

Military and Veterans Issues

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SB 14-132 (<i>Enacted</i>) Fallen Soldier License Plate Combat Zone	SJR 14-016 (<i>Adopted</i>) Rename Twin Tunnels as Veterans Memorial Tunnels	
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SB 14-096 (<i>Enacted</i>) Veterans Community Living Centers in Colorado	HB 14-1059 (<i>Enacted</i>) No Disorderly Conduct for Blanks Fired at Funerals	HB 14-1205 (<i>Enacted</i>) Veterans Assistance Grant Program
HB 14-1373 (<i>Enacted</i>) Senior & Disabled Veteran Property Tax Exemption		

During the 2014 legislative session, the General Assembly addressed a variety of issues regarding members of the armed forces and their families, as well as Colorado veterans. A summary of the legislation considered by the General Assembly pertaining to military issues follows.

Employment

State professional licensing law specifies that a licensee, registrant, or certificate holder who does not renew his or her state credentials within 60 days of their expiration will be treated as having expired professional credentials. **House Bill 14-1183** requires the Director of Professions and Occupations within the Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA), the licensing board, or commission to reinstate all expired licenses, certificates, or registrations of active military personnel, including any National Guard members or reservists currently on active duty for a

minimum of 30 days. **Senate Bill 14-208** expands these provisions to include veterans, except those who have been dishonorably discharged. Under both bills, an individual requesting reinstatement must still meet the qualifications for the profession and requirements for reinstatement.

House Bill 14-1198, which was postponed indefinitely, would also have eased professional licensing provisions for active military personnel, their spouses, and their dependents. The bill would have provided three years of reciprocity for those authorized to practice in another state in certain professions and occupations. Current law provides such reciprocity for one year for military spouses only. Current exemptions to reciprocity — engineers, optometrists, real estate professionals, and others — would also have been eliminated under the bill.

House Bill 14-1224 aims to increase access to state contracts for service-disabled veterans. The bill creates a goal in the state procurement code for service-disabled veteran-owned (SDVO) small businesses. The state is encouraged to award at least 3 percent of the value of its contracts to SDVO small businesses. To achieve the goal, a state agency may grant a preference to SDVO small businesses. Prior to awarding a contract, a state agency is to require the bidder to submit proof from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs that it qualifies as a SDVO small business. The bill also includes an annual reporting requirement, beginning in 2015. The Department of Personnel and Administration must report on the state's progress in meeting this procurement goal to the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, the members of the Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs, and the members of the State, Veterans and Military Affairs Committees of the General Assembly.

House Bill 14-1179, which was postponed indefinitely, would have created the Veterans Workforce Accelerator Grant Program. The program, administered by the Department of Labor and Employment, would have awarded grants to an eligible recipient as matching funding for an accelerated, hands-on skills training program for advanced industry jobs. The State Workforce Development Council would have awarded a grant based on eligibility criteria, prioritizing a training program that has, as a core component, advanced industry skills training for veterans.

Military Activities

The General Assembly showed an interest in protecting the state's military assets in preparation for a new round of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process. **Senate Bill 14-157** commissions a report demonstrating the strategic and economic advantages of maintaining and expanding military missions, defense spending, and defense-related investment in Colorado. The bill requires the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to issue a request for proposals for an outside contractor to prepare the report, which must be completed by April 15, 2015. The report will then be presented to the federal Department of Defense. The bill creates the Comprehensive Report on the Value of United States Military Activities Fund in the State Treasury and appropriates \$300,000 to the fund to finance the report.

House Bill 14-1351 directs the Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT) to support state businesses involved in the defense industry and influence federal decision-making that concerns the defense industry in Colorado. Specifically, the OEDIT must:

- advocate for state involvement in U.S. military missions;
- support private businesses that bid on contracts with U.S. armed forces; and
- assist the Colorado Congressional delegation in protecting current U.S. armed forces bases and commands in Colorado.

OEDIT currently has an aerospace champion as part of its high-level staff. The bill codifies this position and is consistent with OEDIT's existing Colorado Aerospace Strategic Growth Plan.

