

The American Legion,  
Department of Wisconsin  
2930 American Legion Dr.  
Portage WI 53901  
(608) 745-1090  
wilegion.org



Founded on four pillars:  
• Veterans Affairs &  
Rehabilitation  
• National Security  
• Americanism  
• Children & Youth

---

*The mission of The American Legion, Department of Wisconsin is to provide service to veterans, their families and their communities.*

Chair Hutton and members of the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue

Thank you for holding this hearing on SB-238 relating to tuition and fee remission for eligible veteran's spouses, surviving spouses and children enrolled in the University of Wisconsin System or a Technical College. I also want to thank the authors and their staffs for the work they have put into this proposal.

The American Legion is the largest Veterans Service Organization in the Nation. In Wisconsin, we have approximately 50,000 members. We have just over a century of advocating for veterans, service members and their families.

Senate Bill 238 is another economic development tool for Wisconsin. Current law is not an incentive for recently discharged service members to relocate to Wisconsin. We see many employers looking for skilled employees. We need to grow the workforce in Wisconsin not provide disincentives to in migration.

This bill expands the definition of an eligible veteran for the purpose of remission of fees for spouses, unremarried surviving spouses and children. This change is good for the Wisconsin economy. It has the potential to increase the return of retired service members to Wisconsin.

The fiscal estimate only recognizes the costs incurred by the University and Technical College System, and they were undetermined. It does not address the increased economic activity the state and local economies will experience or the increase in tax revenue.

Wisconsin has been developing policies designed to encourage service members to come to Wisconsin upon completion of their term of service. We need those skills. Adopting this bill creates another tool to increase the skilled workforce in Wisconsin.

We thank you for your consideration of this issue and urge you to recommend to the Senate adoption.

Paul Fisk  
Legislative Chair  
The American Legion, Department of Wisconsin



Office of Government Relations

Van Hise Hall  
1220 Linden Drive  
Madison, WI 53706  
[www.wisconsin.edu](http://www.wisconsin.edu)

DATE: August 23, 2023

TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue

FROM: UW System Office of Government Relations

RE: Written Testimony on Senate Bill 238

Thank you, Chair Hutton and committee members, for providing the UW System (UWS) an opportunity to submit testimony on Senate Bill 238 (SB 238). We thank Senator Cowles and Representative Maxey for authoring this legislation and addressing a desire to attract more veterans and their families to Wisconsin higher education institutions.

The UW System, with 13 universities and 26 campuses, has one of the most robust programs for veterans and service members in the country. We strive to provide a welcoming higher educational setting for service members, veterans, and their families. Each of our universities has a veteran service department that provides comprehensive support to veterans. Dedicated campus staff assist veterans with transferring credits, navigating benefits, and connecting veterans with each other and the campus community.

UWS currently provides qualifying veterans, spouses, and children full tuition and fee remission up to eight semesters or 128 credits. Total tuition and fee remissions have increased every year since 2006. Yearly remission amounts for veterans have exceeded \$10 million annually since 2015. Remissions for children and spouses have seen the most increases in the past several years. Over the past 5 years, remissions for children and spouses of veterans have gone up an average of 9% each year and are nearly \$17 million annually. In FY23, UWS provided a record-setting amount of nearly \$30 million in tuition and fee remissions. The state reimbursed UWS about \$5.4 million in FY23, leaving over \$24 million in UWS tuition remission payments unfunded. A table of remissions and payments for the last six years is attached.

To qualify for tuition remission, a veteran is required to have been a Wisconsin resident at the time of entry into military service or have been a Wisconsin resident for five years prior to registering at a UW System school. Current statute also allows for the spouse and children of a qualified veteran who died in service or has a 30% or more disability rating to receive full tuition and fee remission.

SB 238 would expand tuition remission to any spouse or child if the veteran served on active duty for 20 or more years and is on active duty immediately before the beginning of the semester. SB 238 still retains the same residency requirements set forth by current statute but removes the requirement for the veteran to have a disability rating. This legislation would be the first bill in

(Cont.)

