

House Bill 298

By: Representatives Scott of the 76th, Jackson of the 64th, Davis of the 87th, Holcomb of the 81st, Williams of the 168th, and others

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT

1 To amend Article 1 of Chapter 4 of Title 38 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated,
2 relating to the Department of Veterans Service, so as to provide for a Veterans Bill of Rights;
3 to provide a short title; to provide for definitions; to provide for licensing practices; to
4 provide for education waivers and requirements; to provide for collaborations for general
5 health and mental health resources; to provide for related matters; to repeal conflicting laws;
6 and for other purposes.

7 BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF GEORGIA:

8 **SECTION 1.**

9 Article 1 of Chapter 4 of Title 38 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to the
10 Department of Veterans Service, is amended by adding a new Code section to read as
11 follows:

12 "38-4-15.

13 (a) This Code section shall be known and may be cited as the 'Veterans Bill of Rights.'

14 (b) As used in this Code section, the term:

15 (1) 'Department' means the Department of Veterans Service.

16 (2) 'Emergency medical services (EMS) personnel' means an individual or group of
17 individuals licensed with cognitive knowledge and scope of practice that corresponds to
18 that level in the National EMS Education Standards and National EMS Scope of Practice
19 Model.

20 (3) 'Institution of higher education' means an eligible educational institution as defined
21 in Section 529 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 or other applicable federal law.

22 (c) The department shall take all necessary steps to annually increase the number of
23 veterans taking advantage of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's Military
24 Skills Test Waiver Program. These steps shall include, but are not limited to, ensuring
25 information on the program is accessible on the department's website, coordinating with
26 military placement and training programs, including, but not limited to, disseminating
27 information on the program to veterans with relevant experience who are newly located or
28 locating in Georgia.

29 (d) The Department of Public Health shall immediately review all licensing practices and
30 take all necessary and appropriate steps to increase recognition of military training and
31 experience toward licensing of EMS personnel. Within one year after the effective date
32 of this Code section, the Department of Public Health shall report to the General Assembly
33 any additional steps that may require legislation and request that the General Assembly
34 pass that legislation.

35 (e) The Department of Banking and Finance shall review all state licenses for which
36 military members may have relevant training or experience and, within one year after the
37 effective date of this Code section, produce a report recommending steps that can be taken
38 to increase recognition of military training and experience toward licensing. As soon as
39 practicable, but by no later than one year after issuance of the report, the Department of
40 Banking and Finance shall then take any steps identified in the report that can be taken
41 without further legislation and shall report to the General Assembly annually to request it
42 to enact any necessary legislation.

43 (f)(1) A veteran who enrolls as a student in good standing at a public institution of higher
44 education shall upon application be granted academic credits without limitation toward
45 his or her degree for completion of courses that were part of the veteran's military training
46 or service if the completed courses meet the standards of the American Council on
47 Education, or its equivalent, for the awarding of academic credits. No fee, tuition, or
48 other charge shall be assessed against a veteran who qualifies for academic credit under
49 this Code section.

50 (2) A public institution of higher education that offers an early course registration period
51 for any segment of the student population shall have a process in place to offer early
52 course registration to students who are veterans or National Guard members. A veteran
53 with no previous college experience shall be permitted to file applications up to the end
54 of registration and begin classes pending completion of his or her application and
55 provision of supporting documents.

56 (3) A student who is called to active duty in the armed forces of the United States after
57 having attended a public institution of higher education regularly for 13 weeks or more,
58 or having completed 85 percent of the term's work through acceleration, shall be given
59 full credit for each course in which he or she has a grade of 'C' or better. A student called
60 to active duty who does not meet attendance requirements sufficient to earn a grade shall
61 be entitled to a 100 percent refund of tuition and fees. Upon a veteran's return from
62 active duty, he or she may register after normal registration periods end without late fees
63 or other penalties.

64 (4) A public institution of higher education shall adopt any and all procedures that are
65 necessary to fully implement this Code section.

66 (g) The Department of Economic Development and Tourism shall annually review
67 apprentice, training, and other vocational programs focused on providing job training and
68 placement to returning military service members and veterans. The annual review shall
69 evaluate the costs and results and recommend programs for expansion using state funding.

70 including, but not limited to, an estimate of future returns to the state of improved
71 outcomes from the expansion of programs. The Department of Economic Development
72 and Tourism shall provide an annual report to the General Assembly and Governor on
73 January 1 of each year for five years after the effective date of this Code section, to be used
74 by the General Assembly to inform annual budget decisions.

75 (h) The department shall develop and operate veteran health navigator services to increase
76 access to health care coverage and services. The department shall identify, train, and
77 deploy veteran health navigators who have direct knowledge of the veteran communities
78 they serve. Leveraging existing resources and structures where veterans and their families
79 are likely to be found, the veteran health navigators shall:

80 (1) Help identify all federal and other health benefits, coverage, and services available
81 to veterans and their families; and

82 (2) Coordinate with relevant departments, health care providers, and health insurance
83 programs to help veterans and their beneficiaries apply for coverage under such
84 programs, including helping veterans overcome barriers within the health care system to
85 ensure enrollment in health plans and effective delivery and coordination of health
86 services.

