

GOVERNOR PATRICK FILES LEGISLATION TO HONOR DECORATED SOLDIERS

Bill will ensure active military qualify for specialty license plates

BOSTON - Tuesday, April 6, 2010 - Moved by the story of a New Bedford soldier who lost his leg while serving in Iraq, Governor Deval Patrick has that eliminates the restriction against active military from qualifying for a free military medal license plate. Currently, only those who have been discharged from duty are entitled to plates representing the Silver Star, Bronze Star, Distinguished Flying Cross or Purple Heart.

"We want to recognize the heroic service of all individuals who have earned these distinctions," said Governor Patrick. "For Purple Heart recipients and other awarded soldiers who remain on active duty, their bravery and continued service deserves acknowledgement."

"Through this proposed legislation, Massachusetts has a great opportunity to recognize and honor our brave men and women who serve and protect our country every day," said Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray, Chair of the Governor's Advisory Council on Veterans' Services.

"I was really happy to hear that this was happening - I think it's great," said Sgt. Christopher Gomes, U.S. Army, who met Governor Patrick at the Freetown Veterans of Foreign Wars last month. The Purple Heart recipient and New Bedford resident explained to the Governor that he does not qualify for the Purple Heart license plate because he remains on active duty. "The men and women who continue serving in the military should not be excluded from these privileges. This new legislation ensures that active duty service members will be recognized for their service and sacrifice now rather than having to wait until they are veterans."

"It's the right thing to do," said Secretary of Veterans' Services Tom Kelley. "If a son or daughter of Massachusetts has been wounded in combat, we should offer them the same opportunity and distinction while they are on active duty to proudly display the plate reflecting the medal they have earned as a result of their service."

MassDOT Registrar of Motor Vehicles Rachel Kaprielian said once the bill passes, the RMV will design a new license specialty plate for active duty soldiers who have been awarded military medals. Until the new plate is in production, about 12 to 14 weeks, eligible soldiers can get a temporary veterans medal plate upon application.

"We don't want this inequity in honoring all who serve our country to stand another minute," said Registrar Kaprielian. "They shouldn't have to wait to be discharged from service to be eligible for these special plates and they shouldn't have to wait until the new plate is produced to display the honor on their vehicles."

Currently, there are 6,619 veterans who display military medal plates on their vehicles. Disabled veterans, in addition to free license registrations, are also eligible for an exemption in paying sales and excise taxes on one vehicle.

The chairs of the Legislature's Veterans and Federal Affairs Committee voiced their support for the Governor's legislation. "It is the least we can do to honor those who have distinguished themselves in service to our country," said Senator Kenneth Donnelly.

Representative Harold Naughton said, "Distinguished heroes should not have to wait until they are discharged to be recognized this way. As our country is still engaged in two wars, it is an appropriate time to allow active duty servicemen and women to receive this honor."

Since taking office, the Patrick-Murray Administration has honored veterans while increasing the benefits and services available to them. In July 2009, the Administration announced plans for the official state memorial for Massachusetts servicemembers killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. The Home of the Brave bill, signed into law February 11, 2009, increased the cash bonuses for veterans serving multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and established a "Medal of Liberty" to be awarded to the next of kin of Massachusetts servicemembers who have died due to wounds received while serving in the armed forces. Most recently, the Governor's budget preserved programs and services for veterans, providing an \$8 million increase to the Department of Veterans' Services.

Lieutenant Governor Timothy Murray presented a resolution to assist families of servicemen and women across the country during the National Lieutenant Governors Association (NLGA) Winter Meeting in Washington, D.C. The resolution will expand services by Strategic Outreach to Families of All Reservists (SOFAR), calling for SOFAR's helpful guide, a written resource for education professionals to help students with a family member that has been deployed, be distributed to schools and employees under the jurisdictions of the states and territories of NLGA members.