

By Senator Collins

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A bill to be entitled

An act relating to veterans; amending s. 295.124, F.S.; updating a reference to federal law relating to the designation of the Department of Veterans' Affairs as the state approving agency for veterans' education and training; amending s. 295.21, F.S.; revising the membership of the board of directors of Florida Is for Veterans, Inc.; conforming provisions to changes made by the act; amending s. 295.22, F.S.; renaming the Veterans Employment and Training Services Program administered by Florida Is For Veterans, Inc., as the Veterans Florida Opportunity Program; providing that grant reimbursements are limited to a specified amount per eligible trainee per fiscal year; deleting a provision that allowed for reimbursement of only permanent full-time employees; providing that training costs for a trainee must be equal to or greater than a specified amount; revising requirements for a grant agreement between the corporation and a business requesting funds; authorizing the use of grant funds as educational stipends for specified individuals while training at locations of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences; requiring Florida is for Veterans, Inc., and the university to enter into a grant agreement; requiring the corporation to determine the amount and structure of any educational stipend; specifying that such stipends be used only for specified training; providing an appropriation; creating s. 295.25, F.S.;

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prohibiting the Department of State from charging veterans who reside in this state fees for the filing of specified documents; limiting a veteran's use of the exemption; amending s. 322.21, F.S.; providing an exemption from driver license fees to members of the Florida National Guard and their spouses; amending s. 379.354, F.S.; providing a reduced fee for persons who are active or retired members of the United States Armed Forces, the United States Armed Forces Reserve, the National Guard, the United States Coast Guard, and the United States Coast Guard Reserve for resident lifetime hunting licenses and resident lifetime sportsman's licenses; amending s. 394.47891, F.S.; providing that the chief judge of a judicial circuit has the exclusive authority to determine whether veterans may participate in the veterans treatment court of that circuit; providing an effective date.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

Section 1. Section 295.124, Florida Statutes, is amended to read:

295.124 State approving agency for veterans' education and training.—The Department of Veterans' Affairs shall act as the state approving agency for purposes of veterans' education and training, in accordance with 38 U.S.C. s. 3671 ~~38 U.S.C. s. 1771~~ and the applicable annual contract between the state and the Federal Government.

Section 2. Paragraph (d) of subsection (3), paragraph (a)

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of subsection (4), and paragraph (c) of subsection (8) of section 295.21, Florida Statutes, are amended to read:

295.21 Florida Is For Veterans, Inc.—

(3) DUTIES.—The corporation shall:

(d) Implement the Veterans Florida Opportunity Employment and Training Services Program established by s. 295.22.

(4) GOVERNANCE.—

(a) The corporation shall be governed by a 12-member ~~an 11-member~~ board of directors. The Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives shall each appoint three voting members to the board. The appointments made by the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives may not be from the body over which he or she presides. In making appointments, the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives shall must consider representation by active or retired military personnel and their spouses, representing a range of ages and persons with expertise in business, education, marketing, and information management. Additionally, the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives shall each appoint one member from the body over which he or she presides to serve on the board as ex officio, nonvoting members, and the Governor shall appoint one member who is a secretary, or his or her designee, with experience in economic or workforce development from an executive agency, as an ex officio, nonvoting member.

(8) ANNUAL REPORT.—The corporation shall submit an annual progress report and work plan by December 1 to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of

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Representatives. The report must include:

(c) Status of the Veterans Florida Opportunity Employment ~~and Training Services~~ Program administered under s. 295.22.

Section 3. Section 295.22, Florida Statutes, is amended to read:

295.22 Veterans Florida Opportunity Employment ~~and Training Services~~ Program.—

(1) LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS AND INTENT.—The Legislature finds that the state has a compelling interest in ensuring that each veteran or his or her spouse who is a resident of this state finds employment that meets his or her professional goals and receives the training or education necessary to meet those goals. The Legislature also finds that connecting dedicated, well-trained veterans with businesses that need a dedicated, well-trained workforce is of paramount importance. The Legislature recognizes that veterans or their spouses may not currently have the skills to meet the workforce needs of Florida employers and may require assistance in obtaining additional workforce training or in transitioning their skills to meet the demands of the marketplace. It is the intent of the Legislature that the Veterans Florida Opportunity Employment ~~and Training Services~~ Program coordinate and meet the needs of veterans and their spouses and the business community to enhance the economy of this state.

