

Department of Legislative Services
 Maryland General Assembly
 2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
 First Reader

House Bill 142 (Delegate Miller)
 Health and Government Operations

State Government - Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman - Establishment

This bill establishes a Veterans and Military Families Ombudsman in the Department of Veterans and Military Families (DVMMF) to serve as a resource to provide information and support to veterans and military families regarding their rights and access to services. The ombudsman must be a veteran. The bill specifies the responsibilities of the ombudsman, which include, among other things, establishment of a toll-free telephone number to assist individuals seeking information or advice about services and programs, and submission of an annual report.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: DVMMF can likely establish a toll-free telephone number using existing budgeted resources. General fund expenditures increase by at least \$95,700 in FY 2026 to hire an ombudsman; future years reflect annualization and ongoing costs. Revenues are not affected.

(in dollars)	FY 2026	FY 2027	FY 2028	FY 2029	FY 2030
Revenues	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
GF Expenditure	95,700	114,700	119,800	125,100	130,500
Net Effect	(\$95,700)	(\$114,700)	(\$119,800)	(\$125,100)	(\$130,500)

Note: () = decrease; GF = general funds; FF = federal funds; SF = special funds; - = indeterminate increase; (-) = indeterminate decrease

Local Effect: The bill is not anticipated to materially affect local government operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary:

Appointment and Salary

The Secretary of Veterans and Military Families must appoint the ombudsman, who serves for a term of five years, and may be removed by the Secretary for cause. Salaries of the ombudsman, their staff, and other specified expenses must be as provided in the State budget. In cooperation with the Secretary of Budget and Management, the Secretary of Veterans and Military Families must set minimum salary, qualifications, and experience standards for the ombudsman and any staff under the ombudsman.

Responsibilities, Toll-Free Telephone Number, and Annual Report

The ombudsman must (1) serve as a source of knowledge on laws, rules, and regulations governing veterans and military families; (2) provide impartial information to veterans and military families on the process of obtaining services; (3) explain to veterans and military families their rights and how they may avail themselves of those rights; (4) work neutrally with DVMF and other entities to ensure services for veterans and military families are provided as intended; (5) advocate on behalf of veterans and military families; (6) communicate with the public about the needs of veterans and military families; (7) identify any patterns of complaints made by veterans and military families and inform DVMF; and (8) serve as a general resource for veterans and military families and make referrals to available State and federal services and programs for veterans and military families.

The ombudsman must arrange for a toll-free telephone number, available in English as well as other appropriate languages, to assist any individual seeking information or advice about services and programs available to veterans and military families.

By July 1, 2026, and annually thereafter, the ombudsman must submit a report to the Governor and the General Assembly that includes (1) the number and type of calls received on the toll-free number during the previous year; (2) any patterns of complaints; (3) a summary of the services provided by the ombudsman; and (4) any recommendations that the ombudsman determines are appropriate and necessary concerning the State's provision of services and programs for veterans and military families.

Current Law:

Department of Veterans and Military Families – Generally

DVMF delivers services and programs to assist Maryland veterans, their families, and survivors in obtaining State, federal, and local benefits provided by law in recognition for their service. DVMF assures the quality maintenance of veterans' cemeteries and memorials to honor Maryland veterans. DVMF also manages Charlotte Hall Veterans Home, an assisted living and skilled nursing facility for veterans and their eligible spouses who are unable to care for themselves due to disability, advancing age, or who require nursing home care. Additionally, DVMF engages in public awareness and outreach to veterans, their families, and other stakeholders.

Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program

The Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program within DVMF ensures that veterans are informed of the services, benefits, and assistance available to them and that general issues relating to veterans' needs are brought to the attention of the Governor and the General Assembly. The program is administered and coordinated by a director, who is appointed by the Secretary of Veterans and Military Families.

The program must actively help veterans and their dependents become aware of and access any service or benefit to which they are entitled, including tax, health care, disability, and pension benefits. In collaboration with the Maryland Higher Education Commission, the program must actively help veterans and their dependents become aware of and access education and training benefits to which they are entitled. The director must support veterans and their dependents through the service or benefit process and refer veterans, veterans' dependents, and veterans' survivors to the appropriate governmental unit for claims assistance.

The director must develop and implement a communications and outreach plan and mechanisms for outreach to be disseminated by direct mail and through community-based veterans organizations, DVMF, the Department of Human Services, the Maryland Department of Health, and other State agencies or units. Communications mechanisms must include (1) designing marketing materials describing the services provided by the program; (2) a regular electronic newsletter; (3) brochures describing various benefits or any other issue or benefit of interest to veterans or their dependents; and (4) other measures the director considers appropriate. DVMF must develop communication tools to assist in identifying veterans and dependents who may be eligible for benefits and programs offered by the department. In addition, the program must (1) manage the Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program and Fund; (2) coordinate the responsibilities of veterans' service

specialists, and (3) manage DVMMF media relations, web content, social media, internal and external communications, customer service training, and intergovernmental relations.

Veterans' Service Specialists

Each governmental unit must (1) designate an employee of the unit (who to the extent practicable is a veteran) as a veterans' services specialist for the unit and whose duties include the coordination of veterans' services with DVMMF; (2) provide DVMMF with any nonprotected or nonprivate information about the services the unit provides to veterans; and (3) post on the unit's website all services available for veterans from the unit, the contact information for the veterans' service specialist, and a link to DVMMF with the contact information for the director of the Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program.

The veterans' service specialist must coordinate the provision of veterans' services available through the unit with DVMMF and attend annual training that DVMMF provides concerning the coordination of veterans' services. On request for services by a veteran, a governmental unit that does not provide services to veterans must direct the veteran to contact DVMMF, as specified. DVMMF must (1) coordinate a meeting each quarter, or as otherwise necessary, with governmental units to discuss and receive information concerning the implementation of veterans' service specialists at each governmental unit, and (2) by January 15 each year, report on the implementation of veterans' service specialists to the Governor and the General Assembly. The 2023 annual report on veterans' service specialists can be found [here](#).

State Expenditures: DVMMF advises that the responsibilities of the ombudsman established under the bill generally duplicate services offered under its Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy Program, in addition to the services offered by veterans' service specialists stationed at applicable governmental units. DVMMF further advises that it can likely establish the required toll-free telephone number, including providing information in English and Spanish, on its current telephone system using existing budgeted resources.

The bill requires DVMMF to hire an ombudsman. Therefore, general fund expenditures increase by at least \$95,726 in fiscal 2026, which accounts for the bill's October 1, 2025 effective date. This estimate reflects the cost of hiring an ombudsman to assist veterans and military families as specified under the bill. It includes a salary, fringe benefits, one-time start-up costs, and ongoing operating expenses. It does not reflect the

cost of additional staff or services, nor any costs associated with the toll-free telephone number.

Position	1.0
Salaries and Fringe Benefits	\$88,357
Operating Expenses	<u>7,369</u>
Total FY 2026 State Expenditures	\$95,726

Future year expenditures reflect a full salary with annual increases and employee turnover as well as annual increases in ongoing operating expenses.

Additional Information: The bill’s language does not meet the requirements necessary to establish a mandated appropriation. Generally, any legislation mandating funding of a program must include either an exact dollar figure or a funding formula that makes it possible to compute the level of funding required.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: SB 6 (Senator Salling) - Education, Energy, and the Environment.

Information Source(s): Department of Budget and Management; Department of Veterans and Military Families; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - January 17, 2025
km/jc

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