

SENATE BILL 376

By Campbell

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 33;
Title 49; Title 58, Chapter 3; Title 63; Title 68 and
Title 71, relative to veterans' rights.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE:

SECTION 1. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 58, Chapter 3, is amended by designating existing language as part 1 and adding the following as a new part 2:

58-3-201. Short title.

This part is known and may be cited as the "Veterans' Bill of Rights."

58-3-202. Part definitions.

For purposes of this part:

(1) "Department" means the department of veterans services; and

(2) "Veteran" means a former member of the United States armed forces or a former member of a reserve or national guard unit who was called into active military service of the United States, as defined in § 58-1-102, and who served honorably, as defined in § 49-7-102.

58-3-203. Veterans' access to jobs.

In order to improve veterans' access to jobs, the department shall:

(1) Assist small business concerns owned and controlled by veterans and service-disabled veterans, as defined in 15 U.S.C. § 632(q)(2) and (3), with obtaining loans from small business revolving loan funds, with a goal of seven percent (7%) of those loan funds reaching such businesses annually;

(2) Apply smart labor force data to direct veterans to in-demand fields by producing monthly electronic reports of workforce need projections, by industry, job type, geography, and needed credential, that:

(A) Compare workforce needs with existing and projected workforce and credential availability in this state;

(B) Highlight top in-demand industries, job types, and credentials by geographic area; and

(C) Include a mapping of which in-demand job titles and credentials would leverage skills, experience, and credentials possessed by veterans; and

(3) Distribute the monthly report to appropriate military out-placement offices, education centers, nonprofit programs, and department and agencies working to connect veterans with jobs.

58-3-204. Veterans' access to degrees, certifications, and occupational licenses.

(a)

(1) Veterans have the right to have state licensing boards recognize veterans' military training and experience.

(2) The department shall take all necessary steps to annually increase the number of veterans taking advantage of the federal motor carrier safety administration's Military Skills Test Waiver Program, which authorizes state licensing agencies to waive the skills test portion of the commercial driver license (CDL) application for active-duty or recently separated veterans who possess at least two (2) years of safe driving experience operating a military truck or bus, including ensuring information on the program is accessible on the department's website.

(3) The department shall also coordinate with military placement and training programs, including the department of defense Credentialing Opportunities On-Line (COOL) program, and disseminate information on such programs to veterans in this state, and relocating to this state, with relevant experience.

(4) In conjunction with applicable departments, agencies, and boards, the department shall review licensing practices of emergency medical technicians, paramedics, physician assistants, and nurses in this state and take all necessary and appropriate steps to increase recognition of military training and experience toward in-state licensing that can be accomplished through the rulemaking process.

(5) The department shall review requirements for all state occupational licenses for which military members may have relevant training or experience and produce a report recommending steps that can be taken to increase recognition of military training and experience toward in-state licensing. The report must identify recommended actions that can be taken without accompanying legislation, as well as recommendations that require legislative action.

(b)

(1) Veterans have the right to be awarded college credit for related military experiences and training and have institutions of higher education be responsive to veteran-specific needs.

(2) Each veteran who enrolls as a student in good standing at a public institution of higher education in this state must be granted academic credit for completed courses that were part of the veteran's military training or service if the

completed courses meet the standards of the American Council on Education or its equivalent for the awarding of academic credits. The credit must be granted upon application and without limitation toward the veteran's degree. No fee, tuition, or other charge shall be assessed against the veteran for such credit.

(3) Public institutions of higher education shall increase flexibility in course registration to reflect veterans' needs as follows:

(A) Offering an early course registration period for students who are veterans or members of the military, including the reserves and national guard;

(B) A student who is called to active duty in the armed forces of the United States after having attended regularly for thirteen (13) weeks or more or having completed eighty-five percent (85%) of the term's course work through acceleration shall be given full credit for each course in which the student has a grade of C or better;

(C) A student who is called to active duty service that does not meet attendance requirements sufficient to receive full credit pursuant to subdivision (b)(3)(B) is entitled to a full refund of tuition and fees;

(D) Veterans with no previous college experience shall be permitted to file applications up to the end of the registration period and allowed to begin classes pending approval of their application and provision of supporting documents; and

(E) Upon a release from active duty, a veteran or service member may register after the end of a registration period, without being charged a late fee or other penalty.

(c)

(1) Veterans have the right to participate in proven, cost-effective training programs that leverage veterans' experiences.

(2) The department shall review annually apprenticeship, training, and other vocational programs focused on providing job training and placement to returning military service members and veterans. The annual review must evaluate costs and results of programs, and the department shall identify programs it recommends expanding with state or federal funds and include what improved outcomes are expected from program expansions.

58-3-205. Veterans' access to health care.

(a) Veterans have a right to affordable health care.

(b)

(1) The department shall work to ensure all veterans can access the healthcare coverage and treatment they are eligible for based on their military service.

