

SENATE BILL 817

By Yarbro

AN ACT to amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 33; Title 50; Title 55, Chapter 50; Title 58, Chapter 3; Title 63; Title 68 and Title 71, relative to military veterans.

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

SECTION 1. This act is known and may be cited as the "Veterans' Bill of Rights."

SECTION 2. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 58, Chapter 3, is amended by adding the following as a new section:

(a) It is the intent of the general assembly for the department of veterans services to help veterans access jobs, college degrees, health care, and housing by means and methods identified in this section.

(b) To increase veterans' access to jobs, the department shall:

(1) In conjunction with the department of economic and community development, establish programs to provide microloans and technical assistance to veteran-owned businesses, including through the use of revolving loan funds for small businesses to assist small business concerns owned and controlled by veterans and service-connected veterans, as defined in 15 U.S.C. § 632(q), with a goal of seven percent (7%) of funds to be loaned to such small business concerns annually;

(2) In conjunction with the department of labor and workforce development, apply smart labor force data to direct veterans to in-demand fields, including by:

(A) Producing monthly electronic reports of workforce need projections, by industry, job type, geography, and needed credentials,

including comparing workforce needs with existing and projected workforce and credential availability in this state and highlighting top in-demand industries, job types, and credentials by geographic area;

(B) Identifying which in-demand job titles and credentials will leverage skills, experience, and credentials possessed by veterans; and

(C) Distributing the reports and information identified in subdivisions (b)(2)(A) and (B) monthly to appropriate military out-placement offices, education centers, nonprofit programs, and agencies working to connect veterans with jobs; and

(3) In conjunction with the department of labor and workforce development, expand proven, cost-effective training programs that leverage veterans' experiences by:

(A) Reviewing apprentice, training, and other vocational programs focused on providing job training and placement to returning military servicemembers and veterans. The review must take place annually, evaluate the costs and results and recommend programs for expansion with state funding, and include future returns to the state based on any improved outcomes from program expansion; and

(B) Providing an annual report on the results of the review under subdivision (b)(3)(A) to the general assembly and governor no later than January 1 of each year.

(c) To increase veterans' access to college degrees, certificates, and licenses, the department shall:

(1) In conjunction with the department of safety, ensure veterans' military driving training and experience is recognized, including by taking steps to

annually increase the number of veterans taking advantage of the federal motor carrier safety administration's military skills test waiver program, which waives 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. The department shall ensure information on the program is accessible on department's website, and shall coordinate with military placement and training programs, including the credentialing opportunities on-line (COOL) program, and disseminate information on the program to veterans with relevant experience;

(2) In conjunction with the appropriate state health licensing boards and commissions, review the licensing of emergency medical technicians (EMTs), paramedics, physician assistants, and nurses in this state and take steps to increase recognition of military training and experience toward in-state licensing. The department shall make recommendations to the general assembly regarding any actions requiring legislation no later than February 1, 2022;

(3) In conjunction with the appropriate state professional and occupational licensing boards and commissions, review the licensing for professions for which military members may have relevant training or experience and provide a report to the general assembly recommending steps that can be taken to increase recognition of military training and experience toward professional and occupational licensing in this state. The department shall provide the report no later than February 1, 2022, and include recommendations to the general assembly regarding any actions requiring legislation. The department shall work to implement any steps identified in the report that can be taken without further legislation, and shall provide an annual report to the general

assembly on progress made and any updates to recommendations for legislation; and

(4) In conjunction with the department of education, the Tennessee higher education commission, the board of regents, the board of trustees of the University of Tennessee, and the state board of education, establish a program to award college credit for related military experiences and training, including by:

(A) Granting academic credits to every veteran who enrolls as a student in good standing at an institution within the University of Tennessee or state university and community college system. Credits are to be granted upon application and without limitation toward the veteran's degree for completion of 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, and no fee, tuition, or other charge may be assessed against a veteran for the granting of credits pursuant to this subdivision (c)(4)(A); and

(B) Increasing flexibility in course registration to reflect returning veterans' needs at the University of Tennessee and institutions within the state university system and community college system, including by:

(i) Offering early course registration to students who are veterans or members of the national guard at institutions that offer an early course registration period for any segment of the student population;

(ii) Awarding full credit for each course taken by a student who is called to active duty in the armed forces of the United

States after having attended regularly for thirteen (13) or more weeks or having completed eighty-five percent (85%) of the term's work through acceleration if the student has a grade of C or better;

(iii) Refunding one hundred percent (100%) of paid tuition and fees to students called to active duty who do not meet attendance requirements sufficient to earn a grade;

(iv) Permitting veterans with no previous college experience to file an admission application up to the end of registration, and allowing those veterans to begin classes pending completion of their application and provision of supporting documents; and

(v) Allowing a student who has been called to active duty to register after the end of the normal registration period, without late fees or other penalties, when the student returns from active duty.

