

SENATE BILL 2225

Testimony before the North Dakota Senate Appropriations Committee

By

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Good morning mister Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Mark Landis. I am the Burleigh County veterans service officer.

I appear today in support of Senate Bill 2225, which would change the definition of qualifying dependents of veterans for tuition waiver purposes. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. I would also like to thank Senator Dever for bringing this bill forward.

Under current law, dependents may qualify for waiver of tuition at state institutions of higher education if the veteran has a combined 100% service-connected disability rating from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). If this bill is passed as amended, the disability threshold would be lowered to 50% and tuition would be reduced according to disability level. There are good and sufficient reasons to support this legislation.

Disability ratings are assigned according to reduced average earning capacity. A veteran with a 50% disability rating may also experience a 50% reduction of earning capacity. VA compensation does not typically replace all of the income that is lost as a result of disability. Eight other states currently offer some form of tuition reduction for dependents based on disability ratings less than 100%.

Most parents provide some level of financial support to their college age children. In fact, it has become an expectation in today's society. That is very difficult to do with limited income. Passage of this bill not only benefits students. It benefits disabled veterans by preserving their subsistence level of income. In a broader perspective, it also benefits society by encouraging more people to pursue higher education.

The State of North Dakota has established precedent in this regard. The state has recognized 50% is a very significant level of disability by approving benefits such as a property tax credit, free annual passes to state parks, and reduced fees for fishing licenses. We are not asking the legislature to establish a new benefit program; rather, simply to establish consistency in the application of state benefits for veterans.

The higher education system has expressed concerns regarding the cost of this legislation. While I respect those concerns, it is apparent that the amendment addresses the vast majority of the cost, and some flexibility would be appreciated. Please keep in mind the students that would be affected still pay for room and board, books, and other expenses associated with college education.

I respectfully request you to vote "do pass" on this bill as amended.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I will stand for your questions.