



DATE: April 5, 2021  
TO: Committee on Veterans & Legal Affairs  
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations  
RE: **LD 827, *An Act To Help Veterans Access Jobs, Education and Housing***

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Senator Luchini, Representative Caiazzo and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans & Legal Affairs: I write on behalf of the University of Maine System to inform your consideration of LD 827, *An Act To Help Veterans Access Jobs, Education and Housing*.

Maine's public universities are committed to serving those who have served and honored that more than 1,800 Veterans, active Maine National Guard members and Veteran-dependents have entrusted us to fulfill their educational needs this academic year. We are also proud that our universities have received national recognition for their military-friendly culture and the seamless supports they provide to help in the transition from servicemember to student to the workforce.

All Maine public higher education institutions including UMS universities offer in-state tuition rates to all Veterans with an honorable discharge regardless of their residency. Since UMS adopted this policy in 2014, the number of out-of-state Veterans we serve has doubled, and now accounts for about one-quarter of our overall Veteran-student population. We are unsure at this time of the potential impact of expanding this benefit to include Veterans with a general discharge under honorable conditions. Given this, we submit testimony today neither for nor against, and have not yet submitted a fiscal note. We will listen during today's hearing and continue to work with this Committee and the Bureau of Veterans' Services to better understand the number of Veterans nationally who may have had minor misconduct in the military that led to this status, but who are otherwise eligible for many VA benefits.

UMS policy also provides that all Veteran-dependents using GI Bill benefits receive the in-state tuition rate until they complete their academic program regardless of their residency and whether their GI Bill benefits have been exhausted, expired or transferred. Given the considerable differential between UMS in-state and out-of-state tuition, these benefits have a significant financial impact on our System, but they are consistent with our commitment to honoring military service and have the potential to attract Veterans to Maine provided they are using the benefit for a program that includes classes on our campuses and is not entirely online.

The UMS welcomes and provides supports to all Veterans, regardless of their discharge status. Each of our universities has a School Certifying Official (SCO) who works with Veterans and helps them access their education and other benefits, as is required by federal law. At our universities that enroll fewer Veterans, the SCO responsibilities may be part of broader job duties and the SCO may connect the student to other campus services including academic advising rather than directly provide them. At each of our institutions with large Veteran populations including the University of Maine (431 Veterans), the University of Southern Maine (356 Veterans) and the University of Maine at Augusta (276 Veterans), there are multiple full-time professional staff who often have prior military experience to assist Veterans.

Those larger universities as well as the University of Maine at Fort Kent also have designated space for Veterans where they can connect with one another and access other services and supports, including academic and career advising, and assistance transferring previous course or military experience into credit. Even if space was available, there may not be demand for

designated space at our universities that enroll a small number of Veterans, especially those that enroll fewer than 30 including the Universities of Maine at Farmington and Machias.

Last year, the UMS conducted an internal analysis of trends over the past decade relating to enrollment and educational outcomes of our Veterans and Veteran-dependents. The findings – specifically that retention and graduation rates are lower among Veteran-students, which is not unique to the UMS or Maine – are a reminder of our important duty to continually improve our services and supports for those who have served our nation and are now strengthening our campuses and communities. Given this, we are appreciative of Senator Rafferty for bringing this bill and when doing so, taking into account many of our suggestions on similar legislation that this Committee considered during the 129<sup>th</sup> Legislature. We will continue to research the impact of expanding our in-state tuition benefit to Veterans from out-of-state with a general discharge under honorable conditions and provide a fiscal note as soon as we are able.

Thank you.