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**HOUSE BILL NO. 354**

Offered January 14, 2026

*A BILL to amend and reenact § 2.2-2004 of the Code of Virginia, relating to Commissioner of the Department of Veterans Services; powers and duties; online portal.*

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Patron—Thomas (By Request)

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Referred to Committee on General Laws**Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia:****1. That § 2.2-2004 of the Code of Virginia is amended and reenacted as follows:****§ 2.2-2004. Additional powers and duties of Commissioner.**

The Commissioner shall have the following powers and duties related to veterans services:

1. Perform an annual cost-benefit and value analysis of (i) existing programs and services and (ii) new programs and services before establishing and implementing them and report the results of such analysis to the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs;

2. Seek alternative funding sources for the Department's veterans service programs;

3. Cooperate with all relevant entities of the federal government, including the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and U.S. Department of Labor in matters concerning veterans benefits and services;

4. Appoint a full-time coordinator to collaborate with the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations created in § 2.2-2681 on ways to provide both direct and indirect support of ongoing veterans programs, and to determine and address future veterans needs and concerns;

5. Initiate, conduct, and issue special studies on matters pertaining to veterans needs and priorities, as determined necessary by the Commissioner;

6. Evaluate veterans service efforts, practices, and programs of the agencies, political subdivisions, or other entities and organizations of the government of the Commonwealth and make recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, the Governor, and the General Assembly on ways to increase awareness of the services available to veterans or improve veterans services;

7. Assist entities of state government and political subdivisions of the Commonwealth in enhancing their efforts to provide services to veterans, those members of the Virginia National Guard, Virginia residents in the Armed Forces Reserves who qualify for veteran status, and their immediate family members, including the dissemination of relevant materials and the rendering of technical or other advice;

8. Assist counties, cities, and towns of the Commonwealth in the development, implementation, and review of local veterans services programs as part of the state program and establish as necessary, in consultation with the Board of Veterans Services and the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations, volunteer local and regional advisory committees to assist and support veterans service efforts;

9. Review the activities, roles, and contributions of various entities and organizations to the Commonwealth's veterans services programs and report on or before December 1 of each year in writing to the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, the Governor, and the General Assembly on the status, progress, and prospects of veterans services in the Commonwealth, including performance measures and outcomes of veterans services programs;

10. Recommend to the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, the Governor, and the General Assembly any corrective measures, policies, procedures, plans, and programs to make service to Virginia-domiciled veterans and their eligible spouses, orphans, and dependents as efficient and effective as practicable;

11. Design, implement, administer, and review, in consultation with the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, special programs or projects needed to promote veterans services in the Commonwealth;

12. Integrate veterans services activities into the framework of economic development activities in general;

13. Manage operational funds using accepted accounting principles and practices in order to provide for a sum sufficient to ensure continued, uninterrupted operations;

14. Engage Department personnel in training and educational activities aimed at enhancing veterans services;

15. Develop a strategic plan to ensure efficient and effective utilization of resources, programs, and services;

16. Certify eligibility for the Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program and perform other duties related to such Program as outlined in § 23.1-608;

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17. Establish and implement a compact with Virginia's veterans, which shall have a goal of making Virginia America's most veteran-friendly state. The compact shall be established in conjunction with the Board of Veterans Services and supported by the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Service Organizations and shall (i) include specific provisions for technology advances, workforce development, outreach, quality of life enhancement, and other services for veterans and (ii) provide service standards and goals to be attained for each specific provision in clause (i). The provisions of the compact shall be reviewed and updated annually. The Commissioner shall include in the annual report required by this section the progress of veterans services established in the compact;

18. Assist the Department of Corrections, sheriffs, and local and regional jails in utilizing the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Re-Entry Search Services system, with the goal of (i) identifying veterans incarcerated in state prisons and local and regional jails, (ii) helping such veterans prepare for release or reentry, (iii) reducing the rates of recidivism and homelessness, (iv) connecting such veterans to resources to address the challenges of post-traumatic stress disorder, and (v) diverting eligible veterans to treatment dockets. The Department shall coordinate with the Virginia Sheriffs' Association, the Virginia Association of Regional Jails, the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, the Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security, the Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court, the Department of Criminal Justice Services, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, community partners, district and circuit courts, and other stakeholders as necessary; ~~and~~

19. *Develop and maintain an online portal to connect veterans, members of the Virginia National Guard, and Virginia residents in the Armed Forces Reserves who qualify for veteran status, and their immediate family members, to available resources, programs, and services in the Commonwealth and provide a means to submit electronic applications for such resources, programs, and services. The online portal shall collect, maintain, use, disseminate, and safeguard personal information in compliance with state and federal law; and*

20. Provide the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, the Governor, and the General Assembly with an overview of the activities of the Military Spouse Liaison, as outlined in § 2.2-2002.2, including any legislative recommendations, on or before December 1 of each year.