

STATE REPRESENTATIVE
CHRISTINE SINICKI

Senate Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
Testimony regarding Senate Bill 693:
free state park admission for veterans and Gold Star families.

February 14, 2024

Chairman Stafsholt and members of this Committee:

Thank you very much hearing Senate Bill 693, a bill that would allow our veterans and their families to enter Wisconsin state parks as a benefit in recognition of their service and sacrifice.

Under current law, anyone interested in visiting a state park or recreational area must first buy an annual state park sticker. This bipartisan bill would allow current veterans and Gold Star Families to enter state parks without having to purchase the park sticker.

Created during World War I, the title Gold Star recognizes family members who lost a loved one in military service. Today, immediate family members (parent, sibling, spouse, or child) receive a Gold Star from the federal Department of Defense, to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Veterans and Gold Star Families already have free admission to federal parks, but not state parks. This bill would simply make Wisconsin law match federal law. We agree that it makes sense to amend the bill to limit it to Wisconsin veterans and Gold Star families.

Please recognize veterans and families of those who have sacrificed their lives for us by supporting Senate Bill 693. Thank you.

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DIANNE H. HESSELBEIN

STATE SENATOR • SENATE DISTRICT 27

Testimony of Sen. Dianne Hesselbein
Committee on Forestry, Parks and Outdoor Recreation
SB 693: Free state park admission for veterans and gold star families.
February 14, 2024

Chairman Stafsholt and members of the Committee:

Thank you for holding this public hearing on Senate Bill 693.

We all enjoy the wonderful state parks that Wisconsin has to offer. As you know, anyone interested in visiting a state park or recreational land is required to purchase a state park sticker.

This is a simple bill that allows current Veterans and Gold Star Families in Wisconsin to enjoy our state parks and land without having to buy a park sticker. Initiated during World War I, the title Gold Star distinguishes a family member who lost a loved one in military service. Today, immediate family members (parent, sibling, spouse, or child) receive a Gold Star from the Department of Defense, to honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

As a member of the VFW, I have heard from several veterans wondering why Veterans and Gold Star Families have free admission for federal parks, but not state parks.

Please join me in supporting families of those who have sacrificed their lives for us and support SB 693.



Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage

2024 Senate Bill 693

Fee State Park Admission for Veterans and Gold Star Families

February 14, 2024

Good afternoon, Chair Stafsholt and members of the Committee. My name is Chris Pedretti, and I am the Business Operations Section Supervisor for the Wisconsin State Park System for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, for informational purposes, on Senate Bill 693 (SB 693), related to the waiver of fees for admission to state parks for Veterans and Gold Star Families.

The department supports efforts to increase public access to the many outdoor recreation activities available throughout Wisconsin. Under SB 693, the department would waive the admission fees required to enter State Park System properties for all Veterans and Gold Star Families. The department supports and thanks all Veterans who have served our country and Gold Star families whose members have made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country. Allowing access to the State Park System for these Veterans and families can certainly have a positive impact in their daily lives.

Currently, the State Park System manages a free admission program for disabled Veterans. If enacted, we would suggest a similar format for implementing this bill. Under this scenario, an application form could be submitted by the Veteran or Gold Star Family. A DNR staff member would then manage these applications and issue an admission pass that can be shown at entrance stations or displayed in vehicles as valid proof of admission. This would require additional staff time within the state park central office to manage the program and process the applications. This program would have minimal impact on property staff or law enforcement staff as they would manage this admission like the current disabled Veteran program.

Once again, we are always very diligent to keep the self-funded model of our State Park System in mind so that we can ensure we provide the best outdoor recreation experience for all of our visitors. It is difficult to know exactly what the revenue impact would be for this program. We used a formula based on our admission revenue for fiscal year 2023 for residents and nonresidents and then applied a percentage based on participation rates by the general population and percent of Veterans and Gold Star families. It is estimated that the program could result in an estimated net loss of just over \$1 million annually in resident and nonresident annual and daily admission. If the introduced amendment is adopted and the waiver is limited to residents, the fiscal impact would be lessened, though still significant. A sum sufficient transfer from the general fund, similar to the approach taken by the Governor when including admission waivers in his biennial budget request, would help offset the financial impacts of this bill. Additionally, due to the large number of applications that would need to be processed, the department would also ask for additional funding for staffing in the amount of \$50,620.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, I would like to thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.