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2020 SESSION: DEFENSE AND VETERANS HIGHLIGHTS

During the 2020 Legislative Session, the General Assembly applied its powers to support Georgia's veteran and active duty military populations. As of 2018, Georgia is home to over 700,000 veterans according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and over 88,000 reserve and active duty members work across the state's 10 military installations. Georgia also has the sixth largest National Guard population in the nation with a total of about 14,000 members.

In addition to its regular duties, the Georgia National Guard has been instrumental in the state's response to COVID-19 by providing strike teams to address coronavirus hot spots across the state. The National Guard was first to respond as 257 cruise ship passengers returned to Georgia in early March for quarantine and treatment. Over 600 National Guard members were deployed to work with Augusta University to test as many as 2,200 people per day, provide medical assistance teams at hospitals, as well as implement new infection control teams at long-term care facilities where it is exceptionally difficult to socially distance a large medically-fragile population. While the state was observing stay-at-home orders, these strike teams also helped package about 90 million pounds of food for regional food banks and prepare and deliver about 948,000 meals to Georgians in need.

FY 2021 Budget

- The Department of Veterans Services is receiving \$1.2 million in one-time funds in the FY 2021 budget for renovations, technology improvements, and patient connectivity initiatives at the two Georgia War Veterans nursing homes. In 2019, the average daily patient census was 146 at the Augusta nursing home and 231 at the Milledgeville nursing home. These new investments will increase the bed census at both locations.
- Additionally, \$450,000 in start-up funds is provided for the sub-acute therapy unit at the Milledgeville nursing home. This rehabilitation unit will provide care and treatment to Georgia veterans who are diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), or multiple amputation of one or more limbs and who are rated at 70 percent Service Connected Disabled (SCD). The patients must qualify for the VA's SCD rating because the unit is designed for the VA to pay for 100 percent of the cost of the care and treatment provided to these patients.
- The Georgia Military Pension Fund is receiving almost \$2.7 million in the FY 2021 budget to support the state's retired National Guard members.

- The Georgia Cyber Innovation and Training Center at Augusta was provided with \$75,000 in one-time funds to pursue the Cybersecurity Maturity Model Certification (CMMC). This certification will expand the ability of the center to pursue cybersecurity contracts offered by the U.S. Department of Defense.
- During FY 2021, the Georgia Student Finance Commission will offer over \$5.2 million in scholarships and grants to future members of the nation's military through the North Georgia Military Scholarship Grants, the North Georgia ROTC Grants, and the Georgia Military College Scholarship programs. In addition, the Georgia National Guard Service Cancelable Loans program will be able to match its FY 2020 awards and assist about 350 recipients by utilizing over \$1 million in FY 2021 appropriations and reserved funds.
- The FY 2021 budget also provides \$2.2 million in bonds for renovate the Georgia Veterans Education Career Transition Resource (VECTR) Center. Housed within Chattahoochee Technical College's campus in Cobb County, this center provides newly retired veterans and their families with the career and education resources necessary to transition to civilian life after the military.
- Georgia's Department of Defense is receiving \$14 million in bonds to renovate, maintain, and improve its facilities across the state in FY 2021. This includes National Guard readiness centers in Effingham, Newton, and Barrow counties that allow the state to quickly and effectively respond to emergencies.

2020 Legislation

- HB 819 allows for the issuance of veterans' driver's licenses to Georgia residents who are veterans of the armed forces for countries that are allies of the United States. The bill repeals a provision related to storage of unregistered vehicles in specified instances.
- HB 907 expands the service period for the definition of "war veteran" to those who were discharged without any dishonorable conditions, served on active duty, or served in a reserve component of the United States Armed Forces to include January 1, 1947 through June 26, 1950.
- HB 914 requires professional licensing boards to issue an expedited license to a military spouse or transitioning service member who holds a current license, in good standing, with another state; examinations to demonstrate required knowledge may be required.
- SB 336 adds the Meritorious Service Medal to the list of military medals that are available for special license plates. The bill creates a special and distinctive license plate for past or present members of United States Army Ranger units or graduates of the United States Army Ranger School. The bill amends Code Sections 40-2-86 and 40-2-86.1 to add the option of specialty license plate designs for motorcycle license plates.
- SB 306 establishes the Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology Interstate Compact. The compact allows Georgia to facilitate interstate practice of audiology and speech-language pathology. The compact includes a provision to support active duty military personnel or their spouses to maintain licensure in participating states.