(d) To increase veterans' access to health care, the department shall ensure all veterans can access the healthcare coverage and treatment they are eligible for based on their service, including by:

(1) Developing and operating veteran health navigator services to increase access to healthcare coverage and services by:

(A) Identifying, training, and deploying veteran health navigators who have direct knowledge of the veteran communities they serve;

(B) Having veteran health navigators help identify all federal and other health benefits, coverage, and services available to veterans and their families;

(C) Having veteran health navigators coordinate with relevant departments, healthcare providers, and health insurance programs to help veterans and their beneficiaries apply for coverage under such programs, including helping veterans overcome barriers within the healthcare system to ensure enrollment in health plans and effective delivery and coordination of health services; and

(D) Leveraging existing resources and structures where veterans and their families are likely to be found; and

(2) Ensuring the needs of veterans and their families are incorporated in all efforts to expand access to affordable, quality health care by:

(A) Using the veteran health navigators and program described in subdivision (d)(1) as a source of information about the unique needs, coverage, and treatment gaps faced by veterans and their families;

(B) Examining existing programs designed to increase access to affordable quality health care and evaluating 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;

(C) Implementing steps to expand access to affordable, quality health care identified in the examination and evaluation of programs;

(D) Providing a report of findings and recommendations, including legislation or budget requests, to the general assembly and the governor. The department shall also publish the report on the department's website; and

(E) Providing a report showing the impacts that medicaid expansion would have for the community of veterans and their families to the general assembly and the governor. The department shall also publish the report on the department's website.

(e) To prevent veteran suicide and increase veterans' access to mental health services, the department shall:

(1) Ensure veterans and their families have access to mental health treatment, including treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, and suicidal ideation by:

(A) Including access to mental health coverage, services, and treatment as a focus of the veteran health navigator program described in subsection (d), and requiring that navigators help identify all federal and other mental health benefits, coverage, and services available to veterans and their families, including for post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicide prevention;

(B) Coordinating with local, state, and federal government agencies and consulting with the United States department of veterans affairs, nonprofit organizations, and service providers, including veterans affairs medical centers and local governments that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental health, to develop and implement a strategy to reduce barriers to access to mental health services and treatment for veterans and their families, including by:

(i) Identifying structural and logistical barriers to accessing treatment, including perceived stigma, long travel distances to receive care, and any other barriers, and making an annual report

on the barriers available to the general assembly and the governor and publishing the report on the department's website;

(ii) Resolving barriers identified in subdivision (e)(1)(B)(i) that can be resolved through departmental action, including through increased coordination between departments, nonprofit organizations, service providers, and the federal government, application for and use of private and federal grants, and other actions; and

(iii) Providing a report of findings and recommendations, including legislation or budget requests, to the general assembly and the governor. The department shall also publish the report on the department's website; and

(C) Coordinating with local, state, and federal government agencies and consulting with the United States department of veterans affairs, nonprofit organizations, and service providers, including veterans affairs medical centers and local governments that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental health, to enhance and strengthen suicide prevention programs in keeping with proven best practices and research, including by:

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

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



(iii) 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

(iv) Evaluating community strategic plans within this state and disseminating findings and best practices to optimize the impact of efforts by all partners and stakeholders; and

(2) Connect veterans to trained mental healthcare providers, including those trained in veteran suicide prevention, including by:

(A) Creating a centralized provider database that identifies by region mental health providers who have the expertise and ability to assist veterans and their families and that highlights providers who have training or experience in the prevention and treatment of veteran suicide;

(B) Using existing resources and incorporating best practices and research from the United States department of veterans affairs and state and nonprofit service providers to develop a continuing education program 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 in areas of this state that do not have sufficient numbers of trained providers; and

(C) Identifying evidence-based best practices to increase awareness of veteran suicide prevention hotlines, whether in-state or national, and other crisis resources with proven effectiveness to reduce veteran suicide.

(f) To end veteran homelessness, the department shall set and achieve a goal of ending veteran homelessness in three (3) years by:

(1) Using criteria identified by the United States interagency council on homelessness to take steps to end veteran homelessness; and

(2) Coordinating with local, state, and federal government agencies and nonprofit organizations, and in consultation with states and cities that have achieved an end to veteran homelessness in accordance with the criteria described in subdivision (f)(1), to develop and implement a strategy to meet the goal of ending veteran homelessness within three (3) years, including through the use of:

(A) A coordinated community outreach and a common assessment tool;

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

(C) Data-sharing among all relevant providers, departments, and veterans affairs medical centers;

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

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

(F) A commitment to housing first principles; and

(G) Identification of and application for funding, as needed from private, foundation, and other partners.

(g) For purposes of this section, "department" means the department of veterans services.

SECTION 3. This act takes effect upon becoming a law, the public welfare requiring it.