

HOUSE BILL 279

P1
HB 1358/21 – HGO

2lr1252
CF SB 654

By: Delegates Rogers, Bartlett, Charles, Crosby, Henson, Hill, R. Jones, Kaiser, Kerr, Kipke, Love, Patterson, Saab, Sample–Hughes, Szeliga, ~~and Williams~~ Williams, Bagnall, Belcastro, Bhandari, Carr, Chisholm, Cullison, Johnson, Kelly, Krebs, Landis, R. Lewis, Morgan, Pena–Melnik, Reilly, Rosenberg, and K. Young

Introduced and read first time: January 17, 2022
Assigned to: Health and Government Operations

Committee Report: Favorable with amendments
House action: Adopted
Read second time: February 22, 2022

CHAPTER _____

1 AN ACT concerning

2 **Veterans Affairs – ~~Office of Communications and Public Affairs~~**
3 **Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program – Veterans Advocacy and**
4 **Education Act**

5 FOR the purpose of altering the name of the Outreach and Advocacy Program in the
6 Department of Veterans Affairs to be the ~~Office of Communications and Public~~
7 ~~Affairs~~ Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program; requiring the ~~Office~~
8 Program, in collaboration with the Maryland Higher Education Commission, to
9 actively help veterans and their dependents become aware of and access certain
10 benefits; altering certain responsibilities of the director of the ~~Office~~ Program;
11 repealing a certain requirement that the Department develop and maintain a certain
12 database of veterans in the State; altering certain responsibilities of the Department;
13 altering certain responsibilities of the ~~Office~~ Program; and generally relating to the
14 ~~Office of Communications and Public Affairs~~ Communications, Outreach, and
15 Advocacy Program.

16 BY repealing and reenacting, with amendments,
17 Article – State Government
18 Section ~~9–940 through 9–941 and 9–942 through 9–944~~ to be under the amended
19 part “Part V. ~~Office of Communications and Public Affairs~~ Communications,
20 Outreach, and Advocacy Program”; and 9–946

EXPLANATION: CAPITALS INDICATE MATTER ADDED TO EXISTING LAW.

[Brackets] indicate matter deleted from existing law.

Underlining indicates amendments to bill.

~~Strike out~~ indicates matter stricken from the bill by amendment or deleted from the law by amendment.



1 Annotated Code of Maryland
2 (2021 Replacement Volume)

3 BY repealing and reenacting, without amendments,

4 Article – State Government

5 Section 9–941

6 Annotated Code of Maryland

7 (2021 Replacement Volume)

8 SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF MARYLAND,
9 That the Laws of Maryland read as follows:

10 **Article – State Government**

11 Part V. ~~{Outreach~~ **COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH,** and Advocacy Program} ~~OFFICE~~
12 ~~OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS.~~

13 9–940.

14 (a) In this part, ~~["Program"]~~ **"OFFICE"** means **PART, "PROGRAM" MEANS** the
15 ~~{Outreach~~ **COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH,** and Advocacy Program} ~~OFFICE OF~~
16 ~~COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS.~~

17 (b) There is ~~an~~ **A** ~~{Outreach~~ **COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH,** and Advocacy
18 Program} ~~OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS~~ in the Department.

19 (c) The purpose of the ~~{Program}~~ ~~OFFICE~~ is to ensure that:

20 (1) veterans are informed of the services, benefits, and assistance available
21 to them from the State and federal government **AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS;** and

22 (2) general issues relating to veterans needs are brought to the attention
23 of the Governor and the General Assembly in order for them to be addressed.

24 9–941.

25 (a) The Secretary shall appoint a director for the ~~{Program}~~ ~~OFFICE.~~

26 (b) The director is entitled to the salary provided in the State budget.

27 (c) The director shall administer and coordinate the ~~{Program}~~ ~~OFFICE.~~

28 9–942.

1 (a) The ~~Outreach and Advocacy Program~~ ~~OFFICE~~ shall actively help veterans
2 and their dependents become aware of and access any service or benefit to which they are
3 entitled including:

- 4 (1) tax benefits;
- 5 (2) health care benefits;
- 6 (3) disability benefits; AND
- 7 (4) pension benefits[; and
- 8 (5) education].

