
SENATE COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Bob Archuleta, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 1034 **Hearing Date:** 4/20/26
Author: McNerney
Version: 4/14/26 Amended
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Diego Nelson

Subject: Vehicles: special license plates

DESCRIPTION

Summary:

This bill expands the definition of “disabled veteran” for purposes of special license plates and requires the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to issue disabled veteran (DV) plates to veterans rated 100% permanent and total who also qualify for a disabled parking placard, regardless of whether the qualifying mobility condition is service connected.

Existing law:

- 1) Defines “disabled veteran” as a veteran who, as a result of military service:
 - a) Has a 100% disability rating related to a condition that impairs mobility.
 - b) Is unable to move without the aid of an assistive device.
 - c) Has specified severe conditions (e.g., loss of limb, blindness). (Vehicle Code § 295.7)
- 2) Requires DMV to issue special license plates at no cost to qualifying disabled veterans. (Vehicle Code § 5007)
- 3) Authorizes issuance of disabled parking placards to individuals with mobility limitations, based on a functional standard that includes persons who:
 - a) Have lost, or lost the use of, one or more lower extremities or both hands.
 - b) Have a significant limitation in the use of lower extremities.
 - c) Have a diagnosed disease or disorder that substantially impairs or interferes with mobility.
 - d) Are so severely disabled as to be unable to move without the aid of an assistive device.
 - e) Are blind.
 - f) Are suffering from lung disease.
 - g) Are suffering from cardiovascular disease. (Vehicle Code § 295.5)

This bill:

- 1) Expands the definition of “disabled veteran” to include veterans who have a condition that meets the eligibility requirements for a disabled person pursuant to Section 295.5 of the Vehicle Code.
- 2) Requires the DMV to issue Disabled Veteran (DV) plates to a veteran who is rated 100 percent permanent and total by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, without

regard to whether the veteran's mobility limitation is service connected, and who meets the eligibility requirements for a disabled parking placard.

BACKGROUND

Under current California law, disability-related parking benefits are administered through two separate legal frameworks that developed along different paths over time. The state's general disabled parking placard program is based on functional mobility limitations rather than the cause of the disability. A person may qualify for a placard if they are unable to walk without assistance, cannot walk a specified distance without stopping, or have another qualifying condition that substantially limits mobility. Because the standard focuses on the individual's present physical condition, eligibility does not depend on whether the disability is related to military service.

The Disabled Veteran plate program is narrower than the general disabled parking placard program and is reserved for veterans who meet service-connected disability requirements recognized by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Under current California law, DV plates provide three main benefits: parking privileges, an exemption from registration fees for one qualifying vehicle, and, if the vehicle is registered to a FasTrak or other eligible electronic toll account, an exemption from tolls on California toll roads, toll bridges, toll highways, vehicular crossings, and other toll facilities, except high-occupancy toll lanes as specified in Vehicle Code section 23301.3. State law also allows a county veterans service officer (CVSO), CalVet, or the VA to certify eligibility in place of the usual medical certification.

The VA may determine that a veteran is "100% disabled" in several different ways, and not all of them necessarily reflect the same type of disability or functional limitation. In some cases, the veteran has an actual 100% disability rating under the VA rating schedule. In others, the veteran is compensated at the 100% rate because service-connected disabilities prevent substantially gainful employment, even though the combined schedular rating is less than 100%. The VA may also determine that a total disability is permanent and not expected to improve or assign a temporary 100% rating for a limited period based on recovery from surgery, hospitalization, or a similar circumstance.

The main categories are as follows:

- **Schedular 100% rating**: The veteran has an actual 100% disability rating assigned by the VA under its rating schedule, either because a single condition is rated at 100% or because the combined rating reaches 100%.
- **Total Disability based on Individual Unemployability (TDIU)**: The veteran's service-connected disabilities prevent substantially gainful employment, so the VA pays compensation at the 100% rate even though the schedular rating is less than 100%.
- **Permanent and Total (P&T)**: The VA has determined that the veteran's total disability is permanent and not expected to improve. This is generally a status attached to a total disability rating rather than a separate rating percentage.
- **Temporary 100% rating**: The VA assigns a temporary total rating for a limited period when a veteran qualifies based on circumstances such as surgery, hospitalization, or immobilization related to a service-connected disability.

COMMENT

According to the author: “California prides itself for how it takes care of veterans, especially those who were seriously injured while defending our country or are disabled. But current California law discriminates against disabled veterans by making it tougher for them to access parking benefits. For many veterans, a DV license plate is not merely a parking accommodation, it is a symbol of service, sacrifice, and earned recognition. Without parity in California law, disabled veterans will continue to face barriers in accessing parking benefits to which they should be entitled. SB 1034 ensures parity for disabled veterans seeking to obtain disabled veterans parking placards from the DMV.”

Under current law, the DMV treats DV plate eligibility as a veteran-specific benefit tied to the definition of “disabled veteran” as specified in Vehicle Code section 295.7. State law also requires the DMV to accept, in lieu of an otherwise required medical certification, a certificate from a CVSO, CalVet, or the United States Department of Veterans Affairs confirming that the applicant qualifies as a disabled veteran for purposes of receiving a DV plate. In practice, CVSOs commonly help verify whether the veteran has a 100% VA disability rating and whether the qualifying mobility limitation is service connected before the application is submitted to DMV. Under the status quo, a veteran who is rated 100% permanent and total but does not have a service-connected mobility limitation would not qualify for a DV plate solely based on the rating.

This bill raises a broader policy question about whether the Disabled Veteran plate program should remain a veteran-specific benefit tied to service-connected disability or instead move closer to the general disabled parking placard program. By cross-referencing Vehicle Code section 295.5, the bill could blur the distinction between those two standards and shift the DV plate program away from the narrower service-connected framework that has historically set it apart. The bill could also create uncertainty in the CVSO verification process. CVSOs have traditionally verified veteran status, VA disability ratings, and whether the qualifying condition is service connected. If the program begins to incorporate the broader disability criteria used for placards, it may become less clear what CVSOs are expected to certify at the front end of the application process.

At the same time, a broader eligibility standard could make the program more useful to some veterans with serious mobility impairments who do not qualify under the current approach. In practice, the current framework is narrower, and some veterans may have substantial day-to-day mobility limitations but still fall outside the DV plate program because their condition is not recognized as qualifying in the required way for DV plate purposes.

SB 1034 could expand access for veterans who are rated 100% permanent and total and who face significant difficulty walking or traveling independently, but whose mobility impairment is not currently treated as service connected for purposes of DV plate eligibility. This bill could improve access to parking and vehicle-related benefits for a group of veterans whose transportation needs are real and substantial, even if they do not fit neatly within the program’s traditional service-connected framework. It therefore presents a policy tradeoff: broadening the program may make it more responsive to veterans with serious mobility challenges, while also moving it away from the narrower veteran-specific standard that has historically defined the DV plate benefit.

Previous legislation

AB 1882 (Villapudua, 2024) would have expanded the definition of “disabled veteran” for Vehicle Code purposes by cross-referencing criteria like those used for disabled parking placards, including specified mobility- and vision-based conditions. The bill was held in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

Amendments

The author amended SB 1034 to delete the Section 1 language listing eligibility criteria based on the standards for disabled parking placards and instead cross-references Vehicle Code Section 295.5, which defines a disabled person using specified criteria.

POSITIONS

Sponsor: Department of California Disabled Americans Veterans

Support: American Legion, Department of California
Amvets, Department of California
California State Commanders Veterans Council
Military Officers Association of America, California Council of Chapters
Vietnam Veterans of America, California State Council

Oppose: None

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