(2) To accomplish the objectives of this subsection (b), the department is hereby directed to develop and operate veteran health navigator services to increase access to affordable healthcare coverage and services. In doing so, the department shall identify, train, and deploy veteran health navigators who have direct knowledge of the veteran communities they serve.

(3) Veteran health navigators shall:

(A) Help veterans identify federal and other healthcare benefits, coverage, and services available to veterans and their families;

(B) Coordinate with relevant departments and agencies, healthcare providers, and health insurance programs to help veterans and their beneficiaries apply for coverage under available programs; and

(C) Help veterans overcome barriers within the healthcare system to ensure enrollment in affordable health plans and the provision of effective delivery and coordination of health services.

(4) The department shall focus on activities that leverage existing resources and structures where veterans and their families are likely to be found.

(c)

(1) The department shall incorporate and empower veterans and their families in efforts to expand veterans' access to affordable, quality health care.

(2) Using information provided by veteran health navigators and the program described in subsection (b) regarding the unique needs, coverage, and treatment gaps faced by veterans and their families, the department shall:

(A) Examine existing programs that are designed to increase access to affordable quality health care and evaluate whether the needs of veterans and their families are met by those programs or whether further coordination with the veteran health navigators or other steps would better meet the needs of veterans and their families;

(B) Report findings and recommendations; and

(C) Prepare a report analyzing any potential impact that medicaid expansion would have on health care for veterans and their families in this state.

58-3-206. Veterans' access to mental health services.

(a) Veterans have a right to mental health services.

(b)

(1) The department shall work to ensure veterans and their families have access to mental health treatment, including treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide.

(2) To accomplish the objectives of this subsection (b), the department shall include mental health coverage, services, and treatment as a focus of the veteran health navigator program described in § 58-3-205(b), and require navigators to help identify federal and other mental health coverage, services, and treatment available to veterans and their families, including for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicide prevention.

(3) In coordination with local, state, and federal departments and agencies, and in consultation with nonprofit organizations and healthcare service providers that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental health, the department shall develop and implement a strategy to reduce barriers to access to mental health services and treatment for veterans and their families, including by:

(A) Identifying structural and logistical barriers to accessing treatment, including cost and availability of treatment, perceived stigma, long travel distances to receive care, and other barriers, and making an annual report on such barriers; and

(B) Resolving or reducing barriers identified in subdivision (b)(3)(A) that can be resolved or reduced without legislation, including through increased coordination between departments and agencies and nonprofit organizations, through the use of private and federal grants, and other actions.

(4) In coordination with local, state, and federal departments and agencies, and in consultation with nonprofit organizations and healthcare service providers that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental health, the department shall enhance and strengthen suicide prevention programs in keeping with proven best practices and research, including by:

(A) Identifying and applying for federal and private grants focused on veteran suicide prevention;

(B) Coordinating with local, state, federal, and nonprofit programs to include community-based approaches for at-risk veterans and veterans at large;

(C) Providing technical assistance to communities to develop strategic plans to reduce veteran suicide, including through coordination and participation by local leaders, faith communities, schools, workplaces, and other stakeholders; and

(D) Evaluating community strategic plans within this state and disseminating learnings and best practices to optimize the impact of efforts by all partners and stakeholders.

(c)

(1) The department shall work to connect veterans with trained mental healthcare providers, including those trained in veteran suicide prevention.

(2) To accomplish the objectives of this subsection (c), the department shall create a centralized provider database, identifying by grand division or region mental health providers qualified and available to assist veterans and their families, including highlighting providers with training or experience in assisting veterans or in the prevention and treatment of suicide.

(3) Using existing resources, and incorporating best practices and research from the United States department of veterans affairs, other departments and agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other service providers, the department shall develop a continuing education course for mental health providers to obtain expertise in veteran suicide assessment, prevention, treatment, and risk management and make the program available for free to providers.

(4) The department shall identify evidence-based best practices to increase awareness of any veteran suicide prevention hotline in this state or nationally, and other crisis resources with proven effectiveness to reduce veteran suicide.

58-3-207. Veterans' access to housing.

(a) Veterans have a right to secure and safe housing.

(b) The department shall work toward the goal of ending veteran homelessness in this state, following guidelines established by the United States interagency council on homelessness.

(c) In coordination with local, state, and federal departments and agencies, and in consultation with nonprofit organizations, the department shall develop and implement a strategy to meet the goal described in subsection (b) within three (3) years, including through:

(1) Coordinated community outreach and a common assessment tool;

(2) A community-wide comprehensive, by-name list of veterans experiencing homelessness, prioritized based on vulnerability;

(3) Data-sharing among providers, departments and agencies, and nonprofit organizations;

(4) Increased coordination and streamlined processes for appropriate housing placements;

(5) Connecting veterans experiencing homelessness to health, mental health, employment, and training resources;

(6) A commitment to housing first principles; and

(7) Identification of and application for funding from both private and public sources.

58-3-208. Reports and recommendations.

The department shall report findings and recommendations in accordance with this part to the governor and the general assembly by February 1 of each year. The department shall publish the annual report on the department's website.

SECTION 2. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.