

Date of Hearing: June 17, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

SB 55 (Umberg) – As Amended March 26, 2025

SENATE VOTE: 38-0

SUBJECT: State parks: facilities pass: Gold Star Family members

SUMMARY: Requires the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks), upon presentation of eligibility, to issue a pass to a Gold Star Family member for use of all facilities in units of the state park system. Specifically, **this bill**:

- 1) Defines eligible Gold Star Family members as a person who is:
 - a) A resident of California; and
 - b) Eligible to receive a Gold Star Lapel Button.
- 2) Authorizes State Parks to adopt regulations to implement this bill.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the California state park system and vests State Parks with control of the state park system and responsibility for administering, protecting, developing, and interpreting state parks for the use and enjoyment of the public. Requires State Parks to protect the state park system from damage and to preserve the peace therein [Public Resources Code (PRC) § 5001 *et seq.*].
- 2) Limits attendance at the state park system to within the limits established by carrying capacity (PRC § 5001.96, § 5019.5).
- 3) Authorizes State Parks to collect fees, rents, and returns for use of any state park system area with some exceptions including:
 - a) Prohibits State Parks from collecting any fee from students in kindergarten through 12th grade on a school outing (PRC § 5010.2);
 - b) Authorizes State Parks to provide discounted passes to certain groups of people including fourth graders, seniors over the age of 62, disabled persons, and low-income residents, as defined (PRC § 5010.2.5, § 5011); and
 - c) Authorizes State Parks to issue a reduced-fee or free day-use permit to veterans, active duty military, and reserve military personnel on Memorial Day and Veterans Day (PRC § 5011.5, § 5011.6).
- 4) Allows the Department of Veterans Affairs to sponsor a Gold Star Family specialized license plate program and issue a license plate for a vehicle owned by an eligible Gold Star Family member (Vehicle Code § 5156).

- 5) Requires the National Park and Federal Recreational Lands Pass to be made available, at no charge, for the lifetime of the pass holder, to any member of a Gold Star family who meets the eligibility requirements of section 3.2 of Department of Defense Instruction 1348.36, and other listed persons (U.S. Code Title 16 § 6804).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** According to the author, “Currently, California law offers free state park access to certain veterans, and the federal government extends similar benefits to Gold Star Families for national parks and public lands. However, our state has yet to extend this recognition at the state level. By passing [this bill], we align California with several other states that already provide this benefit, ensuring that Gold Star Families have access to outdoor spaces that can offer healing, reflection, and recreation.

[This bill] is not just about access—it’s about honoring sacrifice, supporting mental well-being, and demonstrating that California stands with those who have lost loved ones in service to our nation. I urge my colleagues to support this bill and help us provide a lasting tribute to the families who have given so much.”

- 2) **Background.** There are 280 park units (beaches, historic sites, museums, off-highway vehicle recreation areas, parks, etc.) in the state park system. At most parks, day use fees are charged for vehicle day use only with no charge to walk or bike into the parks. Most historical parks and museums charge a day use fee per person.

Discounted passes. State Parks offers several forms of discounted pass. These include a Disabled Discount Pass (\$3.50), a California State Parks Golden Bear Pass for low income individuals (no cost), a California State Parks Senior Golden Bear Pass (\$20), and a Distinguished Veteran Pass (no cost). Distinguished veterans are considered honorably discharged war veterans with 50% or greater service-connected disability, individuals held as prisoners of war, or recipients of the Medal of Honor. There are also two free entry programs including the (1) California State Parks Adventure Pass that provides free entry for fourth graders and their families at 19 state parks throughout the state and (2) the California State Parks Library Pass that provides free passes to every public library throughout the state so library patrons can check out passes for free vehicle day-use access to parks across the state. All free and discounted passes are generally provided by a pass, with the exception being that active duty and reserve military personnel and veterans receive free entry to most park units upon proof of service on Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

Gold Star Families. The phrase “Gold Star Family” dates back to World War I when military families displayed service flags featuring a blue star for every immediate family member serving in the Armed Forces. If the Service member died in the line of duty, the blue star was changed to gold and eligible next of kin received a gold star lapel button in adherence to the U.S. Department of Defense guidelines. According to Section 1126 of Title 10 of the United States Code, service members who lost their life during World War I, World War II, while engaged in action against opposing foreign forces, or as a result of an international terrorist attack or as a part of a peace keeping force, may qualify for a Gold Star Lapel Button.

