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Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs
Public Hearing, AB 769
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Thank you Chairman and members of the Committee for this opportunity to testify on AB 769, relating to requirements for colleges when college students are called into active military service.

With the sacrifices our military members give to our state and country, it is important to ensure these brave men and women are treated with respect and are getting the services they need. When these service members are called into active duty, current law protects their employment status. Unfortunately, current protections for service members who are also college students are not as clear.

Specific to Wisconsin, National Guard members may be called into state active duty to respond to natural disasters, public disturbances and other emergencies, at any time. If a call to active duty comes during the academic year, activated students risk potential financial loss since they are not always entitled to a refund of tuition or room and board fees.

Recently, this situation hit home for our National Guard soldiers when the 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team was mobilized in support of hurricane relief efforts under state active duty orders. You will hear from some individuals today who were impacted directly by the mobilization and faced problems regarding tuition and room and board. National Guard members serving their country, who also happen to be college students, should not have to worry about what will happen to their tuition, as well as their financial future, if they are called upon to help our state and country.

It is for this reason, Senator Duey Stroebel and I have introduced AB 769. This bill provides the protections necessary in order to help our National Guard and reserve military members who are also students. These protections include:

- 1) Eliminating the requirement that protections apply only if the time of service exceeds 30 days.
- 2) Providing protections to students regardless of whether or not the call to active duty required the service member's consent.
- 3) Requiring all institutions of higher education, trade and professional schools, and post-secondary schools in the state to give service members the option of a tuition refund and refund of pro-rated room and board fees (if applicable), or reenrollment for no additional cost in the next available offering of that class.

- 4) Holding students harmless for re-registration or re-enrollment.
- 5) Requiring schools to give service member students the chance to accelerate completion of a class if that class is scheduled to be concluded within 30 days of the initial call to active duty.

It is my hope that the Committee will support AB 769 in order to provide protections for military members who are also students.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

Representative Cindi Duchow



DUEY STROEBEL

STATE SENATOR • 20TH DISTRICT

Testimony on AB 769

January 4, 2018

Chairman Skowronski and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of AB 769. It is an honor to join Rep. Cindi Duchow and many others in bringing this legislation forward.

Approximately 10,000 men and women serve Wisconsin in both the Army National Guard and the Air National Guard. They are joined by hundreds of other reserve component service members in other branches at units across our state. These individuals stand ready to be activated at a moment's notice to serve our country. In particular, members of the National Guard may be activated by the Governor to provide assistance to our communities in times of natural disaster.

Although state law includes robust protections for reserve component service members when it comes to leaving their job to serve, the protections for college students who must leave school to serve are less strong. AB 769 contains several important changes to state law that will remedy this situation.

First, this bill eliminates the current requirement that orders to active duty must be for 30 days or more before a student is entitled to relief. Often when the National Guard is summoned to duty in response to an emergency, the very nature of the situation precludes a specific end-date being established. Students should not be penalized for the open-ended and tentative nature of timelines associated with emergencies.

Second, this bill expands the current option some students have to place a class on hold or obtain a tuition refund if they are called to active duty while taking classes. This provision currently only applies to certain schools in Wisconsin. Under AB 769 all post-secondary institutions, to include trade schools, would have to offer service member students the option of a tuition refund or placing the class on hold for completion at a later date.

Finally, if a student is required to leave school because they are called to active duty, this bill ensures that they are guaranteed re-enrollment in future classes. This means that a service member doesn't lose their "place in line" so to speak when it comes to re-enrolling at a specific school or in a specific class.

Wisconsin is home to some great educational institutions. With this bill we can work with them to standardize protections for service members, giving them the peace of mind they need to continue to effectively serve our communities and our state.

Skowronski

Thank you assembly Chairman Representative Ken Skowronski and fellow assembly members serving on the committee on Veteran Affairs.

I am Major Bart Droessler with the Wisconsin Army National Guard serving as the State Education Officer.

I am here today to testify in support of Bill 769. ^{AB} During this past year our Wisconsin Army National Guard was called upon to support statewide mobilizations to support Hurricane Irma. This short term state mobilization involved approximately 2600 Wisconsin Guardsman. Many of these soldiers were enrolled in various educational institutions.

167 were enrolled in State University Colleges

108 were enrolled in State Technical colleges

123 were enrolled in private colleges and apprenticeship Programs

These 398 soldiers represented approximately 15 percent of our mobilized force. Bill 769 would provide additional protections for future soldiers called up for short term state mobilizations.

These measures will help our highly educated professional leaders and soldiers maintain the highest level of Readiness to be ready whenever called upon.

Thank you.

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of AB 769. My name is AJ Omernik and the opinions I express are entirely my own, and in no way reflect the official position of the Wisconsin Army National Guard, the Department of Defense or any state or federal agency.

Late last year I witnessed first-hand how current complexities in state law as it relates to service members who are college students can cause frustration and financial hardship for those service members. My unit was one of several called to state active duty in response to Hurricane Irma making landfall in the state of Florida. As our unit prepared to leave Wisconsin, a number of my Soldiers expressed concern about how a sudden activation during the school year would impact their ability to complete college. Existing protections for college students are more narrowly written and not as universally applicable as protections for service members who are employed by civilian employers.

Soldiers in the National Guard, should they be called up for duty, may be gone for two weeks or more. If this occurs during the school year, that soldier would most likely be dropped from class. Public schools are required to pay back this tuition, private schools are not. Most private schools would likely do the right thing by the servicemember, but are not required to. This places ^{the} ~~this~~ service member in the unfortunate predicament of potentially needing to pay back a semester's worth of loans to a school, without any legal recourse or protections. The average soldier will make roughly 750 (2018 Military Pay chart for E4) ^{2nd Year} dollars after taxes during a two week deployment. This same two week deployment could cost that ~~same~~ soldier \$13,000 (Google: Average cost of private college in Wisconsin) for a semester at a private school, again with no recourse to receiving those funds back. AB 769 will give the servicemember the ability to recoup their paid funds, preventing their already considerable sacrifice of time and well-being in serving their state and county from becoming an insurmountable burden.

As a ready reserve, the National Guard may be tasked at any time with a domestic mission. This means that while regular training and deployment schedules are generally known in advance, there are last minute training events and domestic emergencies also arise on short notice. Because emergencies are difficult to predict, it is sometimes hard to set a specific date by which a response will end.

Often it takes time for the full picture to become known. The collective uncertainty of this situation can place a lot of pressure on a citizen-soldier balancing work, college and military service.

Additionally, required job training can be difficult to fit into unit and personal schedules, meaning the servicemember may be required to attend role qualification training an inopportune times. The lack of civilian protections for servicemembers required to engage in this sort of duty both hurts overall force readiness, by depriving units of individuals willing to train, and individual career progression, as these schools are required to advance in the profession of arms.

AB 769 will significantly strengthen protections for college student service members by doing the following:

- 1) Giving them the choice to continue a class at a later date or receive a tuition and pro-rated room-and-board refund.
- 2) Guarantee re-enrollment upon completion of active duty.
- 3) Ensuring protections apply for orders that do not specify at least 30 days of duty.
- 4) Expand the protections to all post-secondary and trade schools in state.
- 5) Give, when possible, students the chance to accelerate completion of a class if the call to active duty comes toward the end of a class.