Wisconsin to propose completely eliminating the disability rating requirement to receive tuition remissions for children and spouses. Although the number of individuals who qualify under the legislation may be limited as over half of veterans since post-9/11 have disability ratings, this bill would impact UWS by expanding the number of individuals who would qualify to receive tuition remission and would increase our remission costs.

UWS supports veteran students and their families in numerous ways, including providing ever increasing full tuition and fee remission for qualified individuals. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on this legislation.

UW System Veteran, Spouse and Children Remissions & Payments

<u>Year</u>	<u>Veterans, Spouses &amp; Children</u>	<u>Remissions &amp; Payments</u>	<u>State Reimbursement</u>	<u>Difference/UW Paid Costs</u>
2017	3651	\$ 23,927,758	\$ 4,717,039	\$ 19,210,719
2018	3676	\$ 24,511,335	\$ 4,845,136	\$ 19,666,199
2019	3808	\$ 25,885,222	\$ 4,811,118	\$ 21,074,104
2020	3878	\$ 26,625,645	\$ 4,961,094	\$ 21,664,551
2021	3923	\$ 27,771,024	\$ 5,310,899	\$ 22,460,125
2022	3868	\$ 28,865,218	\$ 5,361,333	\$ 23,503,885
2023	3890	\$ 29,667,641	\$ 5,405,292	\$ 24,262,349





# DAVE MAXEY

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 15<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## Testimony for Senate Bill 238

### Public Hearing

### Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue

August 23, 2023

Chair Hutton and fellow members of the Committee on Universities and Revenue: thank you for hearing this bill today. The bill before you is Senate Bill 238, relating to tuition and fee remission for eligible veterans' spouses and children enrolled in the University of Wisconsin System or a technical college. This bill will allow the spouse and children of a service member on current active duty for 20 years or more years to claim state GI Bill benefits for their college education at a technical school or institution in the UW-System.

Under current Wisconsin law the GI benefits are contingent upon retirement, with the tuition remission program extending to spouses and children of eligible veterans who die in active duty, or as a result of a service-connected disability, or disabled veterans whose service-connected disability rating is at least 30 percent. Current law also provides that the veteran must reside in Wisconsin for at least five years to claim remission.

Senate Bill 238 aims to establish a third class of eligibility, enabling the spouses and children of active duty service members who have served 20 or more years to access tuition remission benefits. I dedicated four years of my life to serving our great nation. While I would not have benefited from this legislation many of the brave men and women I served alongside fought tirelessly, spending years away from their families to safeguard our freedoms and way of life. If these individuals can dedicate their lives for 20 or more years, then it is only fitting that we make it more convenient for them to obtain the benefits they rightfully deserve. Furthermore, this benefit may encourage these brave hardworking individuals to move to Wisconsin and make Wisconsin their forever home.

Thank you once again, members of the Senate Committee on Universities and Revenues for hearing my testimony on Senate Bill 238. I look forward to your support and recommendation of passage of this bill.

# **ROBERT L. COWLES**

**Wisconsin State Senator, 2nd Senate District**

**STANDING COMMITTEES:**

Natural Resources & Energy, Chair

Transportation & Local Government, Vice-Chair

Economic Development & Technical Colleges

## **Testimony on 2023 Senate Bill 238**

Senator Robert Cowles

Senate Committee on Universities and Revenue

August 23, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Hutton and committee members, for allowing me to testify on 2023 Senate Bill 238, which would alter the way we provide tuition and fee remission to the spouses and children of persons eligible for Wisconsin GI Bill benefits enrolled in the UW System or a technical college.

The men and women of our armed forces bravely serve to defend our country. For families with a career active-duty service member as a parent, coming home to domestic life can be burdensome, as many of the benefits veterans earn are contingent upon their retirement. Senate Bill 238 would attempt to ease that transition, allowing the spouse and children of a service member on current active duty for 20 or more years to claim state GI Bill benefits for their education at a technical school or institution in the UW System.