By the numbers. According to the Gold Star Family Registry, which is “the first comprehensive database of the United States’ fallen Heroes,” since World War II, 32,447 California residents have lost their lives in the line of duty. Since not all Gold Star Family members are residents of the same state as their deceased loved ones, it is unclear how many California residents would qualify to receive a no-cost lifetime license.

The California Department of Veterans Affairs authorizes the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to issue Gold Star Family specialized license plates for vehicles owned by eligible Gold Star Family members (Vehicle Code § 5156). According to the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee analysis of this bill, as of February 4, 2025, the DMV has issued 636 Gold Star Family license plates. This may be the closest proxy for the number of individuals that might be interested in accessing parks.

Additionally, the popularity of the Distinguished Veterans Pass has been increasing over the last few years with 7,146 issued in 2024.

- 3) **Policy considerations.** According to the author, this bill will honor the sacrifice of Gold Star Families and provide additional access to therapeutic outdoor activities. Generally, time spent outdoors is believed to reduce stress and improve mental health.

While the fiscal impact of this bill is outside the scope of this committee’s jurisdiction, given previous legislative efforts aimed at stabilizing State Parks’ revenues, a broad-based, discounted fee day may run counter to the continued implementation of those reforms, as day-use fees are important to the financial stability of the park system. However, a reduced fee day could be viewed as complementary to other policies that encourage access to parks, which has been a priority for the Legislature in recent years. Additionally, free day use may encourage additional spending. According to data from the 2007–2009 Visitor Survey Report commissioned by State Parks, park visitors spend on average \$80.85 per visit, including \$31.32 within a 25 mile radius of the park and \$49.53 outside the 25-mile radius. Extrapolating from the 26 studied parks to park units statewide, state park visitors annually spend an estimated \$6 billion.¹

- 4) **Arguments in support.** Sons and Daughters in Touch (sponsor) write that “Gold Star Families [...] will embrace this gesture as a sign that California honors their families’ sacrifices.” Other organizations agree that this bill is “one of the ways a grateful state can honor those who gave their lives to protect our freedoms.”
- 5) **Double referral.** This bill is also referred to the Assembly Military and Veterans Affairs Committee.
- 6) **Related legislation.** AB 308 (Alanis) of 2024 was substantially similar to this bill. AB 308 was held in Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 2128 (Cooley) of 2022 would have required State Parks to grant 50% discounted admission to the general public to each unit of the state park system operated by State Parks

¹ Litzky, K. “California state parks: economic impact of visitor expenditures” Master of Public Policy and Administration, California State University, 2010.

every year on September 9th, California Admissions Day. AB 2128 was held in Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 1358 (Cooley) of 2018 would have provided 50% discounted admission to California State Parks on California Admission Day. AB 1358 was vetoed by Governor Brown. The veto message stated: “While this bill is well-intentioned, the department already has the authority to offer discounted or free park admissions to the public. Furthermore, for the past few years the department has worked closely with the Parks Forward Commission to develop initiatives to expand visitations, increase access, and ensure the system's long-term sustainability. The public and our state parks are better served by allowing the department the flexibility to manage its operations without mandates that may harm its fiscal stability.”

AB 240 (Wilk) of 2015 would have allowed free day use entry to state park to vehicles with specialized licenses plates for veterans who are high military honor recipients and Gold Star families. AB 240 was held in Senate Appropriations.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Sons and Daughters in Touch (Sponsor)
American Gold STAR Mothers, INC.
American Legion, Department of California
AMVETS, Department of California
California Association of County Veterans Service Officers
California State Commanders Veterans Council
East Bay Regional Park District
Military Officers Association of America, California Council of Chapters
Orange County Board of Supervisors
Vietnam Veterans of America, California State Council

Opposition

None on file

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