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**LD 827, “An Act To Help Veterans Access Jobs, Education, and Housing”
Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs**

April 5, 2021

Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo, and honorable members of the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee – my name is David Richmond, and I am the Director of the Maine Bureau of Veterans’ Services. I am here today to testify neither for nor against LD 827, ‘An Act To Help Veterans Access Jobs, Education, and Housing’.

Maine veterans receive a host of benefits and services due to cross-agency collaboration throughout the state. The bill before you today is a great example of how those partnerships could work, and in many cases, how they already work for the benefit of our veteran population.

Part A of LD 827 directs the Department of Professional and Financial Regulation to examine licensing eligibility for military veterans. Currently, Maine's Office of Professional and Occupational Regulation (OPOR) leads an initiative in the State of Maine to streamline the licensing process for veterans. Individuals who have military experience and training and who wish to obtain an occupational license receive appropriate credit for their military training and experience. Thanks to the work of this legislative body and state officials, OPOR now has flexibility in evaluating and crediting military experience toward licensure and continuing education requirements, which reduces the need for veterans to undergo duplicative and expensive training. Additionally, we have collaborated with OPOR on LD 374, An Act To Allow Veterans, Active Duty Service Members and Their Spouses To Apply for Temporary Occupational Licenses and Certifications which proposes to expand on their ability to support veterans.

In addition to bolstering employment opportunities, we also serve as a conduit for veterans to access their education benefits. The University of Maine System, Maine Community College System, and Maine Maritime Academy remain one of the Bureau’s largest partners. These institutions provide education benefits to veterans and their dependents who meet qualifying criteria, meaning they qualify for the Veterans Dependents Educational Benefit (VDEB). VDEB provides a 100% waiver of tuition and all mandatory fees for spouses and dependents of veterans who have a disability rating of 100% P&T with the VA; or who were killed in action; or died as a result of a service-related injury. VDEB is available to those veterans who have resided in Maine for 5 years immediately preceding the application for aid, and who continue to reside in Maine throughout the duration of the benefit. Our agency has valuable relationships with the certifying officials of each University of Maine and community college campus. Because of this partnership, our qualifying veterans reap the benefits of a 100% tuition waiver and all mandatory fees for each of their dependents. The University of Maine System has also developed a Student Military and Mobilization and Activation Policy to support students called to duty in order to best accommodate students affected by deployments and training. UMS, MCCA, and MMA have always been tireless advocates for our veterans, and we thank them for their continued commitment.

Lastly, our agency is statutorily required to provide veterans' homelessness prevention coordination, and we do so by working alongside our partnering agencies to reduce the number of homeless veterans across the state. Our Homeless Veteran Coordinator works within the community to maximize all resources available to assist veterans with an emergent and critical need. A lack of affordable housing, and a spike in veteran homelessness over the last year have created a few more challenges, however programs like Shelter Plus Care, and the Bridging Rental Assistance Program have been helpful to case managers working with this particular population of veterans.

The Bureau will assist in any way we can to ensure our veterans are adequately served and connected to the best services available across the state.

I thank you for hearing testimony on this bill and I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

Respectfully,
David A. Richmond
Director, Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services