

Senate Executive Departments and Administration Committee

Kevin Condict 271-7875

SB 21-FN, relative to establishing a New Hampshire state trooper recruitment loan debt relief program and making an appropriation therefor.

Hearing Date: January 15, 2025

Time Opened: 9:51 a.m.

Time Closed: 10:17 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Pearl, McGough, Gannon, Altschiller and Reardon

Members of the Committee Absent : None

Bill Analysis: This bill establishes the New Hampshire state trooper school loan debt relief program.

Sponsors:

Sen. Gannon

Sen. Rochefort

Sen. Avard

Sen. Lang

Sen. Long

Sen. McGough

Sen. Pearl

Rep. Rice

Rep. Vose

Rep. Weyler

Rep. Bernardy

Rep. L. Walsh

Who supports the bill: Matt Amatucci (NH State Police), Jonathan Melanson (NH Troopers Assoc.), Senator David Rochefort (SD1), and Kent Hackmann.

Who opposes the bill: Aubrey Freedman, Elizabeth Sargent (SACOP), and Curtis Howland.

Who is neutral on the bill: None.

Summary of testimony presented:

Senator William Gannon, Senate District 23

- Senator Gannon introduced Senate Bill 21.
- Sen. Gannon explained that he sponsored a nursing retention bill last year. He said that New Hampshire is currently sixty-two state troopers short. He said the State Police are doing their best to keep the whole state covered but it is not sustainable.

- Sen. Gannon said his nurse retention bill was well received, and after its success it seemed natural to try the same program with the police. The purpose of this bill is to attract new people into the State Police.
- Sen. Gannon explained that almost all State Police recruits are college graduates with student loans. This bill would pay those recruits up to \$10,000 per year for up to five years. Sen. Gannon noted there is a mistake in the bill's language. He intended for total payment to be up to \$40,000.
- Sen. Gannon stated he has spoken to state troopers, and they all thought this was a good idea. Young people would find this attractive. He said the main thought of the bill is to bring people into the profession.
- Sen. Gannon explained that state troopers would like this bill to include their immediate families. He said the emphasis of the bill is to attract new hires, but if a state trooper has already paid off their student loans, then paying of their children's student loans could entice veterans to stay.
- Sen. Pearl pointed to lines 12 and 13. He noted the text says \$10,000 for the first five years but the maximum is \$40,000.
 - o Sen. Gannon said he asked for the bill to be drafted with the \$40,000 maximum to mirror the nursing program from last year.
- Sen. Pearl asked if Sen. Gannon is amendable to a minor tweak to reflect the intended \$40,000 maximum.
 - o Sen. Gannon said that is fine. He said this bill originally encompassed police officers as well but including that group would have been too expensive. He said the most immediate need is state troopers, which is a critical need. He said police retention is a long-term need. He said if the State had the money police officers would be included, but he did not want the bill to go to Ways and Means with a big expense.
- Sen. Pearl said there is no appropriation included in the bill.
 - o Sen. Gannon said they will not hire all sixty-two state troopers needed this year.
- Sen. Reardon noted this bill is similar to last year's nursing bill. She asked if the legislature has the authority to make the dispersal tax free.
 - o Sen. Gannon said he is not sure.
 - o Sen. Pearl said the bill would go to the Finance Committee, where that question could be raised.
- Sen. Altschiller pointed to the fiscal note. She said it is unknown how much student debt is held by state troopers. She noted they must have sixty college credit hours. She said the probability of having some debt is there. She asked if this bill would cost a half million dollars in the biennium.
 - o Sen. Gannon said he does not imagine all vacancies are filled within the next two years. He said that probably within the next five years that money would be spent.
- Sen. Altschiller said this is a good program to have for negotiations.
 - o Sen. Gannon said it is another tool in the toolbox.
- Sen. Altschiller asked about how the money would go out. She asked if he is open to an amendment that would have those hired submit a loan stub or

something to the department to show that they have loans. She noted the bill calls for a direct disbursement.

- Sen. Gannon said that is fine. He said the nursing program is watched, and there was an intention to mirror the nursing program.
- Sen. Reardon noted there are qualifications for the nursing program, and that somebody must verify credit hours. She asked if there is a significant amount of work that must be done at the accounting level for the nursing program.
 - Sen. Gannon said he has been told it is not much work. He said the bill would not add staff.

