

Dear Senator Campion and members of the Senate Education Committee, I apologize for the lengthy email, but it is important for you to have some background information. I will also make myself available for testimony if desired by the committee.

I am writing to express my support for H.874, specifically the addition of Section 941, Flexible Pathways Initiative, subsection (4) – “Resources provided pursuant to this subdivision shall include information regarding the admissions process and requirements necessary to proceed with any and all military-related opportunities” and section 2828, Planning Resources.

The Vermont National Guard has historically been challenged in gaining uniform access to high schools to share information and opportunities regarding service in the Vermont National Guard (VTNG). Some schools provide better access than others, but frequently our engagements are less than optimal if they happen at all. When I speak of opportunities, I refer to career pathways for Vermont high school age students and young adults. Through our work with the Vermont Legislature, we have one of the best education entitlement programs across the National Guard. Through service in our Guard, members can attend higher education to earn a four year degree, a second bachelors, a masters degree and earn up to four certificates in a year (trades, cyber). While their higher education is paid for, it is done so through a service obligation to the VTNG – two years of service for each year of school. It is concurrent, so a member earning a four year degree while serving has a remaining service obligation is four years post-graduation. Our members also have access to the Montgomery GI Bill and Federal Tuition Assistance. Part-time service in the VTNG also provides opportunity for affordable health care, dental care, and life insurance. Many of our specialties offer transferable skills and licensing in the state of Vermont. We also work to align our members with viable career options with our employer partners. While all of this is a significant incentive to join the VTNG, we have not yet been able to truly maximize sharing this information through effective engagement and dialogue with parents and high school students. Including military options as part of student Personalized Learning Plans is one mechanism to remove the mystery, or negative connotations, that seems to surround military service – especially in our Guard. Given

the opportunity, I can share many vignettes about some of the negative perspectives and messaging that currently exist about service in the military, in particular in our Guard. This messaging, unfortunately, is originating from what I consider to be our – and student - centers of influence.

Workforce development, mitigating the loss of talent in Vermont, and improving student retention in higher education are all areas service in the VTNG can help our state. At present, I have 700 vacancies in the Vermont Army National Guard, and approximately 100 vacancies in the Vermont Air National Guard. These are positions for eligible Vermonters between the ages of 17 and 40 years of age. While we have an excellent working relationship with VSAC, our executive agent for the management of our VTNG Education Entitlement, effective sharing of our message remains a challenge. I do understand VSAC representatives have concerns about the language in the bill that mandates sharing of educational benefits provided by the military, presumably during “how to pay for college” events. At this time, I cannot think of more appropriate language to provide a mechanism for this information to be provided to those who could most benefit from it – I leave that to the committee and Legislative Council.

Should we remain unable to improve recruiting into our Guard, we face the very real possibility of losing force structure. By that I mean full and part-time positions, equipment vital to our operations, closure of armories, a reduction in federal pay and allowances, and certainly a reduction in our capability and capacity for both our state and federal missions. I am not catastrophizing this – if the Army National Guard has another state that can fill these vacancies, I expect there will be an effort to move our positions to another state. In the end, it is about readiness for our national security and state missions. If we cannot provide it, it is a matter of business to provide it to a state that can. Generating this readiness is a significant element of my job, and I will continue to do all I can to market opportunities in the VTNG.

In FY23, the VTNG brought \$152m in federal pay and allowances into the Vermont economy. Rough math, using a Sergeant/E5 as an average vacancy, if we filled our personnel shortages, that would grow our pay and allowances by nearly \$8m. It would add to our

response capabilities, and most importantly, provide opportunities to Vermonters for a dual career track. This grows our workforce in Vermont, facilitates the retention of talent, and may mitigate the loss of our youth to educational institutions and employment opportunities outside of Vermont.

I ask the committee to support passage of this bill. Again, what language is used to facilitate getting information about our education benefits and opportunities is up to the committee. I have been very candid about military service, including service in our Guard. It isn't for everyone. I also know it is our job, collectively, to include the remarkable opportunities for education and career pathways for those parents and students who may have an interest in service. Not providing this information, in my opinion, is irresponsible. I do know what we are doing now is ineffective.

All the best.

MG K

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