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Position Paper 2019-06

Removing the Combat Requirement for the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program [VMSDEP]

OBJECTIVE: To change eligibility for higher education benefits under the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP).

BACKGROUND:

- a. The VMSDEP, formally known as the War Orphans Education Program, provides education benefits to spouses and children of military service members killed, missing in action, taken prisoner, or who became at least 90 percent disabled as a result of military service in an armed conflict.
- b. Military service includes service in the United States Armed Forces, United States Armed Forces Reserves, and the Virginia National Guard.
- c. Armed conflict includes military operations against terrorism or as the result of a terrorist act, a peace-keeping mission, or any armed conflict after Dec. 6, 1941.
- d. Under VMSDEP, tuition and required fees are waived at Virginia public colleges and universities.
- e. Students may also receive a stipend of up to \$1,800 per year toward the cost of room, board, books, and supplies. The amount of the stipend is dependent on the amount of funding appropriated (\$1,930,000 in FY16), the number of enrolled students, and their enrollment status.
- f. Benefits are available for up to four years or the equivalent.

DISCUSSION:

- a. Under current law, the veteran's 90% disability rating must have incurred during military operations against terrorism, on a peacekeeping mission, as a result of a terrorist act, or in any armed conflict.
- b. In 2015, DVS denied 502 applicants due to the combat requirement.
- c. The 2016 FIS for SB528 estimated the proposed legislation would result in a system-wide loss of tuition revenue of \$2,182,454 in FY17 and \$2,520,734 in FY18.
- d. This is a potentially significant fiscal impact on higher education institutions, and additional general fund support may need to be appropriated to offset this loss of revenue. Evaluation may show whether funding from other programs such as the Virginia Tuition Assistance Grant Program and the Virginia Community College Tuition Grant for Foster Care could potentially offset the increased cost to VMSDEP.

RECOMMENDATION: That the Governor and General Assembly remove the requirement that a veteran's disability rating be combat related and within an armed conflict. Instead, a permanent, service-connected disability rating of at least 90%, plus satisfaction of the other requirements currently in the Code, would qualify a veteran's spouse or child for VMSDEP benefits.