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Representative Kane supports state Soldiers' Homes oversight and governance reforms

BOSTON – The state-run Holyoke and Chelsea Soldiers' Homes will be subject to enhanced oversight and a streamlined chain of command under the provisions of a comprehensive reform bill supported by State Representative Hannah Kane (R-Shrewsbury).

House Bill 5106, *An Act relative to the governance, structure and care of veterans at the Commonwealth's veterans' homes*, was enacted on a vote of 153-0 in the House of Representatives on July 28. The bill represents a compromise proposal negotiated by a six-member conference committee that had been meeting since March to reconcile the differences between earlier House and Senate versions of the bill.

The series of reforms contained in House Bill 5106 were initiated in response to the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak at the Holyoke Soldiers' Home that claimed the lives of 76 veterans. Representative Kane said the changes are designed to prevent future tragedies and to help ensure the delivery of quality services to residents of both the Holyoke and Chelsea Soldiers' Homes.

Representative Kane noted that the bill elevates the Department of Veterans Services to a Cabinet-level office, with the Secretary of Veterans Services reporting directly to the Governor while also having the power to hire and fire the superintendents who will be responsible for the day-to-day management of the two homes. The bill requires both superintendents to be licensed nursing home administrators, in addition to being a veteran or having prior experience managing veterans in a nursing home or long-term care facility.

House Bill 5106 also establishes a new 19-member Veterans' Homes Council to advise the Secretary on "the health, well-being and safety" of the Soldiers' Homes' residents and to make recommendations on policies and regulations governing the two facilities. According to Representative Kane, the boards of trustees at both homes will be retained, with trustees serving as ex-officio voting members of the council. All trustees will be appointed by the Secretary of Veterans Services, with the approval of the Governor.

To ensure that residents and their families have a voice, House Bill 5106 calls for the appointment of an ombudsperson at both veterans' homes, who will review complaints and work to resolve them. In addition, an independent Office of the Veteran Advocate will be created, which will act as a liaison to all state agencies providing services to veterans and will provide input on how the state can improve services for veterans and their families. The Veteran Advocate will be selected from a list of three candidates submitted by a nominating committee, and approved by a majority vote of the Governor, Attorney General and State Auditor.

Under the bill, both veterans' homes must apply for and maintain certification by the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), while also adhering to federal CDC guidelines for trauma-informed care. Both facilities will be required to undergo inspections by the Department of Public Health at least twice a year, but inspections will occur every 30 days during a declared state of emergency.

House Bill 5106 now heads to Governor Charlie Baker. He has 10 days to review and sign the bill.

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