



Veterans of Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos

Overview for the House Veterans and Military Affairs Committee – February 18, 2026

Ben Johnson | Deputy Commissioner of Programs & Services

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Overview

Minn. Laws 2025, Chapter 30 created a new section of state statute recognizing Veterans of the Secret War in Laos who served with Special Guerrilla Units (SGU) or other irregular forces. The new sections of law establish the definition of a Veteran of the Secret War in Laos and makes these Veterans eligible for specific State Veterans benefits including:

- Veteran designation on Minnesota drivers' licenses and Minnesota ID cards
- Honor Guards from Congressionally Chartered Veteran Service Organizations can be reimbursed by MDVA for providing services at the funeral of a deceased Veteran
- Burial privileges at State Veterans Cemeteries
- Grave markers purchased by MDVA and distributed through County Veterans Service Offices or Veterans Service Organizations
- Veterans Preference in hiring and promotion for public employment; a permissive preference applies to non-public employment
- Free copies of vital records for the Veteran, surviving spouse, or next of kin
- Limited exemption from expiration dates for renewal of professional licenses, motor vehicle registration & drivers' licenses
- Eligibility for the Honor and Remember flag



Criteria 1 & SGU Task Force Establishment

Under the new law passed during the 2025 Legislative Session, Minnesota residents who were naturalized under the Federal Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000 became eligible for benefits effective August 1, 2025.

For those that did not qualify under the above criteria, the law directed the creation of the Veterans of the Special Guerrilla Units and Irregular Forces in Laos Advisory Task Force.

The Task Force was charged with developing recommendations to the Minnesota Legislature regarding eligibility criteria and verification protocols for the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs to determine Veteran status for individuals who claim to have served in the Secret War in Laos with a SGU or other irregular forces.

These recommendations were delivered in a report to the Chairs of the Veterans and Military Affairs Committee on February 10th 2026.



Advisory Task Force Members

MDVA Deputy Commissioner Ben Johnson - The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs Commissioner, or a designee*

Mr. Trent Dilks (DAV of MN) - A representative of the MN Commanders Task Force (CTF) designated by the CTF

Mr. Tou T. Yang - A Hmong American Minnesota resident who served in the United States armed forces

Mr. Gia T. Lee - A veteran of a special guerrilla unit or irregular forces in Laos

Mr. Tong Vang - A veteran of a special guerrilla unit or irregular forces in Laos

Mr. Bill Strusinski - A United States armed forces veteran who served on active duty in Vietnam during the Vietnam War

Mr. Scott Walker - A member with expertise in the history of allied irregular and surrogate forces

Mr. William F. Roleau - A member with direct experience in United States intelligence or special operations in SE Asia

Mr. Stephen (Tim) Kirk - A member with direct experience in Military Assistance Command Vietnam SF operations

Rep. Ethan Cha - A member appointed by the MN House Democratic-Farmer-Labor leader

Rep. Bidal Duran - A member appointed by the Speaker of the MN House of Representatives

Sen. Jeff Howe - A member appointed by the MN Senate Minority Leader

Sen. Susan Pha - A member appointed by the MN Senate Majority Leader*

** During the first TF meeting, Senator Pha was elected Chair of the Advisory Task Force and Deputy Commissioner Johnson was elected Vice Chair.*



Advisory Task Force Process & Outcomes

The Advisory Task Force met eight times in a hybrid format:

- Meeting # 1 – September 30th, 2025
- Meeting # 2 – October 20th, 2025
- Meeting # 3 – October 27th, 2025
- Meeting # 4 – November 13th, 2025
- Meeting # 5 – November 24th, 2025
- Meeting # 6 – December 10th, 2025
- Meeting # 7 – December 19th, 2025
- Meeting # 8 – January 15th, 2026

Over the course of these meetings, the Task Force members worked to develop recommended eligibility criteria and verification protocols informed by briefings from MDVA staff, outside subject-matter experts, Veterans of the Secret War in Laos, and representatives from the National Cemetery Administration.



Technical Change Recommendations

Prior to the start of the Task Force, MDVA identified four areas of the enabling legislation that should be updated in any bill that updates the session law to include new protocols and eligibility criteria:

- Inclusion of a burial fee reference to Minnesota Statutes § 197.236, Subd 9 (State Veterans Cemeteries).
- Update Veterans' Preference benefits to include Minnesota Statutes §§ 43A.09 (Recruitment), 43A.11 (Veterans Preference), 43A.111 (Noncompetitive Appointment of Certain Disabled Veterans [Veterans Preference for Minnesota State Agency Hiring]), 197.46 (Veterans Preference Act; Removal Forbidden; Right of Mandamus), 197.48 (Application [no local ordinance can supersede the Veterans Preference Act]), and 197.481 (Enforcement of Veterans Preference through MDVA Commissioner).
- Remove reference to Minnesota Statutes § 197.65 (Renewal of Professional License, Motor Vehicle Registration, and Driver's License). Provisions apply to persons serving in or having recently been separated or discharged from active military service. Veterans of the Secret War in Laos do not fall under these categories of service-member.
- Remove reference to Minnesota Statutes § 197.987 (Honor and Remember Flag).



Protocol & Eligibility Criteria Recommendation

Eligibility for State Veterans Benefits and Privileges Protocol – Veterans of the Secret War in Laos:

- Establishes procedures for determining eligibility for state veterans benefits and privileges.
- Eligibility for benefits requires applicants to pre-file for burial with the National Cemetery Administration (VA).
- Minnesota County Veteran Service Officers or MDVA staff must assist applicants in completing form.
- After VA determines eligibility, applicant must provide a copy of the determination letter to MDVA. Upon verification, MDVA will issue the applicant a Certificate of Eligibility qualifying them for state benefits

Special Consideration by the Commissioner:

- If the application does not receive a positive determination from the National Cemetery Administration, applicants may request special consideration by the MDVA Commissioner and submit a packet of forms and documentation. (90 days)
- If the MDVA Commissioner denies issuance of a Certificate of Eligibility, the applicant may submit a written request for a contested case hearing to challenge the determination of their Veteran status. (60 days)

Deadline for eligibility determination applications will be accepted until December 31, 2030.



Key Considerations & Closing

The Task Force recommendations are not final.

Any changes must be enacted through Legislative process and signed by the Governor. Upon enactment of the law, Veterans of the Secret War in Laos who meet the established criteria will be eligible to access the identified benefits and privileges

The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs stands ready to work with the Minnesota Legislature during the 2026 Legislative Session to provide additional information on the activities and recommendation to the Task Force, to support the development and enactment of updates and changes.

The Department has an SGU Page on its website with information on the enabling legislation, the Task Force Report and Appendices as well as recordings of all eight Task Force Meetings and meeting materials.

<https://mn.gov/mdva/news/sgu/>



MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Questions?

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