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Honoring Those Who Serve with Jobs and Guarantees

Every day, this nation asks its citizen soldiers to lay it all on the line in defense of our freedoms. To them, we owe a debt of gratitude for the sacrifices they, and their families, make to ensure our national security. This past legislative session, we passed some measures to honor their sacrifices.

One way we have done this is by enacting protections for those reservists and National Guardsmen, who are called away from their homes to the War on Terror, that their jobs will be waiting for them when they return. Last year, we passed legislation that ensures they can return to their jobs with their wages and benefits intact. We also established penalties for employers who violated this law. This year, through Senate Bill 433, we increased the penalties from \$25,000 to \$35,000 for employers who don't comply.

Another important measure passed by the legislature was Senate Bill 82. That new law will make it easier for veterans to obtain commercial driver's licenses. It's part of the "Helmets to Hardhats" program that helps men and women returning from service overseas to find work that better supports their families. Senate Bill 82 allows the Department of Revenue to waive driving skills tests for any qualified military applicant for a commercial driver's license. Those applying must not have had their licenses suspended, revoked, or canceled for two years before they try to get that CDL. In addition, applicants would be required to complete a written test.

Other military-friendly legislation signed by the governor includes an increase in state money for Missouri's veterans' homes by \$8.7 million. This will allow those homes to go from 90 to 97 percent capacity and drop the number of veterans waiting to get in. We also passed into law the Stolen Valor Act to make a fitting punishment for those who impersonate military heroes. In addition, it increases grants to fund Veterans Services Officers.

Senate Bill 75, which I co-sponsored, would have put limits on what colleges and universities receiving state funding could charge to combat veterans. Under this bill, any Missouri resident who served in the U.S. military after September 11, 2001 would not pay more than \$50 for each credit hour taken. Participants would have to maintain a 2.5 grade point average on a 4.0 scale. In addition, we included everyone who served after the terrorist attacks that launched this global war on terror, not just those sent to Afghanistan and Iraq, to recognize that it takes many people playing different roles to make our Armed Forces function. While the measure enjoyed widespread support, we simply ran out of time this legislative session to get it done. But I promise it will be on our agenda again next year.

These are some of the things we did in this past legislative session to help our men and women who serve in the military. It cannot even come close to the sacrifices they and their families make for our country and our freedoms... but I think it's a good start.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.