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CREATE VETERANS' SPEAKERS BUREAU

House Bill 4776 (Substitute H-1) First Analysis (11-9-99)

Sponsor: Rep. Larry Julian
Committee: Veterans Affairs

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

Veterans of military service have expressed concern that young people in schools have no understanding of war-time sacrifice. One veterans organization, a local post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, reports that it has created a program called "Vets in the Classroom Month," to offer classroom teachers the opportunity to invite veterans to share their stories with students throughout the month of November. Another organization, a local college, reports offering a "50 Plus Living History" program that includes many veterans, men and women, who visit educational sites where students learn about government, democracy, and wartime service.

As a 12-30-98 editorial in *The Argus Press* of Owosso, Michigan has noted, veterans are a storehouse of information about the armed services and war, and more of them should be sharing their experiences in schools and community groups. The editorial notes that in-their-own-words accounts of experiences in battle often are effective curricular materials that provide teachers with compelling instructional opportunities. Veterans' stories help people to realize the sacrifices that have been made by others, for the American people and for democratic ideals, so that Americans may live, work, and play in the way few citizens of the world are able. And as the editorial concludes, perhaps veterans' stories have another effect: "Maybe, if we're lucky, we can end the tragic results of war by making our young people aware of its consequences." For, "the tragedy of war is that it uses man's best to do man's worst."

In order for more schoolchildren to be aware of veterans' contributions during times of war, some have suggested that the Department of Military Affairs set-up a speakers' bureau so that knowledgeable veterans with wartime experiences can share their stories of service, courage, and valor with schoolchildren in their classrooms.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

House Bill 4776 would create a new act to establish a veterans speakers program in the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. More specifically, the bill would create the program within the veterans' affairs directorate of the department. The director of the veterans' affairs directorate would be required to report annually on the merits and use of the program to the committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate having jurisdiction over veterans affairs.

The legislation provides that the directorate could do all of the following:

- (1) Create a list of veterans who would be willing to visit local schools and make presentations of their military experience. The list would have to include the length of service, geographical area of service, and the rank of each veteran.
- (2) Encourage veterans' organizations to participate in the program.
- (3) Create a pamphlet that encouraged schools to use the experiences of veterans in the course of their educational instruction. The pamphlet would have to include the names and ways of contacting appropriate veterans from the above list of veterans who had indicated a willingness to participate in the program.
- (4) Distribute the pamphlet to all of the school districts in the state.
- (5) Provide a system of receiving evaluations of the speakers and the program from teachers and students who used the program.
- (6) Update the list at least annually, and make it available on the Internet through the department's website.

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The speaker's program created by the bill would not be a replacement for any instruction required by any other law. The bill would not require any teacher to participate in the program, and would allow teachers who chose to participate in the program to tailor the subject matter and select the veteran that the teacher deemed most appropriate for the students.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The House Fiscal Agency notes that House Bill 4776 (H-1) would create a veterans speaker program within the Veterans Affairs Directorate. The bill would permit the directorate to visit local schools and make presentations of their military experience, create and distribute to each school district in the state a pamphlet encouraging schools to utilize veteran speakers, provide a system for the evaluation of the speakers, and make the list of speakers available on the Internet.

According to the directorate, the creation of a new position to administer the program would be required if the provisions of the bill were fully implemented. A new position would increase state costs by \$35,000 to \$50,000. There would also be costs associated with the creation and distribution of the pamphlets. There are 793 school districts in the state; depending on the quality of the pamphlet, these costs could range from \$250 to \$500.

Since the bill permits rather than requires its provisions to be carried out, the directorate could choose not to implement some or all of the provisions. According to the directorate, the maintenance of a list of speakers on its existing website could be carried out with no significant increase in costs. (11-4-99)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

According to committee testimony, the State of New York has a veterans speakers bureau whose members visit schools, and Michigan should do the same. Having an active speakers bureau composed of wartime veterans who are willing to share their stories with schoolchildren in their classrooms could make history lessons vivid and compelling in a way that a textbook cannot. Further, the speakers bureau would help students to understand the sacrifices their elders have made for democracy. And, the speakers bureau would link citizens young and old across generations, as members together within a community in which service and commitment to others, and to ideals, are clearly valued.

POSITIONS:

The American Legion supports the bill. (11-5-99)

Baker College supports the bill. (11-5-99)

Analyst: J. Hunault

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.