



KANSAS BOARD OF REGENTS

House Committee on Education Proponent Testimony on HB 2646

February 13, 2024

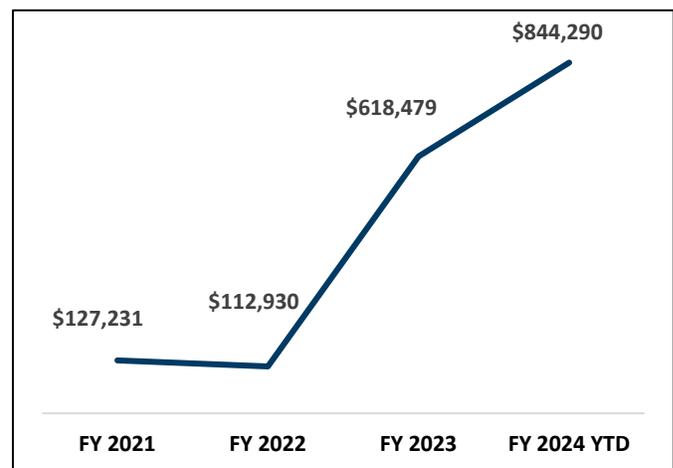
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President & CEO, Kansas Board of Regents

Good afternoon, Chair Thomas, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today to testify in favor of HB 2646.

K.S.A. 75-4364 establishes the Kansas Hero's Scholarship, which requires Kansas postsecondary institutions to waive tuition and fees for the spouses and dependents of Kansas public safety and military personnel who are disabled or killed in the line of duty. Institutions apply to the Board of Regents for reimbursement for the waived tuition and fees, which is paid by a State General Fund appropriation to the Board of Regents. The amount the Board may reimburse in a fiscal year is capped in the statute at \$500,000.

HB 2646 would make several changes to the Hero's Scholarship Act to make the Act easier to administer and benefit servicemembers' spouses and dependents.

First, the bill eliminates the \$500,000 annual cap on reimbursements. In its place, the bill would require the Board of Regents to establish each year an aggregate limit on reimbursements to be paid to postsecondary institutions for scholarships awarded under the Act, making the program subject to appropriation, like other financial aid programs we administer. The amount currently appropriated for the program, with a proviso to negate the statutory cap, is \$1.2 million for both FY 2024 and FY 2025. We believe we will exceed that budget as participation in the program grows.



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In addition, the bill would *allow* institutions to grant waivers up to the amount available for reimbursement. Current law *requires* that all eligible waivers must be granted regardless of whether the institution will be reimbursed by an appropriation to the Board of Regents. Institutions would still have the authority to choose to grant eligible waivers in the event the appropriation is not sufficient for full reimbursement.

HB 2646 would also make several changes expanding the tuition and fee waiver benefit for military servicemembers' spouses and dependents. The Act currently requires that the servicemember died or was injured or disabled after September 11, 2001. The bill would eliminate that date, opening the benefit to those whose covered servicemembers' deaths or disabilities occurred earlier.

Additionally, the Act provides the benefit to servicemembers who died or were injured or disabled during and "as a result of" their military service. The bill would replace that with a requirement that the servicemember died or was disabled while serving.

Finally, the statute contains difficult-to-administer rules on when a servicemember's disability qualifies for the benefit. These would be replaced with two alternatives that will be easier for servicemembers and their families to demonstrate and for the Board to administer: (1) the disability rendered the servicemember incapable of continuing his or her service; or (2) the servicemember is entitled to VA benefits for a service-connected disability of at least 80%.

We appreciate the support of Majority Leader Croft and of Representative Waymaster who was instrumental in development of this program. Thank you for the opportunity to offer proponent testimony on this legislation.