SENATE BILL REPORT
SB 5420

As Amended by House, March 5, 2026

Title: An act relating to ensuring access to state benefits and opportunities for veterans, uniformed service members, and military spouses.

Brief Description: Ensuring access to state benefits and opportunities for veterans, uniformed service members, and military spouses.

Sponsors: Senators Lovick, Wagoner, Chapman, Dozier and Nobles.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: State Government, Tribal Affairs & Elections: 2/11/25, 2/14/25 [DP-WM, w/oRec].

Floor Activity: Passed Senate: 3/6/25, 48-1; 1/21/26, 48-1.
Passed House: 3/5/26, 96-0.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Expands the definitions used to qualify persons for particular benefits for military veterans and uniformed service members.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON STATE GOVERNMENT, TRIBAL AFFAIRS & ELECTIONS

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.
Signed by Senators Valdez, Chair; Krishnadasan, Vice Chair; Wilson, J., Ranking Member; Fortunato, Kauffman, McCune, Riccelli and Short.

Minority Report: That it be referred without recommendation.
Signed by Senator Hasegawa.

Staff: Greg Vogel (786-7413)

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background: State and National Guard. Under Washington law, the organized militia of the state refers to the Washington State Guard, the Army National Guard, and the Air National Guard. All three services serve under the command of the Governor and directed by the adjutant general, except that the National Guard may be called upon by the U.S. President to serve as part of the total U.S. military.

United States Armed Forces and Uniformed Services. Under federal law, the U.S. armed forces are the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Space Force, and Coast Guard. Established in 2019, the U.S. Space Force is the newest branch of the armed forces. Members of the Space Force are called Guardians.

Federal law defines the uniformed services as the U.S armed forces, the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Commissioned Officer Corps.

Washington Service Members' Civil Relief Act. Washington Service Members' Civil Relief Act (WSCRA) applies to military members and their dependents whose financial and legal obligations may be impacted by active military duty. WSCRA's main provisions provide rights with respect to default judgments and stays in civil proceedings. WSCRA also contains provisions restricting contract fines and penalties, restructuring interest rates on certain business loans, and tolling statutes of limitations during military service periods.

Credit for Military Service in State-Sponsored and City Retirement Systems. State-sponsored retirement systems provide credit to combat veterans for interruptive military service for up to five years of service. In order to be eligible for the benefit, veterans generally must have received an honorable discharge or other excusable discharge.

License Extensions for Licenses for Military Veterans. A moratorium is authorized on the expiration of a valid license issued by the Department of Licensing during the time a licensee serves in the armed forces, the USPHS Commissioned Corps, or the U.S. Merchant Marines.

Military Veteran Hiring and Scoring Preferences on Civil Service Exams. Military veterans are eligible for scoring preferences on all state and local government civil service exams.

Veteran Employment Rights. Members of military uniformed services cannot be denied employment, reemployment, job retention, promotion, or any benefit of employment on the basis of military service. Any veteran entitled to be restored to a position must be restored without loss of seniority and may not be discharged without cause within one year of restoration.

The Legislature has also established a permissive preference in private employment for certain veterans. In private, nonpublic employment, veterans and their widows or widowers may be preferred for employment. Spouses of honorably discharged veterans with a service-

connected permanent and total disability may also be preferred for employment. These preferences are not considered violations of any state or local equal employment opportunity laws or laws prohibiting discrimination.

Summary of Bill: Recognizing the United States Space Force as Part of the Organized Militia of the State. Space Force Guardians are added to the definition of members of the organized militia of the state.

Expanding the Definitions of Military Veterans and Service Members. The definitions used to qualify persons for particular benefits for military veterans and service members are expanded to:

- members of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps are included in the following preferences for:
    1. protection under WSCRA;
    2. state-sponsored fire, police, and public employee retirement systems; and
    3. state and local civil service exams;
- members of the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps are eligible for license extensions for licenses issued by the Department of Licensing;
- members of the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps and spouses of active-duty service members and veterans are included in military veteran employment protections; and
- members of the U.S. Space Force and the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps and their widows or widowers, spouses of active-duty service members, and spouses of honorably discharged veterans with a service-connected permanent and total disability are included in the permissive preferences allowed in private employment.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony (Regular Session 2025): PRO: Members of the armed forces, uniformed services, and their families dedicate themselves to a cause we all respect. The uniformed services should be included alongside the armed forces in the benefits and opportunities they get. Providing employment opportunities to spouses of active-duty military members increases stability at home and acknowledges the importance of the family unit for those who serve. Creating parity between service branches reduces waste and confusion. This bill includes service members because they are actually deserving of our support.

By reducing barriers to service, and including more individuals in incentive structures, we

can address staffing shortfalls at a low administrative cost. Preferential employment opportunities foster career continuity in the lives of our service members. When the Space Force became a branch of the armed forces in 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense started to work with state legislatures to have the new force recognized in state laws. This was a major effort, and the Department of Defense commends this bill.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator John Lovick, Prime Sponsor; Tammie Perreault, Department of Defense.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.

EFFECT OF HOUSE AMENDMENT(S):

- Specifies that among other criteria, a veteran of the armed or uniformed services may be eligible for a service credit added to a police pension or Public Employees' Retirement System Plan 1 pension if the person received a medical discharge with an honorable record, instead of a discharge for physical reasons with an honorable record.
- Includes airmen in preferential public employment and permissive, preferential private employment.
- Defines “veteran” for a veteran's public employment preference as service in a specified capacity or a current, deployed member of the National Guard or Armed Forces Reserves.
- Expands eligibility for the veterans permissive preference in private employment to veterans with a qualifying discharge, instead of an honorable discharge.
- Corrects an internal reference to the definition of "qualifying discharge" to reference the definition in current statute regarding general provisions for veteran programs.