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Representative Smola supports HOME Act to assist MA veterans with housing and employment

BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means) joined with his colleagues in the House of Representatives today to unanimously approve legislation to enhance housing and employment opportunities for Massachusetts veterans.

The bill – An Act relative to Housing, Operations, Military Service and Enrichment, or the HOME Act – calls for the creation of a new Office for State Veterans’ Homes and Housing within the Department of Veterans’ Services. In addition to giving veterans preference in state-assisted public housing units, the bill also makes veterans a protected class for hiring purposes.

“The HOME Act seeks to address the needs of our veterans, particularly as it relates to housing,” said Representative Smola. “With Memorial Day fast approaching, it’s only fitting that we take these steps now to recognize our veterans and remember the many sacrifices they have made on our behalf.”

The proposed Office for State Veterans’ Homes and Housing will provide oversight of the Chelsea and Holyoke Soldiers’ Homes. The office will also be responsible for making recommendations to address veterans’ housing needs across the Commonwealth.

Although veterans currently are given preference in public housing, this preference generally applies only to housing units within the community in which the veteran resides. The HOME Act includes a provision championed by Assistant Minority Leader Brad Hill (R-Ipswich) to give veterans statewide preference for public housing. The bill

also prohibits housing authorities from counting as income any veterans benefits for service-connected disabilities in excess of \$1,800 when calculating rent.

During floor debate, two Republican amendments were adopted and incorporated into the bill. One amendment, filed by Representative Donald Wong (R-Saugus), gives cities and towns the option of establishing a fund to assist local veterans and their spouses with their food, transportation and heating expenses, using money raised through a voluntary check-off box on municipal property and excise tax bills. The other amendment, filed by House Minority Leader Bradley H. Jones, Jr. (R-North Reading), would allow certain surviving family members of American soldiers who were killed in action, and who possess a US Department of Defense-issued Gold Star Lapel Button and letter of approval, to obtain a Gold Star Family license plate from the Registrar of Motor Vehicles.

The HOME Act also contains provisions to assist veterans with securing employment. Under current law, recipients of the Medal of Honor and the Distinguished Service Cross can be appointed to civil service positions without having to taken an exam. The HOME Act extends this exemption to recipients of the Distinguished Service Medal and Silver Star Medal.

The HOME Act also:

- Reconfigures the Massachusetts Post-Deployment Commission, which will study the barriers facing military personnel returning to civilian life and identify ways to better assist these veterans with accessing education, employment, healthcare, housing and other services;
- Expands property tax abatements for surviving spouses of service members to include those who have died from injuries or diseases sustained during active service, even if those injuries were not sustained in a combat zone;
- Offers full property tax abatements for the permanent residence of any veteran with a 100% disability rating for service-connected blindness;
- Extends eligibility for the Public Service Scholarship Program to the children and spouses of Prisoners of War (POWs) who served after Vietnam;
- Provides for state employees who are in the reserves and ordered to active duty for more than 30 days to continue receiving their full state salary, minus their reserve pay; and
- Allows local Veterans' Agents to be appointed to three-year terms, rather than on an annual basis.

The HOME Act now moves to the Senate for further action.

For additional information please contact Representative Smola at Todd.Smola@mahouse.gov or (617)722-2100.

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