9 (B) ~~THE OFFICE PROGRAM~~, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE MARYLAND
10 HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION, SHALL ACTIVELY HELP VETERANS AND THEIR
11 DEPENDENTS BECOME AWARE OF AND ACCESS EDUCATION AND TRAINING BENEFITS
12 TO WHICH THEY ARE ENTITLED.

13 [(b)] (C) The director of the ~~Program~~ ~~OFFICE~~ shall:

- 14 (1) support veterans and their dependents through the service or benefit
15 process; and
- 16 [(2) keep in contact with the appropriate governmental unit as to the status
17 of each claim of a veteran, a veteran's dependent, or a veteran's survivor.]

18 (2) REFER VETERANS, VETERANS' DEPENDENTS, AND VETERANS'
19 SURVIVORS TO THE APPROPRIATE GOVERNMENTAL UNIT FOR CLAIM ASSISTANCE.

20 9-943.

21 (a) (1) For the purposes of reaching any veteran, veteran's dependent, or
22 veteran's survivor in need of assistance in obtaining services or benefits granted by the law,
23 the director shall develop and implement [an outreach] A COMMUNICATIONS AND
24 ~~PUBLIC AFFAIRS~~ OUTREACH plan.

25 (2) In order to carry out the director's responsibilities under paragraph (1)
26 of this subsection, the director may:

27 (i) enter into contracts; and

28 (ii) work with governmental units and community-based
29 organizations, including the Maryland Department of Health, the Department of Aging,
30 faith-based groups, veterans groups, senior centers, adult day care centers, institutions of
31 higher education, and other entities the director considers appropriate.

1 (b) (1) The director shall develop mechanisms for outreach to be disseminated
 2 by direct mail and through community-based veterans organizations, the Department of
 3 Veterans Affairs, the Department of Human Services, the Maryland Department of Health,
 4 and any other State agency or unit the director considers appropriate.

5 (2) ~~[The mechanisms for outreach]~~ **COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS**
 6 shall include:

7 (i) ~~[the development of a pamphlet]~~ **DESIGNING MARKETING**
 8 **MATERIALS** describing the services provided by the ~~[Outreach and Advocacy Program]~~
 9 ~~DEPARTMENT~~;

10 (ii) a regular **ELECTRONIC** newsletter;

11 (iii) brochures describing various benefits or any other issue or
 12 benefit of interest to veterans or their dependents; and

13 (iv) other measures the director considers appropriate.

14 (c) The Department shall ~~[develop and maintain a database of veterans in the~~
 15 ~~State]~~ **COMMUNICATE WELCOME HOME INFORMATION TO VETERANS RETURNING TO**
 16 **THE STATE.**

17 (d) The Department, in conjunction with the types of community-based
 18 organizations listed in subsection (a)(2) of this section, shall develop ~~[a survey]~~
 19 **COMMUNICATION TOOLS** to assist in identifying veterans and dependents who may be
 20 eligible for ~~[pension programs]~~ **BENEFITS AND PROGRAMS OFFERED BY THE**
 21 **DEPARTMENT.**

22 (e) The ~~[Program]~~ ~~OFFICE~~ shall:

23 (1) ~~[in conjunction with other governmental units and community-based~~
 24 ~~groups, seek out veterans and their dependents who may be eligible for pension program~~
 25 ~~benefits; and]~~ **MANAGE THE MARYLAND VETERANS SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAM AND**
 26 **FUND ESTABLISHED UNDER PART VIII OF THIS SUBTITLE;**

27 (2) ~~[provide wounded or disabled veterans with information on available~~
 28 ~~services and benefits and support in obtaining these services and benefits]~~ **COORDINATE**
 29 **THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF VETERANS' SERVICES SPECIALISTS DESIGNATED UNDER**
 30 **§ 9-944 OF THIS SUBTITLE; AND**

31 **(3) MANAGE DEPARTMENT MEDIA RELATIONS, WEB CONTENT,**
 32 **SOCIAL MEDIA, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS, CUSTOMER SERVICE**
 33 **TRAINING, AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS.**

1 (F) THE DIRECTOR SHALL SERVE, AS NECESSARY, AS THE SECRETARY'S
2 DESIGNEE TO APPROPRIATE COMMISSIONS, WORKGROUPS, AND COUNCILS.

