, the Healey-Driscoll Administration demonstrates a real commitment to accomplishing outcomes for our Veterans that will be meaningful and impactful in so many ways; it also sends a signal that more needs to be done to support them."

Sarah Sweeney, Executive Director, Military Friends Foundation

"For over 2 decades, Military Friends Foundation has provided support to our military and their families across the Commonwealth. The HERO Act is a tangible recognition of those who have served and their families and is a tremendous example of how Massachusetts continues to keep faith with those who have worn the uniform and their families. The HERO Act will empower veterans to further seek mental health assistance when they need it, create a broader definition for their dependents, aid them in finding improved employment opportunities, and even enhance retirement benefits for veterans. Thank you to those involved in spearheading these critical initiatives to serve Massachusetts Veterans and Gold Star Families."

Gumerindo Gomez, Executive Director, Bilingual Veterans Outreach Center

"The Bilingual Veterans Outreach Centers of Mass Inc. Congratulates and thanks the Healey-Driscoll Administration for putting our veterans first! I sincerely appreciate the bill's commitment

to representing and serving all veteran populations, especially to help them navigate the benefits system and mental-health resources.”

Jeff Chin, Blue Star Families, New England Chapter:

“As a proud veteran and member of the newly formed Governor’s Advisory Council on Veterans Services, I know how important it is for our communities to support our service members, veterans, and military families. We wholeheartedly throw our support behind this effort because it improves the quality of life for our service members, past and present. The HERO Act goes a long way in helping veterans of all backgrounds, including reimbursing outpatient mental-health visits and giving veterans up to 10 years to buy back their active-duty service. As an Executive Director for an organization that serves military families of all backgrounds, and as a clinical social worker, I see firsthand how the resources enabled by the HERO act provide the crucial support our veterans and their families need to thrive.”

John Paradis, Veterans Advocacy Coalition:

“This is an exciting day. I’m heartened to see that, through our grassroots advocacy, the voices of veterans and their families have been heard. I’d like to thank Governor Healey and Secretary Santiago for their tenacious support and for their outreach to the veteran community. Because of their unwavering support, our Commonwealth is making a big step forward in helping Massachusetts veterans achieve the full range of benefits and services they have earned through their service to our nation.”

Tony Agnitti, Co-Founder, Agnitti Insurance Agency:

“As a family-owned business, we consider it an honor to hire veterans. Their sense of selflessness and giving towards their country carries over to our business. We are incredibly supportive of the incentives that Governor Healey’s bill provides for small businesses to hire veterans, it’s a no-brainer.”

Jenny D’Olympia, PsyD, Director, Military Veteran Psychology and Train Vets to Treat Vets Program and Angela Taveira-Dick, PhD, Associate Director, Train Vets to Treat Vets Program at William James College:

“We commend Governor Healey and her administration for passing the HERO Act. This unprecedented piece of legislation not only serves to increase annuity payments, provide tax credits for hiring veterans, and safeguards veterans’ benefits but also demonstrates an unwavering commitment to implementing solutions that will immediately impact veterans’ social determinants of health. These actions and others like it, will no doubt serve to strengthen and protect the mental health and wellbeing of veterans in the Commonwealth. We feel fortunate to be in a state that is leading the nation in supporting the needs of our national heroes and their families.”

John Parsons, Executive Director, Public Employee Retirement Administration Commission:

“Providing veterans working for state and local government additional time to purchase their military service is the right thing to do and it’s a win-win all around. It’s the right thing because veterans are entitled to this benefit for the sacrifices they made and they need the extra time to transition to civilian life and build a solid financial footing. It’s a win-win because we are recognizing veterans for what they gave, there is no cost to active-duty buyback provision and it provides an incentive to keep talented, dedicated individuals in the public workforce. Additionally, veterans who missed their initial opportunity at this benefit are given a grace period to now do so. This will all help veterans get what they are due.”

C. Andrew McCawley, President and CEO, New England Center and Home for Veterans:

“The staff at the New England Center and Home for Veterans is acutely aware of the challenges that our most vulnerable Veterans can face in their lives after military service. Veterans who may struggle with physical disabilities, behavioral health and disenfranchisement are especially at-risk. The Healey Administration’s HERO Act, once again, demonstrates that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts leads this nation in supporting those who have served.”

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