



Greetings, Mr. Chair and members, Representative Rehm. On behalf of The American Legion Department of Minnesota, thank you bringing forward this bill. It was the idea of one of our members, Mike Schachterle, who approached his lawmakers in both the House and Senate to produce this bill. Veterans and Legionnaires especially tend to be very civically engaged. This is a great example of elected officials being responsive to their constituency, so I'd like to acknowledge that and highlight this as a success story.

This bill would provide free access to disabled veterans into the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. While this bill is not on the official Legion platform, it is in line with other things we are trying to get done. For years, veterans service organizations have been working with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to advocate waiving license fees for veterans (regardless of disability) for hunting, trapping and fishing licenses, to give veterans the health benefits that come from the great outdoors. I think people outside the veterans community normally picture a disabled veteran to be someone who has lost limbs or who is constrained to a wheelchair. While this is certainly true, mental health can be the disability a veteran is facing and represents the lion's share of VA benefits claims I have personally worked in my day job as an assistant county veteran service officer focused on high-need veterans. I cannot emphasize enough the mental health benefits of being among plants, nature trails, flowers, and trees. We truly have a gem right here in the southern metro in the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

Regarding identification to prove a veteran's service-connected disability for free admission, a picture ID issued by the Veterans Health Administration would be needed. Veterans who have been through the process of applying for their VA disability compensation benefits usually with the help of a veterans service organization or a county veteran service officer, and who are enrolled in VA medical services, can visit the enrollment desk at their local VA Medical Center to request an ID card. They have to produce a couple forms of documentation similar to how you would for a state-issued ID.

Not all these veterans will have the VA Health Administration ID showing their disability because not all veterans use VHA services and choose to use private medical services and therefore do not have a reason to go into the local VA medical center. It might be good to consider allowing a combination of state-issued ID along with the VA Benefits Administration annual tax abatement letter that they send veterans each May to document their annual compensation. It does not display sensitive medical information, but it does verify they have a service-connected disability. Then ID would not be a barrier to veterans accessing the benefit and that seems in line with the spirit of the bill.

The Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs annual report showed 294,232 total Minnesota veterans. Vietnam war era veterans represent the largest number, 94,073, and we have almost 50,000 Post 9-11 era veterans, which is my generation. One hundred five veterans died by suicide in Minnesota last year, which is typical for how many people we usually lose to suicide each year in this state. I mention this again because of the positive mental health impacts nature can provide which is the focus of this bill. This would be a suicide prevention measure, and frankly we need every resource possible to throw at this problem.

In terms of the cost of this bill, it would be hard to estimate how much revenue would be lost from providing this free admission, where the rate is currently set at \$15 per adult non-member. I

Contact: Kristy Janigo, The American Legion Department of Minnesota Legislative Chair,
Phone: 612-708-9029 **Email:** Kristy.janigo@gmail.com

visited the VA's National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics website to provide a few more estimations for you today. As of September 30, 2020, 100,158 Minnesota veterans were receiving VA disability compensation, or roughly a third of Minnesota veterans.

The arboretum receives around 600,000 visitors each year. The number of veterans in Minnesota represents about five percent of the total population. Applying five percent to 600,000 is around 30,000 Minnesota veterans who feasibly visit the arboretum each year. Then, cut that number in third for veterans with service-connected disabilities, and you have around 10,000 veterans. The cost could be around \$150,000 in lost admissions revenues to allow disabled Minnesota veterans free entry, but likely would end up being less than that as veterans are humble people and often do not take advantage of all their benefits to save them for "the guy who needs it most."

Thanks again Mr. Chair, members, and Representative Rehm. I am happy to stand for any questions.

-Dr. Kristy Janigo

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Kristy Janigo".

The American Legion Department of Minnesota Legislative Chair

Contact: Kristy Janigo, The American Legion Department of Minnesota Legislative Chair,
Phone: 612-708-9029 **Email:** Kristy.janigo@gmail.com