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Legislative
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MEMORANDUM

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November 9, 2009

TO: Interested Persons

FROM: Geoffrey Johnson, Research Associate, 303-866-4788

SUBJECT: Summary of Colorado Assistance to Veterans

This memorandum summarizes benefits made available to veterans by the State of Colorado. The memorandum summarizes educational, tax, motor vehicle, and employment benefits made available to qualifying veterans by state agencies. In addition, the memorandum summarizes hunting, fishing, park entrance, clearinghouse information services, and interment benefits, available to certain veterans.

Educational Benefits

In-state tuition for military veterans. Pursuant to House Bill 09-1039, Colorado law requires state higher education institutions to adopt a policy granting in-state tuition status to honorably discharged military members who enroll in state institutions. The bill further allowed the institutions to grant in-state tuition status to dependents of an honorably discharged military service members. Students receiving in-state tuition status become eligible to receive a stipend from the College Opportunity Fund starting with the 2011-12 academic year.

Veteran's teaching incentives. Through the Teach Colorado Grant Initiative, the Department of Higher Education makes grants to state higher education institutions that create scholarship programs to benefit students in teacher preparation programs. Senate Bill 09-062 expanded the criteria to be given special consideration by the department in making its grants to include scholarships designed to assist honorably discharged veterans of the armed forces in entering the teaching profession.

Operation Recognition. Operation Recognition, awards high school diplomas to deserving WWII, Korea, and Vietnam veterans.¹ The program is offered by the Colorado Board of Veterans Affairs in cooperation with the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Association of School Boards. Colorado high schools may voluntarily participate in the program by offering diplomas to qualifying veterans during their award assemblies. A diploma may be awarded posthumously to a veteran's family member if the veteran is deceased. To qualify, the veteran must have left high school before graduating in order to serve in the U.S. armed forces in WWII, Korea, or Vietnam, must have reached at least 60 years of age, must not have received a high school diploma (but may hold a GED), must reside within the school district awarding the diploma, and must have resided in the school district at the time of leaving high school to serve in the U.S. armed forces.

Tax Benefits

Disabled veteran homestead property tax exemption. Colorado voters approved the senior homestead exemption in November 2000. Under the exemption, the first 50 percent of up to \$200,000 of a residential property's market value is exempt from property taxes. The General Assembly is authorized to adjust the amount of the exemption. To be eligible for the exemption, homeowners must be age 65 or over and must have lived in the same primary residence for the immediate prior 10-year period. The exemption may be retained by a senior's surviving spouse in the event of the death of a spouse who qualified for the exemption.

In 2006, Colorado voters approved Referendum E, amending Section 3.5 of Article X of the Colorado Constitution. The amendment expanded the senior property tax exemption to include "qualified disabled veterans." To qualify, a veteran must have received a "permanent and total" disability designation from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs as a result of a service-connected disability.

Retired military pay income tax exclusion. For purposes of income taxation, state law allows persons 55 to 64 years of age to exclude up to \$20,000 of their military retirement benefits received during a calendar year, and persons 65 years of age or older to exclude up to \$24,000 of such military retirement benefits.²

Motor Vehicles

Motor vehicle specific ownership tax exemption for certain veterans. Colorado law exempts disabled veterans, former prisoners of war, Pearl Harbor survivors, and recipients of the Purple Heart, Navy Cross, Distinguished Service Cross, Air Force Cross, or Silver Star from the imposition of annual specific ownership taxes pertaining to

¹ Section 22-32-132, C.R.S.