(2) DEFINITIONS.—For the purposes of this section, the term:

(a) "Secondary industry business" is a business that the state has an additional interest in supporting and for which veterans and their spouses may have directly transferable

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117 skills. Such businesses are in the fields of health care,
118 agriculture, commercial construction, education, law
119 enforcement, and public service.

120 (b) "Servicemember" means any person serving as a member of
121 the United States Armed Forces on active duty or state active
122 duty and all members of the Florida National Guard and United
123 States Reserve Forces.

124 (c) "Target industry business" is a business as defined in
125 s. 288.005.

126 (d) "Target market" means servicemembers of the United
127 States Armed Forces who have 24 months or less until discharge,
128 veterans with 36 months or less since discharge, and members of
129 the Florida National Guard or reserves. The term includes
130 spouses of such individuals, and surviving spouses of such
131 individuals who have not remarried.

132 (3) CREATION.—The Veterans Florida Opportunity Employment
133 ~~and Training Services~~ Program is created within the Department
134 of Veterans' Affairs to assist in connecting servicemembers,
135 veterans, or their spouses who are in the target market with
136 businesses seeking to hire dedicated, well-trained workers and
137 with opportunities for entrepreneurship education, training, and
138 resources. The purpose of the program is to meet the workforce
139 demands of businesses in this state by facilitating access to
140 training and education in high-demand fields for such
141 individuals and to inspire the growth and development of
142 veteran-owned small businesses.

143 (4) ADMINISTRATION.—Florida Is For Veterans, Inc., shall
144 administer the Veterans Florida Opportunity Employment and
145 ~~Training Services~~ Program and perform all of the following

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functions:

(a) Conduct marketing and recruiting efforts directed at individuals within the target market who reside in or have an interest in relocating to this state and who are seeking employment. Marketing must include information related to how military experience can be valuable to a target industry or secondary industry business. Such efforts may include attending job fairs and events; hosting events for servicemembers, veterans, and their spouses or the business community; and using digital and social media and direct mail campaigns. The corporation shall also include such marketing as part of its main marketing campaign.

(b) Assist individuals in the target market who reside in or relocate to this state and who are seeking employment with target industry or secondary industry businesses. The corporation shall offer skills assessments to such individuals and assist them in establishing employment goals and applying for and achieving gainful employment.

1. Assessment may include skill match information, skill gap analysis, résumé creation, translation of military skills into civilian workforce skills, and translation of military achievements and experience into generally understood civilian workforce skills.

2. Assistance may include providing the servicemember, veteran, or his or her spouse with information on current workforce demand by industry or geographic region, creating employment goals, and aiding or teaching general knowledge related to completing applications.

3. Assessment and assistance may be in person or by

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electronic means, as determined by the corporation to be most efficient and best meet the needs of veterans or their spouses.

(c) Assist Florida target industry and secondary industry businesses in recruiting and hiring individuals in the target market. The corporation shall provide services to Florida businesses to meet their hiring needs by connecting businesses with suitable applicants for employment. Suitable applicants include veterans or veterans' spouses who have appropriate job skills or may need additional training to meet the specific needs of a business. The corporation shall also provide information about the state and federal benefits of hiring veterans.

(d) Create a grant program to provide funding to assist individuals in the target market in meeting the workforce-skill needs of target industry and secondary industry businesses seeking to hire, promote, or generally improve specialized skills of veterans, establish criteria for approval of requests for funding, and maximize the use of funding for this program. Grant funds may be used only in the absence of available veteran-specific federally funded programs. Grants may fund specialized training specific to a particular business.

1. The program may prioritize grant funds to be used to provide a certificate, a license, or nondegree training from the Master Credentials List pursuant to s. 445.004(4)(h); any federally created certifications or licenses; and any skills-based industry certifications or licenses deemed relevant or necessary by the corporation. Funds may be allocated only upon a review that includes, but is not limited to, documentation of accreditation and licensure.

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204 2. Grant reimbursements ~~Costs and expenditures~~ are limited
205 to \$5,000 ~~\$8,000~~ per eligible trainee per fiscal year. Qualified
206 businesses must cover the entire cost for all of the training
207 provided before receiving reimbursement from the corporation
208 ~~equal to 50 percent of the cost to train a veteran who is a~~
209 ~~permanent, full-time employee.~~ Training costs for a trainee in a
210 fiscal year must be equal to or greater than \$5,000. Eligible
211 costs and expenditures include, but are not limited to:

- 212 a. Tuition and fees.
- 213 b. Books and classroom materials.
- 214 c. Rental fees for facilities.

