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# SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Josh Becker, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

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**Bill No:** SB 893 **Hearing Date:** March 24, 2026  
**Author:** Seyarto  
**Version:** January 15, 2026 Introduced  
**Urgency:** No **Fiscal:** Yes  
**Consultant:** Genevieve Wong

**Subject:** State parks: facilities pass: Gold Star Family members

## SUMMARY

This bill would require the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) to issue a pass for use of all facilities, including boat launching facilities, in units of the state park system, to an eligible Gold Star Family member, as defined.

## BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

**California State Park System.** According to State Parks, the State Park System consists of 280 state park units, over 340 miles of coastline, 970 miles of lake and river frontage, 15,000 campsites, 5,200 miles of trails, 3,195 historic buildings, and more than 11,000 known prehistoric and historic archaeological sites; it is the largest and most diverse recreational, natural, and cultural heritage holdings of any state agency in the nation. More than 68 million people annually visit California's State Park System.

**Reduced Rate or Free State Parks Passes.** State Parks offers various annual passes to the general public for a fee. There are five passes offering free or discounted entry to State Park units on an annual or per-visit basis:

- Adventure Pass – offers free entry to 54 state parks to fourth graders and their families, valid from September 1 to August 31 of the child's fourth grade year.
- Disabled Discount Pass – for \$3.50, offers a lifetime pass to persons with permanent disabilities entitling the bearer to a 50% discount on vehicle day-use, family camping, and boat-use fees at over 100 park units.
- Distinguished Veterans Pass – offers a free lifetime pass for vehicle day use, family camping, and boat use at over 100 park units to honorably discharged veterans who have California residency and meet any of the following: (1) have a service-connected disability, (2) were held as a prisoner of war, or (3) is a recipient of the Medal of Honor.
  - Veterans and active duty military can also receive a reduced fee or free day use at state parks units operated by the state and accessible with a vehicle day use annual pass on Memorial Day and Veterans Day (Public Resources Code (PRC) §5011.6).
- Golden Bear Pass – offers social services recipients and low income seniors a pass for free vehicle day use access, valid for a calendar year.

- Senior Golden Bear Pass – for \$20, offers individuals 62 and over with free entry to many state parks during non-peak seasons, valid for a calendar year.

There are various “full price” annual state parks passes and “add-ons”, including, but not limited to:

- The Explorer Vehicle Day Use Annual Pass is valid for one year and provides vehicle entrance to 134 state parks for \$195.
- The Golden Poppy Vehicle Day Use Annual Pass is valid for one year and provides vehicle entrance to 112 state parks for \$125.
- Historian Passport Day Use Admission Annual Pass is valid for one year and allows admission to up to four people to State Historic Parks that generally charge a per-person admission fee for \$50.
- OHV (Off-Highway Vehicle) Vehicle Day Use Annual Pass is valid for one year and provides entry to State Vehicular Recreation Areas where day-use fees are collected for passenger vehicles for \$50.
- Boat Use Annual Pass is an add-on pass for passholders of other State Parks passes to cover the fee charged for boat use for \$100.

**Gold Star Families.** According to this committee’s analysis of SB 55 (Umberg), of the current legislative session, 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 U.S. Armed Forces. If the Service member died in the line of duty, the blue star was changed to gold and eligible next of kin receive 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 that their next of kin may wear or display. According to Section 553.36 of Title 32 of the Code of Federal Regulations, ‘next of kin’ is defined as the spouse, children (natural, step, adopted), parents (natural, step, adopted), siblings (natural, half, adopted), and grandparents of a service member who lost their life in a qualifying situation. The Gold Star Lapel Button definition of ‘next of kin’ is different and is based on the definition in the U.S. Department of Defense Instruction 1348.36. The U.S. Department of Defense Instruction does not include grandparents.

According to the Gold Star Family Registry, which is “the first comprehensive data base of the United States’ fallen Heroes,” since World War II, over 18,000 California residents have lost their lives in the line of duty. However, this number is not necessarily indicative of the number of California residents that could qualify for the proposed no-cost passes. Since not all Gold Star Family members are residents of the same state as their deceased loved ones, it is unknown how many of these 18,000 California veterans have family in California or how many California residents may be an eligible Gold Star Family member due to a veteran from another state.

The California Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) 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). Both departments use the same definition of qualifying situation and qualified family members as the Code of Federal Regulations, except that the DVA and DMV include grandchildren. According to this committee's analysis of SB 55 (Umberg), of the current legislative session, as of February 4, 2025, the DMV has issued 636 Gold Star Family vehicle license plates. This may be the closest proxy for the number of individuals that might be interested in accessing parks under a Gold Star program. Committee staff was unable to verify an updated number of Gold Star Family vehicle license plates for the past year.

**Federal park access.** In 2022, the National Defense Authorization Act authorized a free lifetime pass to national parks and other federal recreation lands for eligible Veteran and Gold Star Families. Eligible veterans are those who served in the U.S. Armed Forces, National Guard, and/or Reserves, and Gold Star Families are next of kin of a member of the U.S. Armed Forces who lost their life in certain "qualifying situations" (section 3.2 U. S. Department of Defense Instruction 1348.36).

**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 (PRC §§5001 et seq.).
- 2) 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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, 5011).
  - 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).
- 3) 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).
- 4) Requires the National Park and Federal Recreational Lands Pass be made available, at no charge, for the lifetime of the passholder, to any member of a Gold Star family who meets certain eligibility requirements and other listed persons (U.S. Code Title 16 §6804).

**PROPOSED LAW**

This bill would:

- 1) Require an eligible “Gold Star Family member” be issued a pass for the use of all facilities, including boat launching facilities, in units of the state park system.
  - a) Define “eligible Gold Star Family member” as a person who:
    - i) Is a resident of the state.
    - ii) Is eligible to receive a Gold Star lapel button, as specified.
- 2) Require State Parks to adopt regulations, as necessary, to implement the bill.

**ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT**

According to the author, “[t]his bill will codify a benefit that recognizes the immense personal cost paid by Gold Star Families and ensure California policy reflects the same level of respect and recognition already extended at the federal level.”

**ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION**

None received

**COMMENTS**

***This bill is double referred.*** This bill is double referred with the Senate Military and Veterans Affairs Committee, with this committee being the committee of first referral. Elements of this bill under the jurisdiction of the Senate Military and Veterans Affairs Committee are included here for context and completeness only and will be discussed before that Committee.

***Potential impacts to State Parks.*** State Parks may experience reduced revenue as a result of this bill. According to information provided by the author’s office, State Parks has estimated that there are approximately 8,000 eligible Gold Star Families in California. It is unknown how many of these families would take advantage of this new pass and how many times the pass would be used.

According to the California State Parks Foundation, State Parks has a \$1 billion deferred maintenance backlog. Certain federal parks, facing staffing shortages, have closed or limited their operating hours, which will likely result in an increase in visitation of state parks. This has the potential to result in a need for more funding to support additional staffing, maintenance, and capital improvements at state park units.

***Prior, related legislation.***

SB 55 (Umberg, 2025), as it was referred to this committee, was identical to AB 308 (Alanis, 2023) (see below). This committee heard SB 55 on March 25, 2025, and passed it out of committee with amendments. This bill is identical to SB 55 as it passed out of this committee. SB 55 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee on the suspense file.

AB 308 (Alanis, 2023) is substantially similar to this bill and would have required that a Gold Star Family member be issued a pass for free day use of any unit of the state park system. AB 308 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee on the suspense file.

**SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS: NONE**

**SUPPORT**

None Received

**OPPOSITION**

None Received

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