

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1384

As Reported by House Committee On:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans

Title: An act relating to providing access to parks to all Washington veterans.

Brief Description: Providing access to parks to all Washington veterans.

Sponsors: Representatives Shavers, Eslick, Doglio, Ramel, Gregerson and Leavitt.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Innovation, Community & Economic Development, & Veterans: 1/25/23, 2/10/23 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Provides certain Washington veterans that receive Washington Basic Food benefits a pass that entitles the holder to free admission to any state park.
- Requires the Parks and Recreation Commission to conduct a study of its discount pass programs by September 24, 2024.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INNOVATION, COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, & VETERANS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 15 members: Representatives Ryu, Chair; Donaghy, Vice Chair; Rule, Vice Chair; Volz, Ranking Minority Member; Barnard, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Chambers, Christian, Corry, Cortes, Paul, Senn, Shavers, Street, Waters and Ybarra.

Staff: Cassie Jones (786-7303).

Background:

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The Washington Parks and Recreation Commission (State Parks) manages recreation at over 120 state parks. State Parks charges admission and camping fees for state park access. Under park passes programs, State Parks issues different park passes for specially designated groups that qualify for discounts or exemptions from park fees. One of these passes is the Disabled Veteran Lifetime Pass. The Disabled Veteran Lifetime Pass entitles any state resident who is a veteran with at least a 30 percent service-connected disability to free use of campsites within state parks, free admission to state parks, and exemption from reservation fees.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

A resident of Washington who is a veteran and receives benefits from the Washington Basic Food Program (Basic Food) is entitled to receive a pass that entitles the holder to free admission to any state park. The pass is valid for five years from the date of issuance and may be renewed every five years. A veteran that has been subject to entry-level separation, bad conduct discharge, dishonorable discharge, or officer dismissal is not eligible for the pass.

State Parks must conduct a comprehensive study of the discount pass programs. The study must review and analyze the following:

- data on the utilization of discount passes, including a review of any gaps in utilization data and any challenges associated with tracking usage;
- any challenges in administering discount pass programs and policy options for improving the operation, efficiency, and sustainability of the programs; and
- policy options for expanding the discount pass programs to additional groups, including all Washington veterans, with consideration for increasing access to state parks in an equitable manner.

State Parks must report on the results of the study to the Governor and the relevant committees of the Legislature by September 1, 2024.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The substitute bill makes the following changes to the original bill:

- restores current law related to the Lifetime Veterans Disability Pass and removes provisions related to the Lifetime Veterans Pass;
- provides that a Washington veteran who is receiving benefits from Basic Food is entitled to receive a pass, valid for 5 years, that entitles the holder to free admission to any state park;
- makes veterans that have been subject to entry-level separation, bad conduct discharge, dishonorable discharge, or officer dismissal ineligible for the pass that entitles veterans receiving Basic Food benefits to free admission to state parks; and
- requires the State Parks and Recreation Commission to conduct a study of its discount

pass programs by September 1, 2024.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This bill will improve the lives of all veterans. After retirement from the military, there are many unknowns related to housing, education, work, medical needs, and family support. There are numerous studies that conclude that exposure to nature will have cognitive benefits, specifically memory, and improving mental and physical well-being. Being outdoors creates a psychological and physiological response that lowers stress levels. Visiting state parks is another tool for veterans to use for dealing with mental hardship and challenges they may have faced during their military career. This bill removes the condition that Washington veterans have a service-connected disability in order to be awarded free admission and renames the pass Veteran Lifetime Pass. This a great opportunity to reward veterans for their tireless service while giving them some relief at home.

Washington has 550,000 veterans in the state. Increasing access to state parks gives veterans a chance to get out, reconnect with peers, and increase physical fitness. Research shows that behavioral health is improved by participation in outdoor activities. State parks help veterans get outdoors while minimizing exposure to large crowds which can be a concern for veterans. The benefits from providing state parks access to veterans may outweigh the costs to the state budget.

(Opposed) This bill sets veterans aside as a special class of citizen. There are already generous benefits for veterans including medical benefits and job hiring preferences. This bill might show the state's appreciation for veterans' service, but the country already shows its appreciation. After State Parks transitioned to a self-funded system, many policies were adopted to make access to state parks more equitable, including free days, free passes for volunteers, and library passes. Veterans with a disability can get free reserved camping. There have been major challenges with this pass. A lifetime pass for all veterans would compound these problems. A vote for this bill will cut State Parks' budget.

(Other) The bill will cause a significant loss of revenue to State Parks. State parks is largely self-funded through earned revenue. The bill is well-intentioned and provides benefits to veterans and there is support for honoring their service. There have been significant issues with the existing Disabled Veteran Lifetime Pass. Free reservations cause

some to make speculative reservations that they do not use. Managing a lifetime pass is also challenging; it is unclear how many passes are active and which individuals are still residents. The bill is not aligned with State Parks equity goals in which State Parks would work with the Office of Equity to review changes to the pass programs. There is interest in exploring more sustainable ways to honor veterans.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Clyde Shavers, prime sponsor; and Anthony Varela, Veterans Legislative Coalition.

(Opposed) Stetson Palmer, Friends of Schafer and Lake Sylvia.

(Other) Owen Rowe, Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: Trina Young, Friends of Schafer and Lake Sylvia.