3 9-944.

4 (a) In this section, "specialist" means an employee designated by a governmental
5 unit who is responsible for responding to and assisting veterans who are employed by the
6 unit or who contact the unit for assistance.

7 (b) Each governmental unit shall:

8 (1) designate an employee of the unit, who to the extent practicable is a
9 veteran, as a veterans' services specialist for the unit and whose duties include the
10 coordination of veterans' services with the Department;

11 (2) provide the Department with any nonprotected or nonprivate
12 information about services the unit provides to veterans; and

13 (3) post on the unit's website:

14 (i) all services available for veterans from the unit;

15 (ii) the contact information for the unit's veterans' services
16 specialist; and

17 (iii) a link to the Department with the contact information for the
18 director of the ~~Outreach and Advocacy Program in the Department~~ OFFICE.

19 (c) The veterans' services specialist shall:

20 (1) coordinate the provision of veterans' services available through the unit
21 with the Department; and

22 (2) attend annual training that the Department provides concerning the
23 coordination of veterans' services.

24 (d) On request for services by a veteran, a governmental unit that does not
25 provide services to veterans shall direct the veteran to contact the Department and provide
26 the veteran with the Department contact information.

27 (e) The Department shall:

28 (1) coordinate a meeting each quarter, or as otherwise necessary, with
29 governmental units to discuss and receive information concerning the implementation of
30 the requirements of this section; and

(2) on or before January 15 each year, report on the implementation of the requirements of this section to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2-1257 of this article, the General Assembly.

Part VI. Reporting.

9-946.

The Secretary shall submit a report by December 31 of each year to the Governor and, in accordance with § 2-1257 of this article, the General Assembly, that includes:

(1) the number of:

(i) requests for help in obtaining benefits; [and]

(ii) [veterans, veterans' dependents, and veterans' survivors helped] **PUBLIC CONTACTS MADE by the ~~Outreach and Advocacy Program by category~~ OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS BY THE COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, AND ADVOCACY PROGRAM;**

[(2) the benefits obtained through the Outreach and Advocacy Program by category;

(3) the average length of time it takes to process benefit requests and for a recipient to access health benefits;]

(III) VETERANS ENROLLED IN THE UNITED STATES VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION; AND

(IV) VETERANS RECEIVING BENEFITS;

[(4) (2) the average amount of disability and pension benefits received by qualified individuals in this State compared to individuals in other states;

[(5) a detailed description of the outreach plan in the Outreach and Advocacy Program;]

[(6) (3) an account of the costs of operating the ~~Outreach and Advocacy Program~~ **COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH, and Advocacy Program** OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS;

[(7) (4) a status of the accomplishments for, efficacy of, efficiency of, and level of resources available for each of the following programs:

(i) cemetery;

- 1 (ii) memorial;
- 2 (iii) service;
- 3 (iv) veterans homes; [and]
- 4 ~~[(v) outreach~~ **COMMUNICATIONS, OUTREACH,** and advocacy;]
- 5 ~~(v) OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS;~~
- 6 (VI) MARYLAND VETERANS SERVICE ANIMAL PROGRAM AND
- 7 **FUND; AND**
- 8 (VII) VETERANS' SERVICES SPECIALISTS;
- 9 [(8)] (5) a general assessment of the status of veterans in the State;
- 10 [(9)] (6) the estimated impact current military operations are likely to
- 11 have on the needs of veterans in the future;
- 12 [(10)] (7) the status of federal veterans programs as they relate to
- 13 Maryland veterans; and
- 14 [(11)] (8) any other issues concerning veterans that the Secretary
- 15 considers appropriate.

16 SECTION 2. AND BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That this Act shall take effect July
 17 1, 2022.

Approved:

Governor.

Speaker of the House of Delegates.

President of the Senate.