

Testimony of Major General Steven Cray, Adjutant General for the State of Vermont.

Thank you for allowing me to testify to H.72 via telephone. This bill has been modified from the existing language in 2017 and the bill that is currently on the wall of House General. With the help of VSAC and Mr. Tom Little, the language has been modified to include 100% tuition waiver at a Vermont School or skills training certificate or a scholarship up to the resident tuition rate at UVM to a private college or University. The proposed 100% tuition benefit legislation is an attempt to put the Vermont National Guard on parity with its neighboring states who all offer 100% tuition as an entitlement for National Guard membership at state colleges and universities not withstanding residency status. The Vermont National Guard cannot effectively compete for recruits that have a desire to serve in the National Guard but also want to pursue higher education or certificate skills training. The recruiters have cases where high school students (particularly communities around the fringes of Vermont) are being advised by our own guidance counselors to check into the National Guard in neighboring states. In fact, there are current Vermont National Guard members with children who have joined the National Guard in neighboring states and are attending college tuition free. In the last year alone, the Vermont Army National Guard under recruited by 50 soldiers and the Air National Guard under recruited by 60 Airmen leaving 350+ vacancies across the ranks of the Vermont National Guard. On a national level and locally the number one recruiting incentive is education benefits. The proposed legislation has imposed performance criteria as well as an extended service commitment (2 years of service to the State of Vermont in the Vermont National Guard for each year of education).

The intent of H.72 is to roll-over the current National Guard Education Assistance Program by transitioning current enrollees to the 100% tuition benefit program upon enactment of the proposed legislation. The recommendation is the new program would receive an additional \$640,000 along with the existing \$250,000 funding for the current program to establish a new baseline of \$890,000. The proposed legislation aims to assist with legislative priorities to keep young people in Vermont by offering education options early in their decision process in exchange for a service commitment to the State of Vermont. This program will grow an educated, skilled and vetted workforce while ensuring the Vermont National Guard can accomplish its federal and state mission.

I cannot overstate the importance of this legislation to the sustainability of your VTNG and the future workforce of Vermont. Our ability to accomplish our mission relies on the number of soldiers and airmen we have to perform their jobs. The safety of our fellow citizens is at risk if we can't stop the down turn in recruitment. Enacting H.72 is a critical investment into Vermont's workforce of tomorrow and the sustainability of the VT National Guard.

Thank you for your time and your support of the Vermont National Guard.