



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
House of Representatives
State House, Boston 02133-1054

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Rep. Smola supports bill to improve oversight and governance of the state's Soldiers' Homes

BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means) has voted to support changes in the governing structure at the state-run Holyoke and Chelsea Soldiers' Homes to help improve oversight of the two facilities and ensure the delivery of quality services to the homes' residents.

House Bill 4441, *An Act relative to the governance, structure and care of veterans at the Commonwealth's veterans' homes*, was engrossed on a vote of 156-1 in the House of Representatives on February 10. The bill now heads to the Senate for its consideration.

Representative Smola said the House bill implements a series of reforms in response to the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home that claimed the lives of 76 veterans. Those reforms include a restructuring of the boards of trustees at both soldiers' homes; new professional qualification standards for the homes' superintendents; regular inspections of the two facilities; the appointment of an independent Veteran Advocate; and the establishment of a Veterans' Homes Council and a new Office of Veterans' Homes and Housing within the Department of Veterans' Services.

Under House Bill 4441, the Department of Public Health will be required to conduct a minimum of two inspections per year at both the Chelsea and Holyoke facilities. The bill also mandates an annual review of both home's health record systems to ensure they are equipped with technology that allows for easy access to records for veterans and their families.

Representative Smola said the bill will help to empower veterans and their families by requiring the Office of Veterans' Homes and Housing to employ an ombudsman at each veterans' home. In addition, it establishes strong whistleblower protections to prevent retaliation against

individuals who submit complaints to the ombudsman or who cooperate in any investigation initiated after a complaint is filed.

House Bill 4441 also creates a Veteran Advocate, who will be appointed by a majority vote of the attorney general, state auditor and governor. Representative Smola noted the Veteran Advocate will serve independently of any state agency, and will advocate on behalf of the state's veterans, including those residing in the Chelsea and Holyoke Soldiers' Homes, to ensure they receive timely, safe and effective services.

Under the House proposal, the executive director of the Office of Veteran's Homes and Housing will be appointed by the Secretary of Veterans' Services and will advise the secretary on matters relative to veterans' housing. The executive director must have at least five years of experience in health care management as well as military or other experience working with veterans.

Representative Smola noted the executive director will also chair the newly-created Veterans' Homes Council, which will be responsible for managing the state's veterans' homes. The Massachusetts Adjutant General and members of the Chelsea and Holyoke Soldiers' Homes' boards of trustees are among those who will serve on the 17-member Council.

According to Representative Smola, the bill requires the superintendents of both soldiers' homes to be licensed as a nursing home administrator and to either be a veteran or have prior experience with the management of veterans in a nursing home or long-term care setting. Both superintendents will report to the executive director of the Office of Veterans' Homes and Housing and will be appointed by the Veterans' Homes Council based on recommendations submitted by the boards of trustees of their respective homes.

House Bill 4441 also reduces the size of the Chelsea and Holyoke Soldiers' Homes boards of trustees from seven to five members, while setting additional requirements for who can serve on these boards. In Chelsea, at least three of the board members will be required to be war veterans, Gold Star Mothers and/or Gold Star Family Members, family members of active or former residents, or family members of Disabled American Veterans. In Holyoke, the trustees must include at least one resident each of Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden and Hampshire counties, and at least three of them must meet the same background requirements as the Chelsea Soldiers' Home trustees. For additional information please contact Representative Smola at Todd.Smola@mahouse.gov or (617)722-2100.

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