



Oregon

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SUBMITTED BY: Val Conley

Senate Committee on Veterans and Milit

SB 1563

Mr. Chair and members of the committee,

For the record my name is Val Conley and I am the Deputy Director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs. I am here today to provide information regarding the dash 3 amendment being proposed that impacts the implementation of the Dependent Tuition Waiver offered by the community colleges.

As you may know, last week the Task Force on Tuition Waivers for Dependents of Fallen and Disabled Soldiers presented its final report to the House Veterans Committee. ODVA presented an addendum to the report, highlighting areas where ODVA disagreed with the Task Force.

I do not believe we can discuss the dash 3 amendment without understanding why the Legislature created the Task Force last session through SB 338. When the Legislature established the tuition waiver program for the survivors of service members killed in action and the dependents of 100 percent service connected veterans in 2008, the bill only applied to the Oregon University System (OUS) and not the community colleges. The community colleges agreed to implement the waiver on their own. Every session since then, veteran groups and advocates have brought forth grievances regarding the implementation of the waiver at the community colleges and proposed legislation to remedy it.

SB 338 was one of those remedies. In its original form, SB 338 did what the SB 1563 dash 3 amendments do; it placed the community colleges in statute, arguing that the colleges had not really hit the mark with their own policies. SB 338 was amended to allow the colleges one last chance at establishing a common tuition waiver policy across the 17 campuses. And SB 338 had one more requirement: The Task Force was to align the eligibility policy with that of the Oregon University System.

Unfortunately, according to the mandate of SB 338, ODVA thinks the Task Force also missed the mark, because it's report does not align with OUS in one significant area – when the waiver should be implemented.

The OUS applies the waiver as what they call "first dollar", meaning that the dependents tuition is waived before any other money is applied. The Task Force reported that the community colleges would differ from the OUS in this respect and apply the waiver "last dollar", meaning a

survivor or dependent will need to exhaust all other means of federal student aid, including a federal VA survivor and dependent benefit called Dependent Educational Assistance (DEA).

This is another point where ODVA and the Task Force disagreed. DEA is an allowance that is available to survivors and dependents while enrolled in a VA approved school. The benefit is paid directly to the dependent and not the college. DEA is not a tuition program, rather an allowance meant to help the dependent pay for many different expenses, including subsistence expenses, tuition, fees and books.

Let me note that while we have some disagreement on this policy, we still consider the community colleges our partners in supporting student veterans. We all want to do the right thing. I believe Chair Witt put it best when he noted during committee that ODVA and the Community Colleges have different constituencies and concerns, which is why we are not seeing eye to eye. I believe he is correct; ODVA is focused on the veterans, their survivors and dependents, because that is our mission. The community colleges have a broader focus due to their different mission. We understand this.

That said, we believe that placing the community colleges in statute along with OUS as proposed by the dash 3 amendment is what should have occurred when the tuition waiver policy was implemented in 2008. I would note that the dash 3 amendment does make a change to the eligibility when compared to the original statute. Specifically, it changes the eligibility of the waiver from those who died of a service connected disability to those who died of a 100 percent service connected disability and eliminates the dependents of those veterans who are rated 100 percent service connected disabled.

Thank you for your time today. I appreciate the work you have done and continue to do for Oregon veterans. I would be happy to answer any questions.