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Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs

Senator André Jacque

Assembly Bill 27

May 22, 2025

Chairman Penterman and Members of the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs:

During the Vietnam War, the United States clandestinely recruited and armed more than 40 thousand ethnic Hmong and other Laotian fighters in their battle against North Vietnamese and Laotian communist forces in what is known as the “Secret War” in Laos. Organized into Special Guerilla Units, these brave soldiers provided vital intelligence, air rescue for downed American pilots and direct engagement in combat operations in service to our country, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. The United States relied heavily on the Hmong Special Guerilla Units, although outnumbered by enemy forces, to intercept and prevent the flow of troops and war supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and fly thousands of deadly combat missions in support of the United States Armed Forces and Central Intelligence Agency. After the conclusion of the Vietnam War, thousands of Hmong soldiers suffered brutal acts of retribution and atrocities by the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Army, and approximately 150,000 Laotian Hmong eventually entered the U.S. as refugees, including service members from the Special Guerilla Units.

It is well past time that we recognize the sacrifices, honor and bravery of these Hmong and other Laotian soldiers who fought on the side of liberty decades ago. However, due to their lack of official “veteran” status, these fighters have not been eligible for any Wisconsin veteran benefits (with the exception of being allowed to have the veteran identifier on their Wisconsin driver’s license or ID card, enacted last session). Currently, Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the U.S., and second largest as a percent of our population, and it is estimated that there are as many as 1,000 Hmong veterans living in Wisconsin.

Assembly Bill 27 would expand the state definition of “veteran” in Wisconsin statute to include individuals who honorably served in Special Guerilla Units operating in Laos from February 28, 1961 to May 7, 1975 under the exemptions enumerated in the “Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 2000” (dependent upon proper documentation and evidence, admission to the U.S. as a refugee from Laos, and a thorough review from the U.S. Department of Defense) to qualify for state veteran benefits, programs, and services (except for admission to a state veterans home and burial in a veterans cemetery due to federal regulations). This legislation passed the State Senate on a broad bipartisan basis last week and is a reintroduction of 2023 Senate Bill 17/Assembly Bill 8, which passed the Assembly Veterans and Military Affairs Committee 13-0 last session. I appreciate the strong bipartisan co-sponsorship by a majority on this committee, among more than 50 legislators.

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While we can't control the federal qualifications for veteran status, we do control Wisconsin standards for state veteran program eligibility, including the Assistance to Needy Veterans Grant, professional and occupational licensure fee waivers, veterans' employment assistance, military funeral aid honors, and the veteran's education grant. As mentioned above, Wisconsin finally took the first step forward last session with the veteran identifier on Wisconsin driver's licenses and ID cards (2023 Act 205), and this legislation represents the consistent common-sense extension of the same standard to the other Wisconsin veterans' criteria. Admittedly, the most significant impact of this legislation is not one of financial benefits but of the respect finally conveyed not just in words, but in Wisconsin law.

Most importantly, this legislation provides long overdue recognition and appreciation for the bravery and sacrifice of these unsung heroes. As the son and nephew of veterans from the Vietnam War and having connected with many veterans from that era, I have found universal support for this change and can attest to the emotional gratitude and recollection they have for the sacrifice and bravery of our Hmong veterans.

This legislation has been formally supported by the Wisconsin Lao Veterans of America, the Wisconsin Department of the American Legion, the Wisconsin Department of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the County Veterans Service Officer Association of Wisconsin, the Hmong American Partnership, Hmong Cultural and Community Agency, current Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary-designee James Bond and former Secretary Daniel Zimmerman, Governor Tony Evers, and the National Association of Social Workers - Wisconsin Chapter. It honors the courage and extraordinary sacrifice of these unsung heroes who put their lives on the line for the values and beliefs that we revere as Americans, who repeatedly risked their lives to save American airmen, sailors and soldiers. **This legislation is not just a fix to a definition half a century overdue—it is a testament to shared sacrifice and enduring loyalty. It is a statement that in Wisconsin, we will remember those who fought for freedom, even when the world tried to forget them.**

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 27. I'm happy to answer any questions committee members may have.