215 3. Before funds are allocated for a request pursuant to
216 this section, the corporation shall prepare a grant agreement
217 between the business requesting funds and the corporation. Such
218 agreement must include, but need not be limited to:

219 a. Identification of the personnel necessary to conduct the
220 instructional program, instructional program description, and
221 any vendors used to conduct the instructional program.

222 b. Identification of the ~~estimated~~ duration of the
223 instructional program.

224 c. Identification of all direct, training-related costs.

225 d. Identification of special program requirements that are
226 not otherwise addressed in the agreement.

227 e. Permission to access aggregate information specific to
228 the wages and performance of participants upon the completion of
229 instruction for evaluation purposes. The agreement must specify
230 that any evaluation published subsequent to the instruction may
231 not identify the employer or any individual participant.

232 4. A business may receive a grant under any state program

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and a grant under this section for the same veteran trainee.

5. Notwithstanding subparagraph 2., grant funds may be used as educational stipends for individuals in the target market while training at any location of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences within this state. The corporation and the University of Florida shall enter into an agreement before any grant funds are expended, and the corporation shall determine the amount and structure of any educational stipend. Such stipend may be used only for such training for a period of no less than 4 months and no more than 6 months, in the absence of veteran-specific federally funded programs.

(e) Contract with one or more entities to administer an entrepreneur initiative program for individuals in the target market in this state which connects business leaders in the state with such individuals seeking to become entrepreneurs.

1. The corporation shall award each contract in accordance with the competitive bidding requirements in s. 287.057 to one or more public or private entities that:

a. Demonstrate the ability to implement the program and the commitment of resources, including financial resources, to such programs.

b. Have a demonstrated experience working with veteran entrepreneurs.

c. As determined by the corporation, have been recognized for their performance in assisting entrepreneurs to launch successful businesses in this state.

2. Each contract must include performance metrics, including a focus on employment and business creation. The

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entity may also work with a university or college offering related programs to refer individuals in the target market or to provide services. The entrepreneur initiative program may include activities and assistance such as peer-to-peer learning sessions, mentoring, technical assistance, business roundtables, networking opportunities, support of student organizations, speaker series, or other tools within a virtual environment.

(f) Administer a SkillBridge initiative for target industry and secondary industry businesses in this state and for eligible individuals in the target market who reside in, or who wish to reside in, this state. In administering the initiative, the corporation shall:

1. Establish and maintain, as applicable, its certification for the SkillBridge initiative or any other similar workforce training and transition programs established by the United States Department of Defense;

2. Educate businesses, business associations, and eligible individuals in the target market on the SkillBridge initiative and its benefits, and educate military command and personnel within the state on the opportunities available to eligible individuals in the target market;

3. Assist businesses in obtaining approval for skilled workforce training curricula under the SkillBridge initiative, including, but not limited to, apprenticeships, internships, or fellowships; and

4. Match eligible individuals in the target market with training opportunities offered by the corporation or participating businesses, with the intent of having them achieve gainful employment in this state upon completion of their

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291 SkillBridge training.

292 (5) COLLABORATION.—

293 (a) The corporation may assist state agencies and entities
294 with recruiting veteran talent into their workforces.

295 (b) The corporation is encouraged to, and may collaborate
296 with state agencies and other entities in efforts to, maximize
297 access to and provide information on one website that, if
298 possible, includes hyperlinks to the websites of and contact
299 information, if available, for state agencies and other entities
300 that maintain benefits, services, training, education, and other
301 resources that are available to veterans and their spouses.

302 (c) The corporation may collaborate with other state
303 agencies and entities for outreach, information exchange,
304 marketing, and referrals regarding programs and initiatives that
305 include, but are not limited to, the program created by this
306 section and those within any of the following:

307 1. The Department of Veterans' Affairs:

308 a. Access to benefits and assistance programs.

309 b. Hope Navigators Program.

310 2. The Department of Commerce:

311 a. The Disabled Veteran Outreach Program and local veteran
312 employment representatives.

313 b. CareerSource Florida, Inc., and local workforce boards
314 employment and recruitment services.

