Written by Nafia Khan
Monday, 13 August 2012 13:16

SPRINGFIELD – August 12, 2012. To celebrate “Veterans Day at the State Fair”, Governor Pat Quinn today signed a package of new laws designed to honor our veterans and fallen heroes, including a measure to hire more veterans as Conservation Police. Today’s action is the latest by Governor Quinn to improve services for veterans in Illinois.

“Supporting Illinois veterans is our sacred mission,” Governor Quinn said. “These new laws enable us to hire more veterans, provide veterans with better medical and mental health treatment, and better honor the families of fallen heroes with special license plates.”

Under House Bill 4983 – sponsored by Rep. Edward Acevedo (D-Chicago) and Sen. Tony Muñoz (D-Chicago) – the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) would be able to hire more veterans as Conservation Police through a waiver of their college degree requirement. Currently, applicants must have a four-year college degree or a two-year degree plus three years in a police force. Under this new law, any service member who was honorably discharged may have that requirement waived.

The IDNR Conservation Police enforce fishing and wildlife laws, patrol Illinois waterways and state parks, and hunt down violators of the state’s poaching and endangered species laws. The starting salary is $43,956. While the college requirement is waived under this new law, which goes into effect immediately, applicants must still meet other requirements, such as a 300-yard swimming test. There are currently 136 Conservation Police officers and the IDNR hopes to hire more in coming months. All 15 cadets currently in training are veterans.

“Our Conservation Police face poachers, intoxicated boaters and criminals every day. They need to be tough and smart,” said IDNR Director Marc Miller. “Anyone who has been honorably discharged after serving in a hot spot such as Iraq is exactly the kind of person we need on the front-lines here.”

Governor Quinn also signed House Bill 5006 – sponsored by Rep. Derrick Smith (D-Chicago) and Sen. Mike Jacobs (D-Moline) – to double the number of days allotted for military service-related hospital visits by certain state employees from two days annually to four days, and ensures that these days won’t count as sick days. Proposed by Secretary of State Jesse White and backed by the VFW, the bill passed both chambers unanimously and takes effect immediately.

Governor Quinn also signed House Bill 4926, sponsored by Rep. Michael Connelly (R-Naperville) and Sen. Kirk Dillard (R-Hinsdale), to help veterans who incur post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health challenges. The new law – effective immediately – improves the functioning of the courts by increasing access to treatment records of veterans in the criminal justice system, and bolstering the role of caseworkers and "peer recovery coaches." An initiative of Mental Health America of Illinois (MHAI), the new law identifies veterans who have been charged with crimes and may have substance abuse or mental health problems, and makes sure their treatment is part of any adjudication

"We greatly appreciate the support of Governor Quinn for this legislation," said Carol Gall, MHAI Executive Director. "This will reduce recidivism and save taxpayers money." For a century, MHAI has been advocating for persons with mental and emotional disorders.

Also signed today was House Bill 4982 - sponsored by Rep. Patrick Verschoore (D-Rock Island) and Sen. Martin Sandoval (D-Cicero) - to honor such fallen heroes as firefighters and police officers who die in the line of duty by expanding the number of family members eligible for special license plates. Currently, only surviving spouses are entitled to the plates. The new law – proposed by Secretary of State White – allows parents and other relatives of the fallen hero to display the special plates. The bill takes effect on Jan. 1, 2013.

Improving life for veterans has long been a priority for Governor Quinn, who has called for the hiring of 100,000 veterans by 2020. Veterans and their families have free admission to the State Fair and other activities today. Earlier this week, the governor announced the Illinois Hiring Heroes Consortium designed to help veterans find employment. In 2011, Governor Quinn launched the Welcome Home Heroes program to promote homeownership for Illinois Veterans, active military personnel, reservists and Illinois National Guard members. As Lieutenant Governor, Quinn championed the Illinois Military Family Relief Fund Act, which established a fund to provide grants helping service members and their families with the costs of food, housing, utilities, medical services and other expenses they struggle to afford because a wage-earner has temporarily left civilian employment to be placed on active military duty.

###