

# The Chief

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## Vets' Buy-Back Bill Headed to Governor But Fate's Up in Air

By SARAH DORSEY

Military veterans working in state and city government last week cheered the overwhelming passage of the Veterans Equality Act, which would allow them to buy back up to three years of their time spent in the service for state pension credit.

Currently, that right is given only to those who served in specific locations and times believed to indicate that they saw combat. But critics note that the rules exclude those who served in many overseas conflicts, including Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo. Women are also mostly excluded, because for years they were officially restricted from combat duties, although in practice, they have long served in that capacity.

### Will Cuomo Veto Again?

The bill easily passed both houses of the State Legislature, but the challenge will come when it reaches Governor Cuomo's desk. He vetoed an almost identical bill last year, a few days before Veterans' Day, calling its anticipated cost "oppressive" to taxpayers.

Kevin Harrington, a Transport Workers Union Local 100 vice president and chair of its veterans' committee

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KEVIN HARRINGTON: Past cost estimate way off.

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who has been pushing hard for the bill, said last week that he was hopeful that a funding change would make the difference.

This year, the bill comes with an appropriation of \$24.8 million, based on an estimate by the Governor's Budget Division of its first-year cost to the state. Last year, there was no specific funding set aside.

Mr. Harrington said that research done this year showed that the estimate cited by Mr. Cuomo in 2014—he predicted it would cost \$57 million in near-term obligations alone—was far too high. The bill's primary sponsors, Republican Sen. William Larkin and Democratic Assemblywoman Amy Paulin, agreed, and Ms. Paulin said in a statement that New York has one of the most-restrictive rules on pension buy-backs in the nation.

### 'Small Price to Pay'

"Allowing veterans to improve their retirement to assure a greater financial security is a small price to pay for all they have done," Senator Larkin said in a statement. "I believe it is an absolute shame that our Afghanistan veterans and those who have fought in other recent conflicts are not eligible for this military service credit in New York State due to the current law."

But Mr. Harrington said he was concerned that Mayor de Blasio, who opposed the bill last year as too expensive, would again help sway the decision.

His legislative affairs director, Sherif Soliman, wrote in a memo that buy-backs should be restricted to those who "risked their lives during periods of war," and that workers should pay both the employer and employee contributions. (Under the bill, Tier 6 members would pay 6 percent of their current year's salary for up to three years of service to cover the employee portion, and members of other tiers would pay 3 percent.)



WILLIAM LARKIN: Current situation 'a shame.'

Mr. Soliman called the bill too expensive, citing the City

Actuary's estimate that it would cost \$15.7 million per year. He added that "every dollar spent to fund benefit enhancements means one less dollar for the city's discretionary budget which is used to fund essential services."

The Mayor also predicted that too many senior officials might retire if the bill passed, particularly law-enforcement officers.

Andrew Buder, Deputy Counsel to Ms. Paulin, said last week that he has no indication of whether the Governor would sign the bill.