87 (i)(1) Using the veteran health navigators described in subsection (h) of this Code section
88 as a source of information about the unique needs, coverage, and treatment gaps faced by
89 veterans and their families, the department shall examine all existing programs designed
90 to increase access to affordable, quality health care and evaluate whether the needs of
91 veterans and their families are met by those programs or whether further coordination
92 with the veteran health navigators or other steps would better meet the needs of veterans
93 and their families. The department shall then produce a report of its findings,
94 recommendations, and any additional legislative or budget action it recommends, deliver
95 that report to the General Assembly and the Governor, and release it to the news media.

96 (2) The department shall prepare a report showing the impacts that Medicaid expansion
97 has had to date for the community of veterans and their families in Georgia, including any
98 recommendations for better including or serving veterans and their families in that
99 expansion. The department shall deliver that report to the General Assembly and the
100 Governor and release it to the news media.

101 (j)(1) The department shall ensure that access to mental health coverage, services, and
102 treatment is included as a full focus stream of the veteran health navigator services
103 described in subsection (h) of this Code section and that veteran health navigators help
104 identify all federal and other mental health benefits, coverage, and services available to
105 veterans and their families, including, but not limited to, those relating to post-traumatic
106 stress disorder, depression, and suicide prevention.

107 (2) In coordination with local, state, and federal governmental agencies, and in
108 consultation with entities, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, localities,
109 municipalities that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental health, and
110 service providers such as United States Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers,
111 the department shall develop and implement a strategy to reduce barriers to access to
112 mental health services and treatment for veterans and their families. The department shall
113 develop the strategy using methods including, but not limited to, the following:

114 (A) Identifying structural and logistical barriers to accessing treatment, including, but
115 not limited to, perceived stigma, long travel distances to receive care, and any other
116 barriers. The department shall create an annual report on the barriers, which shall be
117 delivered to the General Assembly and the Governor and made available on the
118 department's website;

119 (B) Resolving all barriers identified in paragraph (1) of this subsection that can be
120 resolved without legislative or budgetary action, including, but not limited to, the
121 following:

- 122 (i) Increased coordination between state agencies, nonprofit entities, and the federal
123 government;
- 124 (ii) Application for and use of private and federal grants; and
125 (iii) Any other actions; and
- 126 (C) Reporting annually to the General Assembly and the Governor and making
127 available on the department's website any additional legislative or budgetary steps that
128 would resolve the barriers identified in paragraph (1) of this subsection that have not
129 been resolved by the steps taken in this paragraph.
- 130 (3) In coordination with local, state, and federal government agencies, and in
131 consultation with nonprofit entities, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs,
132 localities, municipalities that have effective prevention and treatment systems for mental
133 health, and service providers such as United States Department of Veterans Affairs
134 medical centers, the department shall enhance and strengthen suicide prevention
135 programs in keeping with proven best practices and research, using methods including,
136 but not limited to, the following:
- 137 (A) Identifying and applying for federal and private grants focused on veteran suicide
138 prevention;
- 139 (B) Coordinating local, state, federal, and nonprofit programs that include community
140 based approaches for at-risk veterans and veterans at large;
- 141 (C) Providing technical assistance to communities to develop strategic plans to reduce
142 veteran suicide, including, but not limited to, coordination and participation by local
143 leaders, faith based communities, schools, workplaces, and other stakeholders; and
- 144 (D) Evaluating community strategic plans within Georgia and disseminating methods
145 and best practices to optimize the impact of efforts by all partners and stakeholders.
- 146 (4) The department shall create a centralized provider database, identifying, by region,
147 mental health providers with the expertise and ability to assist veterans and their families.

148 The database shall highlight providers with training or experience in the prevention and
149 treatment of veteran suicide.

150 (5) Using existing resources, and incorporating best practices and research from the
151 United States Department of Veterans Affairs and state and nonprofit service providers
152 in Georgia, the department shall develop a continuing education course for mental health
153 providers in Georgia to obtain expertise in veteran suicide assessment, prevention,
154 treatment, and risk management and shall make the program available for free to
155 providers in regions of the state lacking sufficiently trained providers, as determined by
156 the database created under paragraph (4) of this subsection.

157 (6) Using existing or appropriated resources, the department shall identify evidence
158 based best practices to increase awareness of any veteran suicide prevention hotline and
159 other crisis resources in Georgia or nationally with proven effectiveness in reducing
160 veteran suicide.

161 (k) In coordination with local, state, and federal government agencies and nonprofit
162 entities, and in consultation with states and municipalities that have achieved an end to
163 veteran homelessness, the department shall develop and implement a strategy to end
164 veteran homelessness within three years. The strategy shall include, but is not limited to,
165 the following:

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

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

169 (3) Data sharing among all relevant providers, state agencies, and United States
170 Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers;

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

173 (5) Connecting veterans experiencing homelessness to health, mental health,
174 employment, and training resources through the services described in this Code section;

175 (6) A commitment to housing first principles, as propounded by the National Alliance
176 to End Homelessness; and
177 (7) Identification of and application for funding, as needed, from private and foundation
178 sources and other partners."

179 **SECTION 2.**

180 All laws and parts of laws in conflict with this Act are repealed.