



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Catharine Young

## Senate Announces Bills to Help Veterans and Military Members

CATHARINE YOUNG May 23, 2008

Members of the New York State Senate Majority Conference today introduced a package of legislation that would provide greater benefits and protections to New York's military personnel.

The package of bills, announced at a Capitol news conference, includes measures to provide better access to education, health and mental health services, employment opportunities, support for the families of New York's service members and ways to commemorate and honor those who serve our state and nation.

The Senate will pass a resolution today urging all New Yorkers to pause for a National Moment of Remembrance on Memorial Day at 3 p.m. to recognize and honor the sacrifice made by the brave men and women who have given their life while defending our nation.

The legislation announced today builds on the Senate's ongoing efforts to provide assistance and benefits to New York's veterans and active military members, including the innovative Patriot Plan which provided numerous benefits to our service men and women fighting the War on Terror.

### **Educational Opportunities for Veterans**

This year's state budget included \$4.5 million to provide tuition assistance for veterans enrolled in an approved graduate, undergraduate and vocational program. Veterans' tuition assistance was increased from \$2,000 per year to \$4,350, allowing veterans to attend a SUNY or CUNY school tuition-free. If a veteran chooses to attend a private school, they will receive the equivalent towards their education costs.

Veterans enrolled in part-time studies will receive a pro-rated amount. In addition, the enacted budget

expanded the eligibility for this program to cover all veterans who served in the Armed Forces in any hostilities since 1961.

The program is a Senate Majority initiative that originally passed unanimously in the Senate last year.

In addition, the Senate also announced the following legislation:

> S.5644 -- Extends the National Guard Scholarship Awards program to cover graduate education programs; and

> S.8264 -- Creates a Task Force to study the implementation of a program to allow SUNY and CUNY to accept military courses for college credit.

### **Health and Mental Health Initiatives**

The Senate will act on legislation (S.5603-A, Senator Leibell) that would provide for State pick-up for costs for single or family co-pays for all active National Guard members enrolled in the TRI-CARE military health plan.

The 2008-09 state budget includes \$250,000 to train mental health providers in veteran-specific mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and substance abuse issues.

The budget also included \$150,000 for the Canines for Veterans Program, to provide working support dogs to combat veterans who are injured in the line of duty, a program initiated by the Senate Majority.

To enhance measures taken in this year's budget, the Senate has also introduced legislation to:

> add two members to the mental health services council -- one from the Division of Veterans Affairs and one from the Division of Military and Naval Affairs;

> extend the statute of limitations for actions involving exposure to Agent Orange for two years.

### **Tax Credits and Employment**

Included in the Senate's veterans' package is legislation that would:

- > give preference to service disabled veteran-owned small businesses with respect to state contracts;
- > provide a tax credit to businesses that hire disabled veterans and veterans returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom;
- > allow members of the armed forces to take special military make up civil service exams.

### **Support for Military Families**

The Senate package includes several bills to provide support to military families whose loved ones are serving in the armed forces, including legislation to:

- > authorize State and Municipal employees to be paid for up to 45 days of military deployment each year, up from 30 days;
- > establish the New York military family relief fund to provide grants to military members who are called to active duty for more than 90 days and are stationed more than 300 miles from their primary residences;
- > require the Division of Military and Naval Affairs and the Office of Children and Family Services to develop a day care assistance program when one or both parents who are members of the military are mobilized for active duty;
- > establish a personal income tax credit for the purchase of equipment used in the performance of duties;
- > provide recruiting incentive awards for New York National Guard and New York Air National Guard;
- > prohibit courts from making determinations in child custody proceedings when a parent is activated, deployed, or temporarily assigned to military service.
- > amend the domestic relations law to state that a parent's military status shall not affect his or her parental rights during custody proceedings.

## **Honoring Our Veterans**

In addition, the Senate plan includes components to honor our active military members, veterans, and their families.

The package includes bills that would:

- > Authorize the use of State funds for the operation and maintenance of state veterans' cemeteries.
- > Establish the Veterans Memorial Preservation Act; and
- > Establish May 11 as Military Spouses Day in New York State.

In addition to the legislation announced today, the Senate yesterday passed three bills that would:

- > exempt military personnel serving in a combat zone from income tax on compensation for their service;
- > provide a United States burial flag for veterans of the New York Guard;
- > allow the Defense Department 214 as proof of service for Cold War veterans applying for a real property tax exemption.