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## **Representative Smola supports passage of HOME Act for veterans**

**BOSTON – Representative Todd M. Smola (R-Warren, Ranking Member, Committee on Ways & Means)** recently voted for legislation providing Massachusetts veterans with expanded employment protections, enhanced housing opportunities, and additional tax abatements.

On July 7, the House and Senate unanimously enacted An Act relative to Housing, Operations, Military Service and Enrichment, also known as the HOME Act. The bill is currently on Governor Baker’s desk awaiting his signature.

“I cannot think of a group of people that is more deserving of the Legislature’s support and respect than our service men and women,” said Representative Smola. “The HOME Act recognizes the many sacrifices our veterans have made by providing them with access to a wide range of state services.”

The HOME Act establishes a new Office of State Veterans’ Homes and Housing within the Department of Veterans’ Services. This office will advise the Secretary on matters related to veterans’ housing and long-term care, and will file an annual report with the Legislature.

The HOME Act also includes a provision championed by Assistant Minority Leader Brad Hill (R-Ipswich) to give veterans statewide preference for public housing. Veterans currently receive preference in public housing, but this generally applies only to housing units within the community in which the veteran actually resides.

The bill retains language inserted by Representative Donald Wong (R-Saugus) giving cities and towns the option of establishing a fund to assist local veterans and their spouses with their food, transportation and heating expenses, using money raised through a voluntary check-off box on municipal property and excise tax bills. It also contains a provision, sponsored by House Minority Leader Bradley H. Jones, Jr. (R-North Reading), to allow the next of kin of soldiers who were killed in action, and who possess a US Department of Defense-issued Gold Star Lapel Button and letter of approval, to obtain a Gold Star Family license plate.

The HOME Act also:

- Makes veterans a protected class for hiring purposes;
- Prohibits housing authorities from counting as income any veterans benefits for service-connected disabilities in excess of \$1,800 when calculating rent;
- Reconfigures the Massachusetts Post-Deployment Commission, which will study the barriers facing military personnel returning to civilian life and identify ways to better assist these veterans with accessing education, employment, healthcare, housing and other services;
- Expands property tax abatements for surviving spouses of service members to include those who have died from injuries or diseases sustained during active service, even if those injuries were not sustained in a combat zone;
- Offers full property tax abatements for the permanent residence of any veteran with a 100% disability rating for service-connected blindness;
- Extends eligibility for the Public Service Scholarship Program to include the children and spouses of Prisoners of War (POWs) who served after Vietnam;
- Provides an excise tax exemption for veterans while deployed;
- Exempts Silver Star recipients from the Civil Service exam;
- Extends assistance from the Military Relief Fund to the National Guard;
- Prohibits municipalities from transferring the right to receive debt payments if the municipality receives notice that the debtor is a veteran;
- Requires businesses with 50 or more employees to grant veterans a paid leave of absence on Veterans Day;
- Provides for state employees who are in the reserves and ordered to active duty for more than 30 days to continue receiving their full state salary, minus their reserve pay;
- Requires the new Office of State Veterans' Homes and Housing, in consultation with the Department of Revenue, to study the feasibility of offering a tax rebate to landlords who lease a dwelling unit to a veteran;
- Directs the Department of Veterans' Services, in consultation with the Department of Revenue, to study the feasibility of implementing a sliding scale property tax abatement for veterans and their spouses;
- Designates Bicentennial Park in Fall River as the Gold Star Families Memorial Monument of the Commonwealth; and Allows local Veterans' Agents to be appointed to three-year terms, rather than on an annual basis.

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