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For Immediate Release

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House approves Stolen Valor Act, bills to protect veterans' grave markers

BOSTON – The House of Representatives today approved a statewide “Stolen Valor Act” designed to prosecute individuals who falsely claim military service credentials for personal financial gain, while also passing legislation prohibiting the unauthorized sale of veterans’ grave markers, requiring vandals to pay restitution for damaging or removing a gravestone, and providing free access to the state’s parks and reservations for Purple Heart recipients.

“With Veterans Day fast approaching, it is only fitting that we work to pass legislation that honors those who have proudly served our country and have fought to preserve the many freedoms we all enjoy,” said Representative Hannah Kane, (R-Shrewsbury) “I am proud to support these bills on behalf of the Commonwealth’s veterans and their families, including those who have made the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of our state and our nation.”

The Stolen Valor Act makes it a gross misdemeanor for individuals to obtain money, property or other tangible benefits by fraudulently representing themselves as an active member or veteran of any branch of the U.S. military, armed forces reserves or National Guard, or by falsely claiming to be the recipient of a military honor, such as the Congressional Medal of Honor or Purple Heart. The bill – filed as House Bill 1641, An Act Concerning the False Representation of Military Status – provides for a punishment of up to one year in a house of correction, a fine of \$1,000, or both a fine and imprisonment.

“It is simply wrong, not to mention unpatriotic, for someone who has never served our country to falsely claim military honors in an attempt to obtain benefits they don’t deserve,” said Representative Kane. “This bill ensures that any misrepresentation will be punishable, preserving benefits for our veterans who have truly earned them.”

In addition to the Stolen Valor Act, the House also approved House Bill 1306, An Act Relative to Veterans’ Grave Markers, which would impose a fine of up to \$5,000 against any unauthorized individual who sells or attempts to sell a veteran’s grave marker. Those who commit a second or subsequent offense would be subject to the same fine, but would also face imprisonment in the state prison for not more than 5 years or imprisonment in a jail or house of correction for up to 2 ½ years.

The bill, which was filed by Representative Paul Frost (R-Auburn), also imposes a fine of up to \$5,000 against anyone who receives, retains or disposes of a veteran's grave marker which they know or should know to be stolen. However, this fine would not apply to individuals who receive or retain a veteran's grave marker with the intent of returning it to a cemetery, a member of law enforcement, a member of the Department of Veterans Services, a non-profit veterans' services group, or a local veteran's agent.

The House also approved legislation filed by Representative Todd Smola (R-Warren), the ranking Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee. House Bill 1600, An Act Providing Further Penalties for Intentional Loss or Damage to a Gravestone or Other Grave Marker, would require individuals who desecrate a gravestone or veteran's grave marker to pay restitution for the damages. This would be in addition to the penalties contained in the current statute, which include a fine of not more than \$5,000 and up to 5 years' imprisonment in the state prison or up to 2 ½ years' imprisonment in a jail or house of correction.

The House also engrossed House Bill 3173, An Act Relative to the Removal of Veterans, Police and Fire Commemorative Flag Holders. This bill would add the American flag and commemorative flag holders representing service in the police and fire department to the list of protected items whose defacement, destruction or removal are subject to fines and imprisonment.

In addition, the House voted to waive the existing charges and fees at all state parks, state forest recreation areas and state reservations for Purple Heart recipients by passing House 3243, An Act Providing Free Park Access to Purple Heart Recipients. The current waiver applies only to disabled veterans and handicapped persons.

The bills now head to the Senate for further action.

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