

SS HB 1678 -- MILITARY FAMILIES, TUITION GRANTS FOR VETERANS' SURVIVORS, AND INTERSTATE COMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR MILITARY CHILDREN

This bill changes the laws regarding members of the military and their families. In its main provisions, the bill:

(1) Adds the chairman of the Missouri Veterans Commission as an ex-officio member of the Missouri Military Preparedness and Enhancement Commission and clarifies that the commission's duties include developing policies and methods to improve the prosperity and employment opportunities of retired military members and the families of former military members;

(2) Specifies that the chair of the Missouri Military Preparedness and Enhancement Commission will be an ex-officio member of the Missouri Veterans Commission and the enhancement commission must help all veterans who are legal residents of Missouri;

(3) Allows a military dependent who has completed an accredited prekindergarten program or completed or attended a kindergarten program in another state to enter kindergarten or first grade even if the child has not reached the required age for Missouri schools by August 1;

(4) Authorizes the State Board of Education to develop recommendations regarding alternate assessments for military dependents who relocate to Missouri during the school year;

(5) Authorizes Missouri to enter into the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children and establishes the Interstate Commission on Educational Opportunity for Military Children. The compact becomes effective upon its adoption by 10 states. Military children include kindergarten through twelfth-grade children of active duty members of the armed services including the National Guard and the reserve, as well as the children of members who die while on active duty, retire, or are medically discharged for a period of one year afterward. The compact covers issues including facilitation of enrollment, both in classes and extracurricular activities; placement; graduation; and information-sharing. The commission is made up of one voting member from each participating state. The duties of the commission include dispute resolution between member states, enforcing the rules of the commission, and providing training and other administrative functions. The bill contains provisions for the formation of the commission's executive committee, budget, liability, and legal status;

(6) Requires the state board to establish rules to allow the

issuance of a provisional teacher's certificate before the completion of a background check to the spouse of a military member who holds a teacher's certificate in another state that requires a background check and who has relocated within the last year;

(7) Allows school districts to accept a course in government completed in another state when a student transfers to a Missouri high school in ninth to twelfth grade to satisfy the state's graduation requirement;

(8) Allows the spouse and children of a soldier who after September 11, 2001, was killed or died of an illness while serving in action or became 80% disabled from an injury sustained in combat action and was a Missouri citizen at the time of enlistment and when the death or injury occurred to receive an educational grant for tuition at a public or private college or university in Missouri. The Coordinating Board of Higher Education within the Department of Higher Education will award up to 25 grants annually. If the waiting list of eligible survivors exceeds 50, the board can ask the General Assembly to increase the number of grants it is authorized to award. The tuition grant cannot exceed what is charged for a resident by the University of Missouri-Columbia. In addition to the full cost of tuition, the grant includes \$2,000 per semester for room and board and the actual cost of books up to \$500 per semester. Children are eligible to receive the scholarship until age 25. Spouses are eligible until age 45. No eligible student will receive a grant for more than 100% of the tuition costs when combined with other similar funds given to the student. An institution is allowed to report to the board the amount of tuition waived in the previous fiscal year and include that data in its request for appropriations for the following year;

(9) Establishes the Missouri Returning Heroes' Education Act which requires all public higher education institutions which receive state funds appropriated by the General Assembly to limit the tuition charged to combat veterans for undergraduate studies to \$50 per credit hour. To qualify, a veteran must have been a Missouri resident when first entering the military, must have honorably served in armed combat after September 11, 2001, and must maintain at least a 2.5 grade point average on a 4.0 scale. Eligibility for the reduced tuition will expire 10 years from the date of the veteran's discharge. The veteran and the institution must report to the Coordinating Board of Higher Education any other eligible financial assistance, and the veteran cannot receive more than the actual cost of attendance from all assistance. An institution is allowed to report to the board the amount of tuition waived in the previous fiscal year and include that data in its request for appropriations for the following

year;

(10) Specifies that a person's absence, relocation, or failure to comply with custody and visitation due to military service and out-of-state deployment, by itself, is not sufficient to justify a modification of a child custody or visitation order; and

(11) Renames the Guard at Home Program to the Hero at Home Program and expands the program to cover the first year after discharge from deployment, to cover reservists, and to cover situations in which an individual cannot return to his or her previous employment.

The provisions of the bill regarding tuition grants will expire six years from the effective date.