

Military funeral honors should not fall victim to budget, committee told



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FILE - Members of the Westbrook Veterans Honor Guard rifle team, from left, Paul Kwasniewski, Dick Barry and John Latino fire the rifle volley during the rendering of full military honors at the funeral of Vietnam veteran Lester John Kraaz, Jr., Friday, October 28, 2016 at Centerbrook Cemetery in Essex. (Sean D. Elliot/The Day)

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Hartford — There was just one outburst in an otherwise subdued public hearing Tuesday of the General Assembly's Veterans Affairs Committee.

It came after state Rep. Tom Delnicki, R-South Windsor, in voicing his support for a bill that would mandate the state to provide military funeral honors, said the following: "I have a tough time understanding why we even have to be in the

a bill that would mandate the state to provide military funeral honors, said the following: "I have a tough time understanding why we even have to be in the position of having to enter legislation like this when this should be a given."

"Amen," multiple veterans in the room responded. Others clapped loudly.

In its second public hearing of the 2017 legislative session, the Veterans Affairs Committee heard testimony on a number of veteran-related bills. Much of the testimony Tuesday was in reference to [House Bill 7181](#), which would require the state to provide for a three-party firing detail, or honor guard, to fire rifle salutes at military funerals.

Late last year, the Malloy administration asked state agencies to propose 10 percent in cuts from their budgets. Fourth on the Military Department's list of seven proposals for cutting funding was to eliminate the three-party firing detail. That would save \$326,000 from a department that receives about \$5 million in state funding annually.

Several legislators, including Delnicki, who introduced a similar proposal, spoke in favor of House Bill 7181, as did several veterans. No one spoke against the proposal.

"I want to underscore the fact that our military has never run from the challenges that have been put before them. ... They have given all and we owe them something in return," said Dan Thurston, chairman of the Connecticut Veterans & Military Organization, which is made up of veterans and military service organizations.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars Department in Connecticut also is endorsing the bill.

"We shouldn't be up here pitching this, to put the money back in, it should be in there every year. I'm a little frustrated with that. ... It seems like every year we have to come up and fight for what's due to the veterans," said Chris Paulhas, state commander of the American Veterans Department of Connecticut.

Veterans groups in the state pushed back in 2015 when Malloy cut the funding as part of his 2016 fiscal year budget proposal. State legislators ended up restoring the cut. Sen. Henri Martin, R-Bristol, said Tuesday that the committee hopes to make the funding permanent and not a line item.

Members of the honor guard detail, who render the three-volley salute, are paid a \$50-a-day stipend. On average, they perform at 3,500 military funerals a year.

No matter the outcome of the funding, the National Guard still will provide at least three service members to fold and present an American flag to the deceased's family and play taps, as mandated by federal law. Federally mandated funerals do not generally provide for a firing party, according to the Military Department.

Other bills that received a fair amount of comment Tuesday include proposals to allow municipalities to provide a [property tax freeze for certain disabled veterans](#) and a [property tax exemption for Gold Star parents](#) whose child or children were killed in action while on active military duty.

The proposals mostly received positive feedback.

Acknowledging the noble intentions behind both bills, Randy Collins, advocacy manager for the Connecticut Conference of Municipalities, expressed the group's opposition to both, saying that it would impose "de facto mandates" on municipalities already suffering from big cuts in state aid.

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"Towns and cities remain almost exclusively reliant on the imposition of a regressive property tax system to fund all levels of local service and these proposals would further increase property tax rates that already subsidize the current 77 property exemptions," Collins said.

A more equitable solution, he said, would be to provide a tax credit against state income tax, so that the cost would be shared by the entire state and not just the host community.

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