

Co-Chair Sollman, Co-Chair Ruiz, and members of the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee On Education.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Higher Education Coordinating Commission budget, specifically as it pertains to the Oregon National Guard State Tuition Assistance program.

Senate Bill 5525 includes \$6.6 million dollars for the Oregon National Guard State Tuition Assistance (ONGSTA) program which has seen increased utilization by our Oregon National Guard members every semester.

The ONGSTA program is unique among the education grant programs administered by HECC. In addition to tuition, it also pays for books and fees.

Eligibility requirements are also unique. First, one must be in the Oregon National Guard, this means they enlisted, attended basic training and advanced individual training and so have already been away from home for anywhere between 4 months and a year and a half. They are now in a drilling status, attending regularly scheduled drills normally one weekend per month as well as two weeks of training in the summer, sometimes three or four weeks depending on the year. They must also be a “member is good standing”. This means they have a clean record. They do not have any unexcused absences from any training events, they have no

adverse actions pending, they pass their annual physical fitness test and meet height-weight standards. They also must remain “Operationally Available” meaning they are available for mobilization overseas, and for State Active-Duty missions here in Oregon such as wildland fire fighting. In short, they have quite a bit of skin in the game and in my view, they earn their education benefit, including books and fees.

At the Oregon Military Department, we are working through multiple avenues to improve recruiting and retention for the Oregon National Guard.

A strong, fully staffed Oregon National Guard is vital to the State of Oregon. The women and men who serve in the Oregon National Guard have both a federal and state mission. They serve to defend the United States of America AND to protect Oregonians. We call on them every year in times of crises to help protect Oregon communities and rescue Oregon citizens. Whether fighting wildland fires, rescuing stranded hikers from mountaintops, and other times of extreme need such as during the Coronavirus pandemic, or the next unknown or unforeseen crisis, the service members of the Oregon National Guard are always ready, always there.

We told these men and women that if they join the Oregon National Guard, we will pay for college.

I urge you to support HECCs budget, recognize the service your Oregon National Guard members provide to the State of Oregon, and help us keep our promise to them.

Russell Gibson

Government and Legislative Affairs Director

Oregon Military Department