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Commissioner of Agriculture Pushes Expansion of Veterans to Agriculture Program

Charleston W.Va. -- Commissioner of Agriculture Kent Leonhardt is asking the West Virginia Legislature to pass a bill to rename and expand the West Virginia Department of Agriculture’s (WVDA) Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program. House Bill 4693 would rename the program to the “Veterans and Heroes to Agriculture Program,” as well as authorize the scope of the program to include first responders. Sponsors include Delegates Jeff Pack, Brande Steele, Roy Cooper, Tony Paynter and Majority Leader Amy Summers.

“To enhance services to additional groups, we needed to alter the scope and name of the program as laid out in code,” said Commissioner of Agriculture Kent Leonhardt. “The new name honors the program’s original intention and takes it a step further to represent where we believe the program is heading. Veterans and first responders both fall under the category of “heroes” in our book,” said Commissioner of Agriculture Kent Leonhardt.

Founded in 2014, the Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture program’s mission is to recruit, retrain and mentor men and women who are currently or have served in the United States military. As tasked under West Virginia state code §19-1-12, the WVDA runs the official Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program with the aim to integrate veterans into the field of agriculture and support those currently working in the field.

Until 2018, the program received no legislative appropriated monies and accomplished its duties through dedicated volunteers and donations. After successful advocating by Commissioner Leonhardt, the West Virginia Legislature secured the first state appropriation for the program in the FY19 budget. The Hershel “Woody” Williams VA Medical Center, in partnership with the WVDA and Marshall University, was also awarded an additional $400,000 of federal dollars in 2019.

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“We believe many of the trainings and concepts we have learned through the VA Farms project and other partnerships can easily transition to other groups. Many organizations are already using agriculture as an opportunity to help other populations heal. Changing the program’s mission just makes sense,” Leonhardt said.

House Bill 4693 can be found [here](#).

For questions or information about the program, contact Dane Gaiser at dgaiser@wvda.us or 304-558-2210.

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*The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.*

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