Military Families

The Colorado National Guard Foundation makes grants from the Military Family Relief Fund to members of the National Guard, reservists, military personnel stationed in Colorado, and the families of these service members to mitigate financial hardships associated with deployment or being called to active duty. **House Bill 14-1277** expands grant eligibility, which was previously only for families of service members mobilized at least 30 days on active military duty, to include families of Guard members called to state active duty by executive order of the Governor.

Motor Vehicles and Transportation

Senate Bill 14-075 exempts members of the U.S. armed forces who are Colorado residents and deployed outside of the U.S. for a full year from paying certain motor vehicle registration fees. The bill applies to Class B and C vehicles (non-commercial trucks and cars) and authorizes the member to pay specific ownership tax (SOT) of \$1. If the owner is deployed for less than one year, the fees and taxes are prorated. If the owner previously paid SOT at the higher rate while deployed, but qualified for the reduced SOT rate, the Department of Revenue must credit the owner's account. Owners must sign an affidavit stating that the vehicle will not be operated on a highway during their time of deployment and provide evidence of deployment.

Senate Joint Resolution 14-016 renames the I-70 tunnels in Clear Creek County commonly known as the Twin Tunnels to the Veterans Memorial Tunnels. Signage indicating the new name is to be installed at the east and west entrances to the tunnels.

Three bills debated in 2014 address military-related license plates and accompanying fees. **Senate Bill 14-041** creates the USS Colorado special license plate, which will be available to all applicants who support the USS Colorado, and who pay the standard license plate fees and a one-time additional fee of \$50. Of this fee, \$25 is credited to the Licensing Services Cash Fund and \$25 is credited to the Highway Users Tax Fund. The plate will be available January 1, 2015. **Senate Bill 14-132** addresses Fallen Service Member special license plates, removing the requirement that the fallen soldier be deployed to a combat zone at the time of his or her death.

Senate Bill 14-056, which was postponed indefinitely, would have waived the one-time \$50 fee charged for certain military special license plates, if the person applying for the plates was a qualified military veteran. The exemption would have been allowed for one set of plates per applicant and applied to the following 14 special license plates: Veteran of the United States Armed Forces; United States Marine Corps; Veteran of the Korean War; United States Army; United States Navy; Bronze Star; United States Coast Guard; United States Air Force; United States Army Special Forces; Veteran of the Afghanistan War; Veteran of the Iraq War; Veteran of Operation Desert Shield or Desert Storm; Distinguished Flying Cross; and Navy SEAL.

Veterans' Benefits and Services

The state's Department of Human Services administers five state veterans' homes, located in Aurora, Florence, Homelake, Rifle, and Walsenburg, Colorado. **Senate Bill 14-096** changes all statutory references to these facilities from "state veterans nursing home" and "state nursing home" to "veterans community living center" or "veterans center."

House Bill 14-1059 specifies that the ritual discharge of blank ammunition cartridges at a funeral for a deceased veteran of the U.S. armed forces does not constitute disorderly conduct.

House Bill 14-1205 creates the Veterans Assistance Grant Program within the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA). The program will provide financial assistance to nonprofit organizations and governmental agencies providing services to improve the health and well-being of veterans in the state. The bill codifies grants the DMVA awarded, and received appropriations for, in fiscal years 2012-13 and 2013-14. The bill also creates the Veterans Grant Program Cash Fund, which may receive gifts, grants, and donations, in addition to annual appropriations from the General Assembly. A \$1,000,000 appropriation to the program was included in the 2014-15 Long Bill. All excess funds will remain in the cash fund at the end of each fiscal year. The program and cash fund are repealed in 2024.

Colorado's homestead exemption allows qualified seniors and disabled veterans to exempt 50 percent of the first \$200,000 in taxable value of a home occupied by the taxpayer.

House Bill 14-1373 extends homestead exemption benefits to the following owners of residential property in tax years starting on or after January 1, 2015:

- the owner or a surviving spouse who is displaced by a natural disaster that destroys their qualifying residence; and
- the surviving spouse who takes possession of the qualifying residence of a deceased disabled veteran.