

SENATE MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION No. 64

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: JUNE 13, 2024

The Senate Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee reports favorably Senate Joint Resolution No. 64.

This resolution designates July 18 of each year as “Sergeant William Harvey Carney Day” in New Jersey.

William Harvey Carney was born into slavery on February 29, 1840 in Virginia, but was granted freedom after his father, who had escaped through the Underground Railroad, was able to buy his family’s freedom and move them to Massachusetts. Wishing to fight in the American Civil War, Mr. Carney joined the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in 1863, which was one of the first African-American regiments in the United States organized during the Civil War and the first official black unit recruited to fight for the Union.

During the July 18, 1863 attack on Fort Wagner in South Carolina, with the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry leading the attack in their first major combat mission, Mr. Carney witnessed his unit’s color guard shot and killed. Upon seeing this, Mr. Carney grasped the flag, led the way to the parapet, and planted the colors until the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry was forced to fall back, but even then he continued to carry the flag leading him to become severely wounded. Despite his severe wounds, Mr. Carney guarded the symbol of a united America with his life and kept it flying high throughout the battle, refusing to relinquish it to anyone other than a fellow 54th soldier upon return to the Union barracks.

Despite their contributions to the Union war efforts, with the bravery and valor of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry noted to have convinced many politicians and Army officers of the value of black soldiers and prompting the further enlistment of black soldiers, the regiment faced discrimination from their inception. In recognition of his bravery, Mr. Carney was promoted to the rank of sergeant and was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor in 1900. Mr. Carney was not only one of the few recipients to earn a Congressional Medal of Honor while fighting on American soil, but also the first African-American to be awarded this honor.

The bravery of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, along with its individual soldiers like Mr. Carney, have been immortalized in various mediums, including the song “Boys the Old Flag Never

Touched the Ground” and the 1989 film *Glory*. The bravery of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and Mr. Carney should be memorialized by a day that recognizes their triumphs not only on the battlefield, but also over racial discrimination and biases.

This bill was prefiled for introduction in the 2024-2025 session pending technical review. As reported, the bill includes the changes required by technical review, which has been performed.