

MCLMar2018

Despite having to go into an “Extended Session” in order to pass next year’s budget, this year’s Legislative Session is officially over. The Governor has received and acted upon the budget. He has also received all of the bills reported upon below. While he has signed most, some still await his final action. Where final action has taken place, I have included the official “Laws of Florida (L.O.F.)” Chapter Number. The following represents what I believe to be the bills of interest to the Marine Corps League, specifically, and veterans in general. Semper Fi.

Bills Passed

CS/HB 333 by Rep. Burgess & 16 others—passed the full House on February 14th with a vote of 109-1, and passed the Senate on March 7th with a unanimous vote. It was signed into law on March 22nd as Ch. No. 2018-45, L.O.F. It adds an exemption to the 770 hour long basic recruit training program for becoming a law enforcement officer in Florida for an applicant who has served in the special operations forces of the U.S. military for at least five years, provided that there is no more than a 4-year break from the applicant’s special operations forces experience at the time of application. The bill defines “special operations forces” to include:

- Service members of the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment;
- Navy SEALs and Special Warfare-Craft Crewmen;
- Air Force Combat Control, Para-rescue, and Tactical Air Control Party Specialists;
- Marine Corps Critical Skills Operators; and
- Any other component of the Special Operations Command approved by the Commission.

It allows the Criminal Justice Standards & Training Commission within the Florida Department of Law Enforcement to require an exempt applicant to undergo additional training as it deems necessary, based on the applicant’s prior training and experience. Unrelated to veterans, it also provides a similar exemption for those who have served as a sworn officer in another state or for the Federal Government for at least 1 year, provided that there is no more than an 8-year break in employment. See the bill for details. The bill is effective July 1, 2018.

CS/CS/HB 29 by Rep. Ponder & Others—passed both the House and Senate with unanimous votes. It was signed into law on March 14th, as Ch. No. 2018-7, L.O.F. It created the “Don Hahnfeldt Veteran and Military Family Opportunity Act”. The 84-page bill eases professional licensing fees and requirements for certain military members, veterans, and their spouses,

aimed at continuing Florida's reputation as a veteran-friendly state. The provisions include:

- Designates March 25th of each year as "Medal of Honor Day" and allows classroom instruction related to the values of the recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor to meet some of the current instructional requirements on character development and the contributions of veterans to our country.
- Allows members of the board of directors for Veterans Florida, Inc., to be eligible for reappointment to the board.
- Allows Junior Reserve Officer Training instructors to participate in the Florida Teachers Classroom Supply Assistance Program. This is a program that allows "classroom teachers" to be reimbursed by the state for some classroom supplies they purchased. Unfortunately, JROTC instructors are not included in the definition of "classroom teachers". The Legislature funded it to the tune of \$45 million for the next fiscal year.
- Amends s. 295.22 F.S., relating to the Veterans Employment and Training Service Program to expand the grants program that assists veterans in meeting the workforce-skill needs of businesses seeking to hire, "...to promote, or generally improve specialized skills..." of veterans. The program appears to reimburse businesses that expend funds in training veterans for specific jobs—up to \$8,000 per veteran trainee. The bill adds a requirement that the business must cover the entire cost of all of the training provided before receiving a reimbursement equal to 50 percent of the cost to train a veteran who is a permanent, full-time employee. It makes other changes to the program; see the bill for details.
- Amends some of the requirements for veterans applying for various licenses of regulated businesses such as funeral directors, insurance or fire-safety related licenses.
- It provides a method for a member or veteran to certify their knowledge, training, and experience to gain credit in licensing for funeral directing, embalming, and direct disposing.

See the bill for details.

SB 100 by Sen. Steube, --passed unanimous out of the Legislature and has been sent to the Governor for his approval. It creates an exemption from local business taxes for honorably discharged veterans and their spouses, unmarried surviving spouses of such veterans, spouses of certain active duty military servicemembers, as well as certain low-income persons. The bill sets forth the procedure for obtaining the exemption and allows cities that currently impose a gross receipts tax to continue the process. See the bill

for details. The bill also removes the \$1 or \$2 fee a veteran must pay to have the word “veteran” displayed on an identification card or driver’s license issued by the DHSMV. It also provides for additional ID to be used to establish veteran status when applying for the above designations. Finally, the bill prohibits county tax collectors from charging a veteran the \$6.25 service fee for driver license services upon presentation of specified documentation proving an individual is a veteran.