DAVE MURPHY

State Representative • 56th Assembly District

May 21, 2025

Chairman Penterman and Members of the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs.

Thank you for holding a public hearing on **Assembly Bill 27**, which would expand veterans benefits to individuals who served in Laos in support of the United States during the Vietnam War. Senator Jacque and I are re-introducing this legislation to recognize the sacrifice and bravery of Hmong and other Laotian soldiers who fought on the side of liberty decades ago.

During the Vietnam War, the United States clandestinely recruited and armed more than 40,000 ethnic Hmong and other Laotian fighters in their battle against North Vietnamese and Laotian communist forces in what is known as the “Secret War” in Laos. Organized into Special Guerilla Units, these brave soldiers provided vital intelligence, air rescue for downed American pilots and direct engagement in combat operations in service to our country, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives.

At the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975, the communist regime in Laos began to brutally persecute these U.S. allies, and approximately 150,000 Laotian Hmong eventually entered the U.S. as refugees, including service members from the Special Guerilla Units. However, due to their lack of official “veteran” status, these fighters have not been eligible for any Wisconsin veteran benefits. Currently, Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the U.S., and it is estimated that there are as many as 1,000 Hmong veterans living in Wisconsin.

This legislation has enjoyed strong bi-partisan support in the past and would expand the state definition of “veteran” in Wisconsin statute to include individuals who honorably served in Special Guerilla Units operating in Laos from February 28, 1961 to May 7, 1975 under the exemptions enumerated in the “Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 2000” to qualify for state veteran benefits.

While we can’t control the federal qualifications for veteran status, we do control Wisconsin standards for state veteran program eligibility, including the Assistance to Needy Veterans Grant, professional and occupational licensure fee waivers, veteran’s employment assistance, military funeral aid honors, the veteran identifier on Wisconsin driver’s licenses and ID cards, and the veteran’s education grant.

Most importantly, this legislation provides long overdue recognition and appreciation for the bravery and sacrifice of these unsung heroes. This legislation has been supported by the Wisconsin Lao Veterans of America, the Wisconsin VFW, the Hmong American Partnership, Hmong Cultural and Community Agency, Former Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs

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Secretary Daniel Zimmerman, and the National Association of Social Workers - Wisconsin Chapter. It honors the courage and extraordinary sacrifice of these unsung heroes who put their lives on the line for the values and beliefs that we revere as Americans, who repeatedly risked their lives to save American sailors, marines, airmen and soldiers. We have an opportunity to amend our statutes and ensure that their service to freedom and our country will not be forgotten.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to address any questions you may have.



**Assembly Committee on Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs
May 22, 2025
Testimony on Assembly Bill 27**

Good afternoon, my name is Joey Hoey and I am the Assistant Deputy Secretary at the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. I want to start off by thanking Chairman Penterman and Committee members for providing this opportunity to testify in favor Senate Bill 2. I also want to thank Representative Murphy and Senator Jacque for bringing the bill forward, and all the other sponsors for signing on.

As you have heard, more than 40,000 ethnic Hmong and other Laotian fighters provided vital service to our country during the Vietnam War, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. After the war, many found themselves being persecuted, forced to flee. Almost 150,000 found their way to the United States as refugees and were naturalized pursuant to the Hmong Naturalization Act of 2000.

WDVA does our best to assist all of the men and women who step up and serve in, and with our military forces. Unfortunately, these brave individuals lack an official “veteran” status, and therefore are often not eligible for Wisconsin veteran benefits.

Secretary-designee Bond wanted me to extend his personal thanks to all the supporters of this bill for their efforts to both recognize the sacrifices and honor the bravery of the Hmong and other Laotian soldiers who fought on the side of liberty decades ago. Our team was excited by the change last session that allows these Hmong and Laotian soldiers to be able to have the veteran identifier on their Wisconsin driver’s license or ID card. And we look forward to being able to serve even more of these individuals when Assembly Bill 27 becomes law.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions anyone on the committee has.