² Section 39-22-104 (4) (f) (III), C.R.S.

registration of a class B or class C motor vehicle weighing less than 16,000 pounds.³

Military special license plates fee exemption. Colorado law exempts qualifying veterans from payment of fees for one set of specified military special license plates.⁴ The fee exemption is available for special license plates for a passenger car, a truck, a motorcycle, or a noncommercial or recreational vehicle. Fees are waived for qualifying veterans for the following military special license plates:

- ✓ Disabled Veteran plate (must demonstrate at least a 50 percent permanent service-connected disability);
- ✓ Disabled Veteran Handicapped plate (must demonstrate at least a 50 percent permanent service-connected disability, and verified physical impairment);
- ✓ Distinguished Service Cross plate (recipient);
- ✓ Former P.O.W. plate (must demonstrate incarceration by the enemy while on active duty in a period of U.S. armed conflict);
- ✓ Medal of Honor plate (recipient);
- ✓ Navy Cross plate (recipient);
- ✓ Pearl Harbor Survivor plate (must demonstrate being stationed at Pearl Harbor during the attack, membership in a national organization of Pearl Harbor survivors, as well as honorable discharge);
- ✓ Purple Heart plate (recipient); and
- ✓ Silver Star plate (recipient).

Employment Benefits

Veterans employment preference. Article XII, Section 15, of the Colorado Constitution provides that veterans who served on active duty and who have been honorably discharged, as well as surviving spouses of such veterans who have not remarried, are awarded "veterans preference points." These points are added to final passing scores on open-competitive employment examinations for employment in the Colorado personnel system and in comparable civil service or merit systems of political subdivisions of the state, including municipalities. Disabled veterans have ten points added to their grades, and nondisabled veterans or their surviving spouses are credited five additional points to their grades for state employment. Prospective civil service employers may only interview the three candidates who scored the highest on this exam. Veterans' preference points are applied to the final score received in the examination process and may increase the chances of a veteran applicant being among the top three candidates for the position.

³ Section 42-3-104 (5), (6), and (8), C.R.S.

⁴ Section 42-3-213, C.R.S.

Unemployment Insurance Benefits - Surviving Military Spouse. Pursuant to House Bill 09-1054, state law extends full unemployment insurance benefits to the surviving spouse of an active duty member of the armed forces who was stationed in Colorado and was killed in combat. Surviving spouses are eligible for the benefits if they relocate to a new residence, either within or outside of Colorado, because of the death, and they are unable to commute to their current employment from the new residence. The surviving spouse must also be available for suitable work to qualify.

Other Benefits

Veterans information clearinghouse. Under House Bill 09-1291, the Veterans Resource Information Clearinghouse, created within the Division of Veterans Affairs in the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, will provide information concerning support, services, and other assistance available to veterans and their families from state and local government agencies, veterans organizations, and nonprofit organizations. The bill requires the division to identify the entities to be included in the clearinghouse and ensure the nonprofit organizations included are legitimate and legally operated. Operation of the clearinghouse is subject to available departmental resources, including gifts, grants, and donations.

Interment of deceased veterans. Colorado law requires the commissioners of each county in Colorado to ensure the decent interment of honorably discharged military personnel who died without sufficient means to defray funeral expenses, or with a family in indigent circumstances, and establish a maximum expense to the county for each burial.⁵ Counties must also ensure that headstones provided by the Veterans Administration or furnished on behalf of the veteran are set at the expense of the county.

Veterans hunting and fishing license privileges. Colorado law allows certain military personnel to obtain a fishing license free of charge during the period of their Colorado residency.⁶ These veterans include active or retired members of the U.S. armed forces who are resident patients at an armed forces hospital or convalescent station, Veterans Administration hospital, or mental health institution in Colorado, or who are totally and permanently disabled. Colorado law also allows any resident of Colorado who has received a Purple Heart, or who is a disabled veteran with a service-related disability of at least 60 percent, to obtain free of charge a lifetime resident combination small game hunting and fishing license.

Park entrance privileges. Colorado residents displaying a Colorado disabled veteran license plate on their vehicle, and passengers in the vehicle, are eligible for free entrance to any state park or recreation area in the state, not including campgrounds.⁷

⁵ Section 28-5-502, C.R.S.

⁶ Section 33-4-104, C.R.S.

⁷ Section 33-12-106, C.R.S.