



DAVE MURPHY

State Representative • 56th Assembly District

March 23, 2023

Chairman Edming and Members of the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs.

Thank you for holding a public hearing on **Assembly Bill 8**, which would expand veterans benefits to individuals who served in Laos in support of the United States during the Vietnam War. Senator Jacque and I are re-introducing this legislation to recognize the sacrifice and bravery of Hmong and other Laotian soldiers who fought on the side of liberty decades ago.

During the Vietnam War, the United States clandestinely recruited and armed more than 40,000 ethnic Hmong and other Laotian fighters in their battle against North Vietnamese and Laotian communist forces in what is known as the “Secret War” in Laos. Organized into Special Guerilla Units, these brave soldiers provided vital intelligence, air rescue for downed American pilots and direct engagement in combat operations in service to our country, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives.

At the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975, the communist regime in Laos began to brutally persecute these U.S. allies, and approximately 150,000 Laotian Hmong eventually entered the U.S. as refugees, including service members from the Special Guerilla Units. However, due to their lack of official “veteran” status, these fighters have not been eligible for any Wisconsin veteran benefits. Currently, Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the U.S., and it is estimated that there are as many as 1,000 Hmong veterans living in Wisconsin.

This legislation has enjoyed strong bi-partisan support in the past and would expand the state definition of “veteran” in Wisconsin statute to include individuals who honorably served in Special Guerilla Units operating in Laos from February 28, 1961 to May 7, 1975 under the exemptions enumerated in the “Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 2000” to qualify for state veteran benefits.

While we can’t control the federal qualifications for veteran status, we do control Wisconsin standards for state veteran program eligibility, including the Assistance to Needy Veterans Grant, professional and occupational licensure fee waivers, veterans employment assistance, military funeral aid honors, the veteran identifier on Wisconsin driver’s licenses and ID cards, and the veterans education grant.

Most importantly, this legislation provides long overdue recognition and appreciation for the bravery and sacrifice of these unsung heroes. This legislation has been supported by the Wisconsin Lao Veterans of America, the Wisconsin VFW, the Hmong American Partnership, Hmong Cultural and Community Agency, Former Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs

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Secretary Daniel Zimmerman, and the National Association of Social Workers - Wisconsin Chapter. It honors the courage and extraordinary sacrifice of these unsung heroes who put their lives on the line for the values and beliefs that we revere as Americans, who repeatedly risked their lives to save American sailors and soldiers. We have an opportunity to amend our statutes and ensure that their service to freedom and our country will not be forgotten.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to address any questions you may have.



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Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs

Senator André Jacque

March 23, 2023

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members for holding this public hearing on Assembly Bill 8, the Hmong and Laotian Veteran Recognition Act.

During the Vietnam War, the United States clandestinely recruited and armed more than 40,000 ethnic Hmong and other Laotian fighters in their battle against North Vietnamese and Laotian communist forces in what is known as the “Secret War” in Laos. Organized into Special Guerilla Units, these brave soldiers provided vital intelligence, air rescue for downed American pilots and direct engagement in combat operations in service to our country, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives.

Assembly Bill 8/Senate Bill 17 - a re-introduction of 2021 SB 23/AB 48) - recognizes the sacrifices and honor the bravery of these Hmong and other Laotian soldiers who fought on the side of liberty decades ago. At the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975, the communist regime in Laos began to brutally persecute these U.S. allies, and approximately 150,000 Laotian Hmong eventually entered the U.S. as refugees, including service members from the Special Guerilla Units. However, due to their lack of official “veteran” status, these fighters have not been eligible for any Wisconsin veteran benefits. Currently, Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the U.S., and it is estimated that there are as many as 1,000 Hmong veterans living in Wisconsin.

This legislation has enjoyed strong bi-partisan support and would expand the state definition of “veteran” in Wisconsin statute to include individuals who honorably served in Special Guerilla Units operating in Laos from February 28, 1961 to May 7, 1975 under the exemptions enumerated in the “Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 2000” (dependent upon proper documentation and evidence, admission to the U.S. as a refugee from Laos, and a thorough review from the U.S. Department of Defense) to qualify for state veteran benefits, programs, and services (except for admission to a state veterans home and burial in a veterans cemetery due to federal regulations).

While we can’t control the federal qualifications for veteran status, we do control Wisconsin standards for state veteran program eligibility, including the Assistance to Needy Veterans Grant, professional and occupational licensure fee waivers, veterans employment assistance, military funeral aid honors, the veteran identifier on Wisconsin driver’s licenses and ID cards, and the veterans education grant. Admittedly, the most

significant impact of this legislation is not one of financial benefits but of the respect finally conveyed not just in words, but in Wisconsin law.

Most importantly, this legislation provides long overdue recognition and appreciation for the bravery and sacrifice of these unsung heroes. This legislation has been supported by the Wisconsin Lao Veterans of America, the Wisconsin VFW, the Hmong American Partnership, Hmong Cultural and Community Agency, Former Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Daniel Zimmerman, and the National Association of Social Workers - Wisconsin Chapter. It honors the courage and extraordinary sacrifice of these unsung heroes who put their lives on the line for the values and beliefs that we revere as Americans, who repeatedly risked their lives to save American sailors and soldiers. We have an opportunity to correct our statutes and ensure that their service to freedom and our country will not be forgotten.

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 8. I'm happy to answer any questions committee members may have.