



Newsletter From Rep. Deborah Ferguson District 63

May 3, 2019

Military Appreciation in Arkansas

ACT 551 CREATES THE ARKANSAS LEGISLATIVE STUDY ON VETERANS AFFAIRS.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS WILL:

- STUDY RISK FACTORS FOR SUICIDE IN VETERANS.
- RESEARCH OPTIONS FOR PREVENTING OR REDUCING THE OCCURRENCE OF SUICIDE AMONG THE VETERAN POPULATION.
- EXAMINE MENTAL HEALTH CARE AVAILABLE TO VETERANS.
- CONDUCT AT LEAST ONE TOWN-HALL-STYLE MEETING TO HEAR FROM VETERANS IN THE STATE.



The month of May is designated as Military Appreciation Month.

Not only do we pause on Memorial Day to remember the sacrifice and service of those who gave all, but the month also holds Military Spouse Appreciation Day on May 10 and Armed Forces day on May 18.

We have more than 3,000 active military members residing in our state and another 252,000 veterans calling Arkansas home.

Every session, we introduce legislation to make Arkansas a better place for our military members and vets. In the most recent session we passed legislation to make it easier for military spouses to find employment quickly and legislation paving the way for an extensive study on veteran affairs in our state.

Act 551 directs the House Committee on Aging, Children and Youth, and Legislative and Military Affairs and the Senate Committee on State Agencies and Governmental Affairs to meet jointly to conduct the Arkansas Legislative Study on Veterans Affairs. The purpose of the study is to examine veterans' issues within the State of Arkansas, including without limitation the occurrence of suicide among the veteran population in this state. In carrying out the purpose of this act, the committees shall:

- Study risk factors for suicide in veterans
- Review and research options for preventing or reducing the occurrence of suicide among the veteran population in the state
- Examine mental health care available to veterans within the state
- Conduct at least one town-hall-style meeting to hear from veterans in the state and their concerns regarding mental

health care and other issues affecting veterans in Arkansas.

This study will begin later this year.

We also passed Act 820. This legislation states an occupational licensing entity shall grant active military members and returning veterans, as well as spouses of active military and returning veterans, with automatic licensure to engage in an occupation or profession if they have an equivalent license in another state.

Other legislation passed addressing military and veteran affairs include:

- Act 215 allows spouses of military service members who are not Arkansas residents to become a notary public.
- Act 171 exempts active military from the May 1 deadline to apply for school choice.
- Act 66 gives veterans more options to prove their veteran status when they go to the DMV for a license. This designation on their license makes it easier on veterans to receive access to benefits.
- Act 167 authorizes the issuance of a Purple Heart recipient special license plate to a surviving spouse.
- Act 635 allows family members who lose a family member in the service of duty to apply for a Gold Star Family special license plate.
- Act 160 will allow a former prison facility to be transferred to a non-profit group helping our veterans released from incarceration.

The Arkansas Department of Community Correction owns the former site of the Southeast Arkansas Community Correction Center in Pine Bluff. The facility has been vacant since 2015, but costs the state to maintain.

According to testimony, there are currently 1,200 veterans housed in the Department of Correction. This new facility could also assist homeless veterans and those returning from war zones.

We will update you on the work of the legislative study on veterans affairs during this interim period. We are beyond grateful to every Arkansan and their families who have served to protect our freedom. We hope to hear from you soon on how our state can best serve you.