Nearly three quarters of college expenses are not because of tuition costs, but instead “university fees.” In the current economic climate, public institutions are forced to charge higher fees every year because of two main reasons: inflation and the declining economy. Today, veterans can no longer afford the fees state colleges are currently charging, forcing veterans to find part-time work that barely pays their own bills. This bill will waive both tuition and university fees for all veterans regardless of age, education level or type of service (active or reserve service). Higher education enrollment will allow military personnel increased access to public health services, which they may have not received otherwise.

The Bill

H. 3364: An Act relative to the cost of veterans higher education

Elevator Speech

Our names are Holly Szafran and Liam O’Connor and we’re students at Brandeis University, and we are passionate about an education bill that will support our friends and family who have supported our country: veterans. My father was in the Navy for 6 years, yet he never got the opportunity to attend college while being a resident of Massachusetts because of the high costs of tuition and the low salary given to high school graduates. Our view is that education is the foundation for a higher quality of life, and those who serve and protect our country deserve the chance to receive that education. We adamantly believe that H. 3364: An Act relative to the cost of veteran higher education will not only fund higher education for our heroes, but also prevent them from going homeless, and from suffering from substance abuse and mental health issues. By waiving their tuition fees, our veterans can begin their new life back home. This Bill is an opportunity for our community to support our troops when they return home by giving them the opportunities to succeed back home. In passing this piece of legislation we will be updating
the current law to not only cover tuition but university fees as well. With your support, you will have the opportunity to make a difference to thousands of Massachusetts Veterans who are seeking an affordable way to receive an education; they are our heroes, now it’s your turn to be their hero.

- **House Ways and Means Script**

We are here today because we are concerned with the lack of educational benefits given to veterans. I know from personal experience that veterans struggle to afford education when they return home from duty. My father could barely afford to pay his bills, let alone, send himself to school after his service in the Navy. Even with the benefits from the GI Bill and the Commonwealth, my father could not afford the high tuition rates that public universities charge. As a concerned citizen and a student activist, I don’t want the same hardship to happen to today’s veterans as it did with my father. It’s a foolish setback for people who want to continue to contribute to our country as productive workers and responsible citizens.

We have done our research and found that 6 out of 8 members of this committee have either sponsored or co-sponsored a veteran’s benefits bill in the past. Representative Todd M. Smola (D) sponsored HD253, for legislation to establish a property tax exemption for members of the National Guard. This shows he clearly supports benefits for returning veterans. Representative Donald H. Wong (R) co-sponsored HD1436, which was Relative to the payment of veterans’ benefits, showing his support and making sure veterans receive their due benefits. Representative Peter J. Durant (R), Representative Shawn Dooley (R) and Representative Kate D. Campanale (R) all co-sponsored HD2563, which was Relative to income tax exemptions for active duty members of the armed forces, also clearly supporting benefits for active-duty service members. Lastly, Representative Angelo L. D’Emilia (R) co-sponsored HD361, Relative to property tax exemptions for veterans, also clearly believing that our government should be helping veterans when they return home with exemptions and waived fees. We know this committee has a strong record in supporting veteran’s benefits. This Bill should be another example of this committee’s continued support for Massachusetts’s veterans.

As your colleague Representative James Arciero, stated, “fees have increasingly become a greater percentage of overall costs at colleges and universities. When the Veteran Tuition Waiver law was passed in 1991, tuition was much more expensive than the various fees imposed by colleges and universities. This law, therefore adequately covered tuition. However since 2003, college and university fees have risen on average 88.17% and now far outpace the tuition costs which are currently waived for our military veterans and national guardsmen.” The Commonwealth did not anticipate the growth in fees as a part of educational expenses on top of the astronomical rate of increase in tuition costs. In short, this benefit has not kept pace with the actual costs of public education.

H. 3364: An Act Relative to the Cost of Veteran Higher Education will provide full waiver of fees to veterans and current members of the armed forces at all public higher education institutions in the Commonwealth. There will be no time limit on these benefits and no distinction between undergraduate and graduate levels of education. Higher education enrollment will allow military personal increased access to public health services, which they may have not received otherwise. This is beneficial because many returning veterans face issues of substance abuse, PTSD, and suicide. This Bill will help the workforce in Massachusetts by motivating and simplifying the process for military personal to attend school.

