

GOVERNOR PATRICK SIGNS VALOR ACT TO INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR VETERANS

Legislation increases opportunities for veteran-owned businesses, Gold Star Families, military children and higher education access

BOSTON – Thursday, May 31, 2012 – Governor Deval Patrick today signed Senate Bill 2254, "An Act Relative to Veterans' Access, Livelihood, Opportunity, and Resources", also known as the VALOR Act. The legislation creates increased supports for veteran-owned businesses, Gold Star Families, military children and higher education access in the Commonwealth.

"I am proud to sign the VALOR Act to enhance our already strong supports for veterans," said Governor Patrick. "Massachusetts continues to lead the nation in providing services for veterans and their families, and this legislation will further reinforce our leadership."

"While this past Memorial Day reminded the nation to honor our brave military servicemen and women, the signing of the VALOR Act pledges to support our veterans and their families throughout the year by increasing access and opportunities for services they have rightfully earned," said Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray, Chair of the Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans' Services. "I am proud to have partnered with the Department of Veterans' Services, Senator Rush, Representative Vallee, and the state legislature to provide our veterans and their families with these benefits including access to education, business assistance, and relief for critical services."

Among other provisions, the VALOR Act provides greater access to financial assistance for small businesses; affords greater opportunities for service-disabled veterans to participate in public projects; makes it easier for children of military personnel to transfer between school districts and states; and expands supports from the Massachusetts Military Family Relief Fund to Gold Star Families. The relief fund, which derives its funding from a voluntary tax check off on income tax returns, is used to defray the costs of food, housing, utilities, medical service and other expenses borne by Massachusetts National Guard and reserve service members and their families.

"One of the most important services we can provide is to support our veterans and their families," said Attorney General Martha Coakley. "The VALOR Act not only symbolizes our commitment to the 385,000 veterans living in Massachusetts but the level of respect and appreciation we have for all that they and their families have sacrificed to protect the freedom we enjoy in our country."

"With the signing of this bill, we are once again doing what's right for our veterans and service men and women in the Commonwealth," said Senate President Therese Murray. "Massachusetts is number one in

services for veterans, active military and their families, and I am proud to live in a state that not only recognizes the responsibility to give back, but wants to give back. The Valor Act sets an example for the nation in recognizing our veterans and service members and making sure they and their families continue to have proper benefits and the right opportunities for employment and education.”

“I commend the Patrick-Murray Administration for their support of this important bill,” said House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo. “In signing this legislation, we are reinforcing our commitment to veterans. Although we can never fully repay our servicemen and women for their heroism and sacrifice, this signature shows that we will continue to support and help veterans transition when they return home to Massachusetts.”

“We are constantly working to advance opportunities for veterans, including those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan,” said Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. JudyAnn Bigby. “The VALOR Act will address many of the unique challenges that today’s veterans and their children face.”

“In Massachusetts, we have always taken the approach that providing services to veterans and their families is more than a ceremonial duty,” said Department of Veterans’ Services Secretary Coleman Nee. “Ensuring access to health care, education, employment and financial security are the cornerstones of how we honor and provide for the men and women of the Commonwealth who have served us in uniform. The signing of the VALOR Act will strengthen that commitment significantly and reinforce the legacy of Massachusetts leading the way in supporting those that have defended and protected our Nation in times of war and peace.”

“The heroic sacrifices of our veterans are shared by their families,” said Secretary of Education Paul Reville. “The VALOR Act will ease the transition for children of those serving in the military in areas such as course placement, course credit, and testing by joining Massachusetts in the Interstate Compact for Military Children.”

Under the VALOR Act, Massachusetts will join other states as part of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. The Compact is a tool for schools to make transition easier for the children of military families so that they are afforded the same opportunities for educational success as other children and are not penalized or delayed in achieving their educational goals. The average military student faces transition challenges more than twice during high school, and most military children will attend six to nine different school systems from kindergarten to 12th grade.

The VALOR Act also calls for the state Board of Higher Education to require each public institution of higher education to develop a set of policies and procedures governing the evaluation of a student’s military occupation(s), military training, coursework, and experience, in order to determine whether academic credit shall be awarded for such experience, training, and coursework. The policy must be in place by March 1, 2013.

“This new law encompasses some of the very best ideas presented by my colleagues in the Legislature and the veterans of the Commonwealth to assist veterans and their families at a time when we are seeing an increase of military men and women returning from deployment overseas,” said Senator Michael Rush. “The signing of the VALOR Act by Governor Patrick marks a proud moment in which Massachusetts renews its commitment to provide for our veterans, service members and their families.”

“I thank Governor Patrick, Lieutenant Governor Murray, and the entire Administration for working in partnership with the Legislature to improve services for Massachusetts veterans,” said Representative James Vallee. “As a veteran, I understand first-hand the challenges military servicemen and women may experience in their transition home, and I am honored to help the Commonwealth expand access and availability for a range of critical services to support our fellow veterans.”

The VALOR Act also streamlines the process for school-aged children of military personnel to transfer between school districts and states; prohibits local hiring authorities from requesting any military medical records that are not requested by the Human Resources Department; and eliminates the \$2,500 cap that applies to years six and beyond of the property tax exemption for surviving spouses of a soldier, sailor, or member of the National Guard whose death occurred as a proximate result of an injury sustained or disease contracted in a combat zone.

Massachusetts Veterans' Services

More than 385,000 veterans currently live in Massachusetts, including 37,000 men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11. The Patrick-Murray Administration has worked to ensure newly returning veterans, as well as Massachusetts' aging veteran population, continue to receive quality health, education benefits, housing and employment services to honor their service.

Last fall, after working with the state legislature and the veterans' community, Lieutenant Governor Murray introduced an initiative in partnership with major trade associations in Massachusetts to encourage their employers to hire veterans and circulate information on veterans' benefits. Additionally, the Patrick-Murray Administration launched an Interagency Task Force on Hiring Veterans, directing all executive branch agencies to promote the benefits of hiring veterans. Through the Registry of Motor Vehicles, veterans are also now given the option to list their veteran status on the front of their driver's license and state identification cards in order to more easily access services. The Patrick-Murray Administration also proposed to increase veterans' services by 13% in the Fiscal Year 2013 Budget.

The Patrick-Murray Administration recently launched a new web portal MassVetsAdvisor.org to help veterans and their family members access more than 200 state and federal benefits in one location. MassVetsAdvisor provides access to programs for education, counseling, employment, health care and other services.

To learn more about resources and services for Massachusetts veterans and military families, visit the Patrick-Murray Administration's Department of Veterans' Services: www.mass.gov/veterans or visit the new web portal: www.MassVetsAdvisor.org.