



An Act Honoring, Empowering, and Recognizing Our Servicemembers and Veterans (The HERO Act) includes over 30 spending and policy initiatives, tax credits, and statute changes organized into four buckets: Benefit Expansion, Commitment to Inclusion and greater representation, Modernization of Veterans Services, and Honoring/Recognizing our Veterans.

Benefit Expansion

- Increases the disabled veteran annuity from \$2,000 to \$2,500, phased over two years, with an annual payment on August 1.
- Extends the timeframe for veterans to use the Active-Duty Service Buyback program from 180 days to 10 years, with a retroactive grace period and expands eligibility to include certain National Guard members and reservists.
- Allows municipalities to double property tax exemptions for veterans or tie the amount to inflation.
- Ensures veterans receiving federal benefits retain Chapter 115 benefits despite COLA increases.
- Adds behavioral health reimbursements to the Chapter 115 benefits program.
- Increases the Veterans Hire Tax Credit from \$2,000 to \$2,500 for small businesses hiring chronically unemployed or low-income veterans.
- Extends the certification period, giving employers up to six months after hiring to certify a veteran for the credit.
- Expands exemptions for motor vehicle excise tax, drivers license fee, and registration fee to all veterans who are 100% service-connected disabled.
- Protects access to the sales tax exemption for veterans who qualify for the disabled veteran license plate and prefer their Purple Heart specialty license plate.
- Requires public school districts to support military-connected students when a parent or guardian is called to active duty.
- Establishes a military family advocacy program to protect against child abuse on military installations.
- Creates a process to establish criteria recognizing military medics' education and training as equivalent to EMT training.
- Ensures Commonwealth employees serving in the armed forces of another state remain eligible for regular pay and benefits.

Commitment to Inclusivity and Greater Representation

- Updates the Chapter 115 definition of a veteran to align more closely with the federal definition, expanding eligibility for the annuity, Chapter 115 benefits, Massachusetts Veterans Homes, and other state benefits.
- Updates the definition of a veteran dependent to meet the standard definition of a dependent used by the Probate and Family Court.
- Expands the Veterans Equality Review Board to cover additional protected classes, including race, religion, and age.
- Establishes a new 11-member commission to study challenges faced by veterans and their families and provide recommendations for improving veteran quality of life.

Modernization of Veterans Services

- Establishes a working group to study alternative mental health therapies for veterans.
- Codifies statutory authority provisions for State Veteran Cemeteries and Chapter 115 medical and dental assistance benefits.
- Modernizes statutory language to improve inclusivity and standardization.
- Allows municipalities to offer veterans the option to receive Chapter 115 benefits via direct deposit or by mail.
- Establishes a military spouse liaison in the Commonwealth to advocate and conduct outreach on behalf of military spouses.
- Creates a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Commission.
- Directs the creation and distribution of a flyer with information on benefits, services, and resources for veterans. Employers with over 50 employees must post this notice in the workplace.
- Prohibits individuals from receiving compensation for assisting veterans with matters related to their benefits, except as allowed under federal law.

Honoring/Recognizing our Veterans

- Directs the Commonwealth flag to be flown at half-staff on National POW/MIA Recognition Day (the third Friday of September).
- Requires the Governor to issue a proclamation on Memorial Day and illuminate certain bridges in gold in recognition of Gold Star families, with EOVS and DOT coordinating this effort.
- Establishes December 20th of each year as United States Space Force Day.
- Adds a representative from a Massachusetts veteran organization to the Behavioral Health Commission, appointed by the Governor.
- Establishes May 22nd of each year as United States Merchant Marine Day.
- Amends existing law to allow municipalities to appoint non-veterans as veterans' graves officers.