- **Letter to the Legislator**

My name is Holly Szafran and I am a student at Brandeis University and a resident of Waltham, working on a bill with classmate Liam O’Connor. We are writing to you in support of Bill H. 3364, An Act relative to the cost of veteran’s higher education, which would provide full waiver of fees to veterans and current members of the armed forces at all public higher education institutions in the Commonwealth. In 2007, my family moved to Newton, MA, including my father who is a Navy veteran who served from 1974-1980. He enlisted directly out of high school and served until he was 21 years old. He had the hardest time finding a job when he left the Navy because he never attended college, and unfortunately never had the opportunity to return to school after starting a family because of finances. With the rising cost of college tuition and low amount of educational benefits offered to him, my father could not afford to educate himself after serving his country. Had this bill been enacted several decades ago, my father would have been able to put him and our family on a better path to prosperity.

Like my father, many veterans continue to struggle to educate themselves after returning home from duty. The last veteran educational benefits bill to be passed in Massachusetts was in 1991 with the Veteran Waiver law. As you may know, at that time this law provided
Advocacy for Policy Change: Brandeis students work to reform Massachusetts law

tuition waivers that were effective in the current economy. However, over the past 25 years, both the tuition and inflation rates in Massachusetts have increased significantly. With a rising cost of higher education today, current veterans are quick to feel the economic hardships that come with going to college, thus finding even greater difficulty in reintegrating themselves back home. In 2012 the Washington Post stated reported that unemployment rate for all Americans, and in the same year the unemployment rate for veterans alone was 9.9%. Since 2003, college and university fees have risen on average 88.17%. It is only obvious to conclude that the same benefits given to veterans in Massachusetts back in 1991 cannot be nearly as effective today. Therefore, it is our responsibility to update these benefits to the fighting men and women who served our country bravely.

Furthermore, greater entry into institutions of higher education will allow military personnel increased access to public health services, which they may have not otherwise received. This is beneficial because many returning veterans face issues of substance abuse, PTSD, and suicide. Drugabuse.gov stated that in 2013, 1 in 6 returning veterans suffered from PTSD. This statistic could lower significantly if veterans received education and stayed occupied with schooling and guidance on how to handle their new life back home.

The only counterargument we may come across is this program is too much of a tax burden on the American taxpayer. This program is not just a hand out, but is an investment in Massachusetts’s veterans. By sending our veterans to school, we will be strengthening the Massachusetts workforce and therefore strengthening the economy.

We saw that you have a great legislative history supporting veterans benefits, including; HD1886: Relative to burial benefits of veterans, HD1889: For legislation to prohibit discrimination against veterans in employment decisions and HD1912: Relative to shelter benefits for veterans. We can only imagine where veterans might be without your support. This new Bill 3364 could be a great addition to your already commendable record in supporting our veterans.

Representative Stanley, please talk to your fellow legislators and make sure this bill is voted favorable out of committee.

Thank you for your continued support for our veterans, as I know first-hand how much it means to them.

Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Liam

Shortly after our meeting with [Legislative Aide for Rep. Jerald A. Parisella] Mr. Rodriguez, we walked to the other side of the state house to meet with Henry Kahn, a top legislative aide for Senator Gobi. Right off the bat Mr. Kahn told us that he had very little knowledge of the bill because it was so new, and he wanted us to describe the proposal of the bill and its financial ramifications. After going in depth about the bills proposal, Mr. Kahn was overall very receptive of our information as took very in-depth notes. We asked him a set of questions about Senator Gobi and her thoughts on veteran's education. He assured us the Senator’s passion for this issue and that she would find it very hard to vote against in committee.

Holly

Because Liam and I were the coalition for our bill, we had to reach out to different veteran groups and talk to different veterans about their experience, and what their opinions were on certain decisions and benefits they received. Michael C. Johns is the president for Massachusetts Veterans’ Service Officers Association in Foxboro, MA and served in the Navy for 12 years. For Mike, we were able to talk to him on the phone a couple of times to talk to him to see what his view of the bill was. At first, Mike really didn’t know anything about the bill, better yet, he didn’t even know it existed, so Liam and I had to provide him with all the information relative to the bill and also send him the actual bill via email so he could do some research and get an understanding what it was all about. After sending the bill and explaining to Mike what the bill represented, he understood exactly what the bill was for and how it could support him. Following explaining the benefits of the bill, he really did support the bill and for very specific reasons.

Update

As of July 11, 2015, the Senate had concurred and the House had referred the bill to the Joint Committee on Veterans and Federal Affairs.

For more information

View the Bill at: https://malegislature.gov/Bills/BillHtml/143741?generalCourtId=12