

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo

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Lawmakers from every corner of New Jersey are working in earnest Under the Dome as the fall legislative session is in full swing.

All eyes continue to be focused on resolving the crisis of funding the Transportation Trust Fund to ensure sufficient funding to build and repair our dire infrastructure system. Officials also continue to investigate the tragic train accident in Hoboken to determine how best to prevent such devastation in the future and how to repair the station which is one of the most heavily used in the Tri-State area.

While there are many important issues swirling around the State House, I wanted to focus this month on measures that the Legislature is undertaking to help our men and women in uniform as Veterans Day approaches. As vice-chairman of the Assembly Military and Veterans Affairs Committee, I focus a great deal of my legislative work on working to address issues affecting active duty military members as well as veterans. In particular, I believe that we must ease the burden on servicemen and women who are adjusting to civilian life and supporting military families.

Pending legislative measures that could help these returning veterans would:

- Require the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to create a registry for organizations providing services to veterans.
- Allow certain National Guard and United States Reserve members to temporarily defer mortgage loan payments and suspend property tax payments.
- Authorize school district hiring preference for veterans.
- Require the Department of Labor and Workforce Development to permit veterans and other groups to apply for unemployment benefits online.
- Include all disabled veterans in New Jersey Transit discount programs for senior citizens and person with disabilities.
- Requires school districts to observe Veterans Day as a school holiday.
- Allow “100 percent Disable Veterans” to receive parking privileges reserved for persons with disability.

Military families also are greatly impacted when a loved one is deployed across the globe. That is why we must respect their sacrifice and provide support them while in our hometowns. One core bill would provide tuition benefits at public institutions of higher education for dependents of certain veterans. If passed, the measure would provide free tuition to students between the ages of 17 and 26 who were a child an active military member of the Armed Forces, Reserves, or National guard. The parent would have been killed in action, determined to be a prisoner of war or missing in action, or other limited factors. Spouses, civil union partners or domestic partners of these veterans would be eligible within 10 years of the veteran's death, determination of permanent or total disability, or determination of a prisoner or missing in action status. Benefits of the bill could be limited to higher education course credit toward a baccalaureate degree. This measure would be a small demonstration our commitment to helping military families who suffer the greatest sacrifice in losing their loved one.

In the past two years, I have spent a great deal of time working on measure to protect our state's military installations from possible scaling back of missions or closure. It is possible that there may be a federal Base Closing and Realignment Commission (BRAC) that would take inventory of nationwide military assets to determine if facilities should close or be consolidated in other locations. It is my mission to ensure that our bases are maintained or further expanded.

The closest base to Mercer County -- the Joint Base McGuire - Ft. Dix - Lakehurst is the state's second largest employer with 44,000 jobs and an estimated impact of \$6.5 billion. In fact, it is the nation's only three-branch military base.

On a statewide level, New Jersey's military installations provide 45,631 direct jobs and 27,603 indirect jobs. They add \$3.8 billion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) directly and \$2.7 billion GPD indirectly to New Jersey's economy.

In the last year, two measures that I have authored relative to supporting jobs and local economic engines tied to military bases have been signed into law. The first, facilitates coordination between military bases and neighboring communities when it comes to land use planning. This law strives to make sure that any developments in nearby towns do not interfere with the necessary activities of military bases. It ensures that open lines of communications exist to ensure the best plans are laid between bases and local governments.

The second new law creates the Military Skills Council. The newly formed Council is tasked with reviewing expenditures and funding from state departments for the training and education of

workers directly employed in the military and supporting industries. The Council also will look at the needs at the military installations and key industries; employment barriers; development of resources; alignment of curriculum and ways to enroll student in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) programs, and engagement of educators, military and industry to ensure workforce alignment. This entity's work will go a long way in getting fuller picture of what our State needs to do to ensure that we have a workforce ready to take on challenges in the military or related professions.

I am continuing to work on my bill package relative to our New Jersey military installations. In particular, one measure would provide preference to employers when it comes to the allocation of workforce development grants. These employers would need to be providing equipment, supplies or services to military bases and installations. Finally, another bill would provide incentives through the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to businesses that create innovative projects relative to military missions and installations. Such incentives could include tax credit bonus of \$500 per employee under the Grow New Jersey Assistance Program; a lower than average interest rate on small business loans; and a requirement that the Department of State provide the businesses with a single contact person responsible for assistance between the business and government entities.

While any bill passed by the Legislature can only touch on a small area of public policy, the combination of these initiatives will go a long way to strengthening our state's commitment to our military personnel and installations.

If you are a member of the military, a veteran or a military family, I urge you to please contact my office if I may be assistance to you. If you have an idea on how the State of New Jersey can help military members, veterans or their families, I am always open to listening to your thoughts. Thank you for your service to our country and I urge my fellow New Jerseyans to salute our servicemen and women on Veterans Day.

I will see you back here next month Under the Dome!

Editor's Note: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Hamilton) represents the 14th Legislative District which includes parts of Mercer and Middlesex counties. He can be reached at AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org; phone (609) 631-7501; www.WayneDeAngelo.com; Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo; or Twitter: @DeAngeloLD14.