CS/HB 7087 by Rep. Renner—is the “tax package” for 2016. The 100-plus page bill makes numerous changes to Florida’s tax laws, some of which may be of interest to veterans. They include:

- Current law provides a \$5,000 property tax exemption to any resident ex-servicemember who was honorably discharged and has been disabled 10 percent or more by misfortune or while serving during a period of wartime service. This exemption is also extended to the surviving spouse of the disabled ex-servicemember if, at the time of the service member’s death, the unmarried surviving spouse was married to the ex-servicemember for at least 5 years. The bill removes the five year requirement.
- The Florida Constitution grants an exemption for military servicemembers that have Florida homesteads and are deployed on active duty outside the U.S. in support of certain military operations designated each year by the Legislature. The exemption is equal to the taxable value of the qualifying homestead, multiplied by the number of days that the servicemember was deployed. The bill updates the statutory list of military operations by eliminating the following: Operation Enduring Freedom; New Dawn; and Odyssey Dawn.

Budget

The Governor has signed the budget after line-item vetoing \$11,961,441,228 in individual items. While your author does not presume to be a budget expert, I have found a number of items that could be of interest to former marines and veterans in general.

SB 440 by Sen. Garcia and 12 others—the bill authorized AHCA, in conjunction with the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs, to seek and negotiate a federal waiver or state plan amendment to the Medicaid program, or other federal authorization necessary to implement the program. If enacted, participation by Florida veterans and their families’ is voluntary.

Despite our best efforts, the bill did not pass. However, buried in the budget under the category of Department of Veterans' Affairs, is a provision directing the Department of Veterans' Affairs "...to seek federal authorization and funding for a program to reduce nursing home placements by providing home and community based service to the veterans population . The program may include medical, behavioral health, or long-term care services, as negotiated". The program is subject to Legislative approval. While this is not exactly what SB 440 provided, it is a similar concept and a good start.

K-9 for Dogs (HB 3241)—did make it into the final budget, but at a rate less than the \$600,000 originally requested. The budget item allocates \$250,000 for the project. It will be used to acquire, screen, and train dogs that were once abandoned in shelters to become service dogs for selected Florida-based veteran and will be used to mitigate the effects of PTSD.

Five Star Veterans Homeless Housing & Re-integration Project (HB 2213)—also made it into the final budget, but at less than the requested amount of \$796,250. The budget allocates \$150,000 for the project located in Duval County, but open to veterans from across the state. Its main goals are to help homeless veterans who are dealing with PTSD or Traumatic Brain injury and other behavioral health issues. It will help them achieve greater self-determination, improved residential stability, and increased income and/or job skills, through individual "Passport to Independence" long-term execution plans tailored to each veteran.

State Veterans' Nursing Home, Marion County-- feasibility study--\$2,000,000.

Lake City Veterans' Home--\$400,000.

Human Services dollars for the following State Veterans' Homes

- Daytona Beach \$255,000
- Land O'Lakes \$295,000
- Pembroke Pines \$280,000
- Panama City \$250,000
- Port Charlotte \$250,000
- St. Augustine \$270,000

Additionally, over the past five months, your author has reported on ten specific House budget requests, mostly for "veterans' courts". Technically, they were listed in the budget as "...felony and/or misdemeanor pretrial or post-adjudicatory veterans' treatment intervention programs". The budget included funds for these programs in the following counties:

- Alachua \$150,000
- Clay \$150,000

- Duval \$200,000
- Escambia \$150,000
- Leon \$125,000
- Okaloosa \$150,000
- Orange \$200,000
- Pasco \$150,000
- Pinellas \$150,000

There may be other items buried in the fine print of the 452-page budget, but the above are some of the ones of interest. With these allocations and the budget for the Florida Department of Veterans' Affairs, Florida remains one of the most "veteran friendly" states in the nation.

Other Issues

HB 75 by Rep. Ponder & Others—passed the legislature unanimously and was signed into law on March 14th, as Ch. No. 2018-8, L.O.F. The bill authorizes Florida College System (FCS) institutions to waive any portion of specified fees that are not covered by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) Military Tuition Assistance (MTA) program. Currently, active duty U.S. Armed Forces members are reimbursed for tuition through the DOD's MTA program. The DOD expressly prohibits the payment of fees, which are defined as any charge not directly related to course instruction. Therefore, active duty military members incur out of pocket expenses for mandatory fees when enrolling in FCS institutions. This bill provides relief to those service members. It is effective July 1, 2018.