315 c. The Quick-Response Training Program.

316 d. Efforts of the Florida Defense Support Task Force
317 created under s. 288.987, the Florida Small Business Development
318 Center Network, and the direct support organization established
319 in s. 288.012(6).

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320 3. The Department of Business and Professional Regulation,
321 reciprocity and the availability of certain license and fee
322 waivers.

323 4. The Department of Education:

324 a. CAPE industry certifications under s. 1008.44.

325 b. Information related to earning postsecondary credit at
326 public postsecondary educational institutions for college-level
327 training and education acquired in the military under s.
328 1004.096.

329 5. The Department of Health:

330 a. The Office of Veteran Licensure Services.

331 b. The Florida Veterans Application for Licensure Online
332 Response expedited licensing.

333 6. The Office of Reimagining Education and Career Help.

334 Section 4. For the 2025-2026 fiscal year, the sum of \$2.5
335 million in recurring funds from the General Revenue Fund is
336 appropriated to the Department of Veterans' Affairs for the
337 purposes of funding the Florida Is For Veterans, Inc.,
338 implementation and administration of the programs described in
339 ss. 295.21(3)(d), 295.21(3)(f), and 295.22, Florida Statutes.

340 Section 5. Section 295.25, Florida Statutes, is created to
341 read:

342 295.25 Veterans exempt from certain filing fees.—The
343 Department of State may not charge veterans who reside in this
344 state the applicable fees for filing articles of organization,
345 articles of incorporation, a certificate of limited partnership,
346 or a partnership registration statement, or for the designation
347 of a registered agent, if applicable, as provided in s.
348 605.0213, s. 607.0122, s. 617.0122, s. 620.1109, or s.

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620.81055. A veteran may apply for this exemption only once.

Section 6. Subsection (7) of section 322.21, Florida Statutes, is amended to read:

322.21 License fees; procedure for handling and collecting fees.—

(7) (a) Any veteran honorably discharged from the Armed Forces who has been issued a valid identification card by the Department of Veterans' Affairs in accordance with s. 295.17, has been determined by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs or its predecessor to have a 100-percent total and permanent service-connected disability rating for compensation, or has been determined to have a service-connected total and permanent disability rating of 100 percent, is in receipt of disability retirement pay from any branch of the United States Armed Services, and who is qualified to obtain a driver license under this chapter is exempt from all fees required by this section.

(b) A member of the Florida National Guard who has been issued a valid identification card by the Department of Military Affairs and his or her spouse are exempt from all fees required by this section.

Section 7. Paragraph (a) of subsection (11) and paragraph (a) of subsection (12) of section 379.354, Florida Statutes, are amended to read:

379.354 Recreational licenses, permits, and authorization numbers; fees established.—

(11) RESIDENT LIFETIME HUNTING LICENSES.—

(a) Lifetime hunting licenses are available to residents only, as follows, for:

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1. Persons 4 years of age or younger, for a fee of \$200.

2. Persons 5 years of age or older, but under 13 years of age, for a fee of \$350.

3. Persons 13 years of age or older, for a fee of \$500.

4. Persons who are active or retired members of the United States Armed Forces, the United States Armed Forces Reserve, the National Guard, the United States Coast Guard, or the United States Coast Guard Reserve, for a fee of \$250.

(12) RESIDENT LIFETIME SPORTSMAN'S LICENSES.—

(a) Lifetime sportsman's licenses are available to residents only, as follows, for:

1. Persons 4 years of age or younger, for a fee of \$400.

2. Persons 5 years of age or older, but under 13 years of age, for a fee of \$700.

3. Persons 13 years of age or older, for a fee of \$1,000.

4. Persons who are active or retired members of the United States Armed Forces, the United States Armed Forces Reserve, the National Guard, the United States Coast Guard, or the United States Coast Guard Reserve, for a fee of \$400.

Section 8. Paragraph (d) of subsection (3) of section 394.47891, Florida Statutes, is amended to read:

394.47891 Veterans treatment court programs.—

(3) AUTHORIZATION.—

(d) The chief judge ~~and state attorney~~ of the judicial circuit that creates and administers a veterans treatment court program has ~~have~~ the exclusive authority to determine whether veterans who have been dishonorably discharged may participate in the veterans treatment court program of ~~within~~ the circuit.

Section 9. This act shall take effect July 1, 2025.