Jonathan Melanson, New Hampshire Troopers Association

- Mr. Melanson stated that the New Hampshire Troopers Association is in support of this bill.
- Mr. Melanson said this program would provide another tool in the toolbox for retaining state troopers.
- Mr. Melanson said their one ask would be to fully fund the program. He said if it remained at the dollar appropriation it would create the opposite effect among state troopers who are looking at coming to work in New Hampshire. He said it could harm the state's efforts to retain law enforcement professionals.

Matt Amatucci, New Hampshire State Police

- Mr. Amatucci said the New Hampshire State Police are in support of the bill.
- Mr. Amatucci said that, when fully staffed, there are three hundred and sixty-two state troopers. He said there are sixty-two vacancies. In the past four years there have been sixty-seven retirements and fifty-two resignations. Of those resignations, nineteen went to other law enforcement agencies, twenty went into the private sector, five joined the military full-time, and the remaining went to an unknown new career.
- Mr. Amatucci explained that over the last four years, they have been able to hire a hundred and nine probationary troopers. He said they have been effective in recruiting and hiring, where they have lacked is in retention of personnel. He said this bill could be used as a retention tool.
- Mr. Amatucci said that adding the incentive of dependents of personnel would allow them to use this bill as a retention tool for current personnel. He said the state troopers see many leave the agency to join other agencies, such as the University of New Hampshire, which provide benefits to their children.
- Mr. Amatucci stated that sixty-one troopers were hired in the past two years and that forty-three had the equivalent of sixty college credits or more. He explained applicants need two years of prior law enforcement, two years of active military service or sixty college credits to apply with the New Hampshire State Police. Two-thirds of the newly hired troopers have the educational requirements met.

- Sen. Pearl asked if that means those new troopers did not have previous law enforcement experience. He asked if they are coming right out of school.
 - o Mr. Amatucci said it can be a mix. Often, they have all three requirements. He explained they just need to have one of the three.
- Sen. McGough asked of the state troopers who have left the department, excluding those who retired, if Mr. Amatucci had an idea of what their average length of service was.
 - o Mr. Amatucci explained the data is broken down by year of retirement, not length of service. He said there were some years where the average was seven and a half years of experience and other years where the average was three and a half years of experience.
- Sen. McGough asked what the major reason troopers left was. He asked if it was salary and benefits.
 - o Mr. Amatucci said that of the nineteen that left and stayed in law enforcement, he believes the main reason was benefits. For those who went into the private sector, he said there was a litany of reasons why they left the profession.
- Sen. Altschiller asked if New Hampshire is competitive in its salary range. She asked if the state is competitive with where troopers are going.
 - o Mr. Amatucci said they have made great strides in making salaries competitive. He said the State Police are competitive with other New Hampshire law enforcement agencies but is not competitive with Massachusetts salaries.
- Sen. Altschiller asked where the State Police are losing most of their people to.
 - o Mr. Amatucci said they are losing troopers mostly to Massachusetts and federal agencies.
- Sen. Altschiller asked if the losses are to Massachusetts State Police or municipal police department in Massachusetts.
 - o Mr. Amatucci said it is both.
- Sen. McGough asked if Mr. Amatucci has heard of a benefit like the one created by this bill attracting away troopers.
 - o Mr. Amatucci said he has not heard of this specific program. He said he has not seen people leaving because of lack of opportunity. He said it is typically a financial decision for families.
- Sen. Altschiller asked if Massachusetts gives dependents benefit for college.
 - o Mr. Amatucci said he does not know. He noted Massachusetts' Quinn Bill, which gives those with a bachelor's degree a twenty percent base pay increase and those with a master's degree a twenty-five percent base pay increase. He said he is uncertain if new hires fell under that program. He said that program was a big benefit that Massachusetts has had for many years.

Aubrey Freedman

- Mr. Freedman expressed his opposition to the bill.

- Mr. Freedman explained he opposed the nursing bill as well. He said it is not right to do a carve out for certain industries.
- Mr. Freedman asked why the State should give certain groups a benefit at taxpayer expense. He said it is blatant favoritism.
- Mr. Freedman asked why state troopers should get a special carve out. He said it would not be cheap. He said that the goal is to reduce state spending, not increase it. He said the program is fiscally irresponsible.
- Mr. Freedman questioned whether this program would solve the problem of retention. He said this will not solve the problem long-term.
- Mr. Freedman said the long-term problem should be addressed through higher pay and better benefits like every other business with a labor shortage.
- Mr. Freedman said the idea is a moral hazard. He said students will not do an internal cost-benefit analysis of taking out student loans.

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Date Hearing Report completed: January 21, 2025