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Dear Commandant LaMont

December 15, 2017

December 8th marked the last of the Interim Committee meetings leading up to the January 10th start of the 2018 Regular Session of the Florida Legislature. It makes this a good time to bring the upcoming 60-day session into focus.

As was mentioned in earlier reports, the Florida Legislature will meet for 60 calendar days unless they “extend” themselves to take up a limited number of unfinished issues or are called back in a “special” session for similar reasons. To become law, the exact same bill must pass both the House and Senate and be approved by the Governor. Because of the limited 60-day duration of the Session, a procedural device of “companion bills” helps pieces of legislation move at the same time through committees at both ends of the hall. After all is said and done, the Florida Constitution only requires one bill to pass—the state’s budget. Finally, as is usually the case with controversial issues, most of the hard work and tough negotiations take place during the last two weeks.

Legislation That Is Moving

SB 440 by Sen. Garcia—passed out of the Military & Veterans Affairs, Space & Domestic Security Committee on December 6th. It creates the Florida Veterans Care Program within the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA) to provide Florida veterans and their families an alternative for health care that is operated similar to or through the Medicaid managed care program. ACHA is authorized to negotiate a federal waiver, state plan amendment, or other federal authorization necessary to implement the program. Veteran participant is voluntary and the program can’t be implemented until after it goes back to the legislature for final authorization.

SB 100 by Sen. Steube—passed out of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Tourism & Economic Development on December 7th. That is its second committee appearance; it has only the Appropriations Committee hearing before going to the floor of the full Senate. It eliminates the \$1 and \$2 fee a veteran must pay to have the word “veteran” displayed on an identification card or driver license issued by the Department of Highway Safety and Motor vehicles. It provides for two additional forms of identification a veteran may present to DHSMF as proof of veteran status. The two additional forms of ID are the:

- Veteran health identification card, issued by the Department of Veterans Affairs; and
- Veteran identification card issued by the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs pursuant to the Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015.

Additionally, the bill prohibits tax collectors from charging a veteran the \$6.25 service fee for driver license services rendered pursuant to Chapter 322, F. S., upon presentation of specified

documentation proving an individual is a veteran. The bill is effective July 1, 2018 and, now has a House companion bill, HB 603 by Rep. Gonzalez. The House bill has yet to be heard.

SB 76 by Sen. Hukill—passed out of the Senate Commerce & Tourism Committee on November 6th. It is a 2-page bill creating a small business Saturday sales tax holiday, allowing certain enumerated small businesses to have the option of not having to charge and collect sales tax on Saturday, November 24, 2018. To the extent that a veteran has a retail business, it may be an interesting option. It is effective July 1, 2018. Its companion bill, HB 519 by Rep. Brown, has yet to be heard.

SB 326 by Sen. Young—passed out of the Military & Veterans Affairs, Space & Domestic Security Committee on November 16th and also passed out of the Children, Families, and Elder Affairs Committee on December 4th. The bill establishes the Florida Veterans' Care Coordination Program within the Department of Children and Families. It will provide statewide dedicated behavioral healthcare referral services to veterans and their families through Florida's 211 Network. The new program will be modeled after the pilot program begun in 2014 by the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay and the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs. It has only one more committee stop before going to the Senate floor. Its House companion bill, HB 179 by Rep. Burges, passed out of the House Children, Families & Seniors Subcommittee on November 16th.

HB 75 by Reps. Ponder, Clemons & others—passed out of the House Post-Secondary Education Subcommittee on October 25th and passed out of the House Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee on November 15th. It provides that a Florida College System Institution may waive any portion of the student activity and service fee, the financial aid fee, the technology fee, the capital improvement fee, and any other fees authorized in s. 1009.23 for a person who is an active duty member of the armed forces of the U.S. using military tuition assistance provided by the Department of Defense. It provides for reports to the State Board of Education on the number and amount of such waivers. Section 1009.23 appears to include out-of-state tuition fees, but it is unclear if that can also be waived. It is effective July 1, 2018. Its Senate companion bill, SB 460 by Sens. Gainer & Broxson, passed out of the Senate Military and Veterans Affairs, Space & Domestic Security Committee on December 6th.

Budgets

The budget process is different for the Senate and House. In the Senate the budgets are created by the various budget committees and consolidated before passing that body. There is often no need to separately pass each individual "member project" in committee. In the House, members must pass individual bills for each of their "member" projects. These issues are then consolidated into a single budget bill that the House will pass. Since the House and Senate budgets always differ at first, the issues are settled by a conference process, resulting in a final budget that is submitted to the Governor. Therefore, the best way to look at the various veteran-related budget items, is to look at the individual House bills.