Under current Wisconsin law, tuition remission eligibility is only extended to spouses and children of eligible veterans who die on active duty, or as a result of a service-connected disability, or disabled veterans whose service-connected disability rating is at least 30 percent. In each case, the veteran must have resided in Wisconsin for at least five years to claim the remission.

SB 238 simply creates a third eligibility class. This new tier would allow the spouses and children of service members who are on active duty, have been on active duty for at least 20 years, and have also maintained Wisconsin residency for at least five consecutive years, to claim tuition remission at a technical college or UW System school. If the veteran is not a Wisconsin resident at the time of enlistment, their spouse or children can still claim remission if they have five consecutive years of Wisconsin residency before they enroll in college.

Committee members, I believe SB 238 is a common-sense reform we can make to support our career service members and their families as they near the end of their commission and begin their transition back into civilian life. We should not punish our men and women in uniform solely because they wish to advance their professions in the service of our nation. This bill would offer their dependents access to the hard-earned fruits of their sacrificial labor, in the form of assistance for a college education.

Good morning/afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the senate. I greatly appreciate you taking the time to receive my testimony on senate bill 238.

My name is Master Sergeant Tyler LaBorde, I was born in Appleton, WI and grew up in Kaukauna where I graduated from Kaukauna High School in 2002. In March of 2001 at the age of 17 I enlisted in the WI national guard. After September 11<sup>th</sup> and graduating from high school I changed my service to active Army. I am now entering my 21st year of active duty service in the United States Army. Throughout my 21 years I have deployed seven times for a total of 54 months to both Iraq and Afghanistan along with countless other deployments to numerous countries in support of this great nation. Though my military orders have me stationed outside of this state I have been a Wisconsin resident for the last 21 years and plan to retire here upon completion of my Active-Duty service. I am married with three daughters; my oldest child, who is 20 years old and as of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September will be a junior in college at the University of Wisconsin Platteville. She is majoring in forensic anthropology and plans to start her career post college also within the state of Wisconsin.

When I first joined it was during the time of the Montgomery GI Bill tuition benefits which were only usable by the service member. When the Post 9/11 GI Bill was created in 2008, and I had the ability to transfer those benefits to dependents I was thrilled to know there was a portion of a financial burden I wouldn't have to worry about. I split my post 9/11 GI Bill between my two oldest daughters and my wife also active duty gave hers to our youngest. This would give them each eighteen months of benefits that would cover their first two years of their college tuitions. Being that my oldest was about six years old at this time the remaining two years wasn't as pressing of a concern.

Fast forward to about 2020 and now my oldest is a junior in high school and is going through the process of apply to colleges and figuring out financing. This, through my younger sister who is also a veteran who was working in the UW-Oshkosh veterans office while earning her degree, is how we learned about the Wisconsin GI Bill and its benefits. Unfortunately, I did not have as firm of an understanding of the eligibility requirements for dependents as I thought I did.

Last year knowing that it was the last year of my daughter's post 9/11 GI Bill benefits I was trying to ensure that her eligibility for the Wisconsin GI Bill was good for the following year. This is when I came to learn of the 30% disability rating that I needed to have for my daughter to be eligible. Finding this out led me to calling numerous people in the Wisconsin VA office to explain that there was no way to get a disability rating until I was out of the military and there had to be an exception to this policy that I could apply for. Which is when I found out that it wasn't the way the policy was written but how the law was written.

That person in the VA office jokingly said that I would need to get the law changed. Being the stubborn and determined non-commissioned officer that I am was not just going to take no for an answer which is how I came to contact Senator Cowles office to find out what I could do about trying to rectify the situation. As I understand it by the virtue of my continued service to this great nation when compared to a resident of Wisconsin that only served for two years and received a 30% disability rating. That person is more qualified than someone still serving to receive benefits for themselves and their family. This feels like a disparity to me when considering that I am someone who has reached the minimum service obligation for retirement from the military but continues to serve the country. Which is why I have prepared these remarks for you today, because of what I believe to be an inequality in the

way that the law for the Wisconsin GI Bill determines eligibility to the dependents of veterans. So I ask you to vote yes to the proposed bill.