The bills passed by the House Health Care Appropriations Subcommittee on December 6th include:

- HB 2345 by Rep. Burgess—provides \$485,000 to the Veterans Intervention Program. It offers direct clinical services through solution-focused outpatient counseling and residential co-occurring treatment. Veteran Peer Navigators will assist with linking community resources with the VA. They will also engage individual and families in a social network with links to financial assistance, employment, housing or other identified needs.
- HB 2435 by Rep. La Rosa—provides \$430,000 to the Transition House, Inc.; Homeless Veterans Program. The funds will be used to provide substance use and mental health services to those clients unable to afford these services. It will be aimed specifically at veterans that are homeless and chronically homeless, and those that have been released from incarceration. The program will provide treatment to include individual & group therapy and vocational skills training. It will also provide access to opportunities for employment and housing.
- HB 2479 by Rep. Latvala—Veterans of Foreign Wars, Department of Florida. The funds will be used to hire additional veteran services officers to assist with disability claims filed with the VA.
- HB 2799 by Rep. McClain—appropriates \$180,000 to the MC Veterans Helping Veterans, Inc.; Training Veterans for Success. The funds will be used to reach out, recruit and train veterans in Marion, Alachua, Levy & Putnam counties, and allow them to be gainfully employed in the construction trades. Currently, there is a critical shortage of trained people in a number of construction trades. This program will help veterans fill those shortages through academic and hands on training through Santa Fe College and MC Veterans Helping Veterans, Inc.

While these individual “member budget requests” may or may not be contained in the Governor’s budget requests, the Governor presented a few of His priorities to the committee. His major issues funded included:

- \$400,000 for statewide crisis support for veterans;
- \$368,060 for veterans’ claims examiners; and
- \$12,139,085 for state veteran nursing home operations.

On December 6th, the House Justice Appropriations Subcommittee passed HB 2069 by Rep. McClain. It appropriates \$150,000 to fund the Marion County Veterans Treatment Court. It reduces substance abuse with local veterans by providing them with access to inpatient and outpatient treatment services and drug testing in Marion County rather than incarceration.

As we get into the second half of next year’s legislative session, all of these elements will start to come together. We will report further as that happens. Stay tuned.

HB 2075 by Rep. Santiago—passed out of the House Transportation & Tourism Appropriations Subcommittee on November 15th. It appropriates \$750,000 to fund the Home Builders Institute Building Careers for Veterans. The program seeks to deliver job readiness and career connections for eligible veterans, military personnel or transitioning veteran offenders seeking vocational skills and employment opportunities. The goal is to assist participants to become gainfully employed within the community and to provide opportunities for stackable, portable, industry-recognized credentials.

HB 107 by Rep. Combee—passed out of the House Local, Federal & Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on October 11th. It then passed out of the House Transportation & Tourism Appropriations Subcommittee on October 25th. It is a 20-page bill creating a veteran identification card to be used as proof of veteran status for the purpose of obtaining discounts or waivers offered to veterans for the exchange of goods and services and for other purposes authorized by law. Note, however, it can't be used for the determination of any federal benefits, and does not replace motor vehicle ID cards under s. 322.051, or certain educational benefits for dependent children of deceased or 100% disabled veterans under s. 295.17. It provides for a \$10 fee and sets forth elements of proof for obtaining the card. The remainder of the bill is devoted to cross references to the various benefits available to veterans under current Florida law. It is effective January 1, 2019. Similar legislation passed the full House last Session, but died in the Senate. It doesn't appear to have a similar problem in the Senate this year. Its Senate companion, SB 328 by Sen. Baxley, passed out of the Senate Transportation Committee on October 24th. The bills appear to be on a fast track for final passage.

Pre-Filed Bills Yet To Be Heard

HB 2099 by Rep. Gruters—appropriates \$320,000 to the Coastal Behavioral Healthcare-Veteran's Court in Lee County. The Veteran's Court presides exclusively over cases involving arrested persons who suffer from a military related mental illness, substance abuse disorder or psychological problems. The principal goals of the program are to reduce criminal recidivism, facilitate mental wellness and sobriety, and to receive improved access to VA benefits and services.

HB 2105 by Rep. McClain—appropriates \$500,000 to fund the activities of the State Veterans' Nursing Home in Marion County. The services provided by the Nursing Home facility would include a clean and healthful sheltered lodging environment, including therapeutic or modified diets as prescribed by a doctor, 24 hour nursing care, diagnostic and pharmacy services, substance and/or supervision of daily living activities, plus additional similar services.

HB 2539 by Rep. Alexander—appropriates \$400,000 for the Florida State University Tallahassee Veterans Legal Collaborative. It covers Franklin, Gadsden, Jefferson, Leon, Madison & Taylor Counties within the 2nd Judicial Circuit. It will provide direct help in tracking down documents

and removing obstacles to obtaining drivers licenses and housing. It will also provide direct legal representation when appropriate.

HB 2513 by Rep. Gruters—appropriates \$150,000 for the Veteran’s Treatment Court in the 12th Judicial Circuit Court. The Court targets veterans in Sarasota County through counseling, case management, housing assistance and coordinated VA assistance.

HB 801 by Rep. Asencio—establishes the Veterans Employment Small Business Grant Program. Its Senate companion, CS/SB 104 by Sen. Garcia, has passed its first committee of reference. It was explained in detail in the October report.

Other Issues

Florida is considered by most to be a “Veteran Friendly” state. Analysis by the Senate Military and Veterans Affairs, Space, and Domestic Security Committee shows the magnitude of the veteran population in Florida. According to the staff analysis, the federal VA system serves more than 1.5 million Floridians, which is the 3rd highest population of veterans in the country, behind only California and Texas. Looking at when those veterans served, the analysis listed 91,799 WW II veterans, 168,208 veterans of Korea, 544,921 from Vietnam, and 487,422 from the Gulf wars. With that many Floridians affected, it is encouraging that we continue to be “veteran friendly”.