
SENATE COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Bob Archuleta, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

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| Bill No: | SB 893 | Hearing Date: | 4/20/26 |
| Author: | Seyarto | | |
| Version: | 1/15/26 | | |
| Urgency: | No | Fiscal: | Yes |
| Consultant: | Diego Nelson | | |

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

DESCRIPTION

Summary:

This bill requires the Department of Parks and Recreation to issue a free state park facilities pass to eligible Gold Star Family members, granting access to all state park units and facilities, including boat launching.

Existing law:

- 1) Establishes the California State Park System and places the Department of Parks and Recreation in control of the system, with responsibility for administering, protecting, developing, and interpreting state parks for public use and enjoyment. Existing law also requires the department to safeguard park property from damage and maintain peace within the system (PRC Sections 5001 et seq.).
- 2) Authorizes the Department of Parks and Recreation to charge fees, rents, and other revenues for the use of state park system areas, subject to specified exceptions, including:
 - a) Prohibiting the department from charging fees to kindergarten through grade 12 pupils participating in a school outing (PRC Section 5010.2).
 - b) Allowing the department to offer discounted passes to specified groups, including fourth-grade pupils, persons over 62 years of age, persons with disabilities, and qualifying low-income residents (PRC Sections 5010.2 and 5011).
 - c) Allowing the department to issue a reduced-fee or no-fee day-use permit to veterans, active-duty military personnel, and reserve military personnel on Memorial Day and Veterans Day (PRC Sections 5011.5 and 5011.6).
- 3) Permits the Department of Veterans Affairs to administer the Gold Star Family specialized license plate program and issue plates for vehicles owned by eligible Gold Star Family members (Vehicle Code Section 5156).
- 4) Requires that the National Park and Federal Recreational Lands Pass be made available, at no cost for the lifetime of the passholder, to eligible Gold Star Family members and certain other specified individuals (16 U.S.C. Section 6804).

This bill:

- 1) Requires the Department of Parks and Recreation to issue a free pass to an eligible Gold Star Family member.

- 2) Defines “eligible Gold Star Family member” as a California resident who is eligible to receive a Gold Star lapel button under federal law, specifically 10 U.S.C. § 1126.
- 3) Provides that the pass entitles the bearer to use all facilities, including boat launching facilities, in units of the state park system.
- 4) Requires the department to adopt regulations as necessary to implement the program.

BACKGROUND

California’s State Park System is the largest and most diverse collection of recreational, natural, and cultural resources of any state agency in the nation, attracting more than 68 million visitors annually. According to the Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks), the system includes 280 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.

To promote public access, State Parks offers several annual passes that provide free or discounted entry to park units on either an annual or per-visit basis. The primary passes include:

- Adventure Pass – Provides free entry to 54 state parks for fourth-grade students and their families, valid from September 1 through August 31 of the child’s fourth-grade year.
- Disabled Discount Pass – For a one-time fee of \$3.50, offers a lifetime pass for individuals with permanent disabilities, providing a 50% discount on vehicle day-use, family camping, and boat-use fees at over 100 park units.
- Distinguished Veterans Pass – Provides eligible veterans with a free lifetime pass covering vehicle day use, family camping, and boat use at over 100 park units.
 - Additionally, veterans and active-duty military may receive free or reduced-fee day use at state-operated park units on Memorial Day and Veterans Day (Public Resources Code § 5011.6).
- Golden Bear Pass – Offers free vehicle day-use access for low-income individuals and recipients of certain social services programs, valid for one calendar year.
- Senior Golden Bear Pass – For \$20, provides individuals aged 62 and older with free entry to select state parks during non-peak seasons, valid for one calendar year.

Collectively, these programs are intended to expand access to California’s state parks for students, seniors, low-income individuals, persons with disabilities, and veterans.

Gold Star Families are defined as the surviving immediate family members of service members who died in the line of duty, represent a group recognized at the federal level for their sacrifice. Eligibility for the Gold Star lapel button extends to spouses, parents, children, and certain next of kin, serving as a nationally recognized symbol of loss and service. At the federal level, Gold Star Families are eligible for free access to National Parks. This establishes a clear policy precedent and raises parity considerations for California to consider providing a similar benefit within the State Park System.

COMMENT

According to the author: “This 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.”

Existing law authorizes California to issue a Distinguished Veteran Pass for free use of state park facilities to specified veterans who are California residents, were honorably discharged, and meet qualifying criteria, including certain service-connected disabilities, former prisoner-of-war status, or receipt of the Medal of Honor. By contrast, current law does not provide a comparable state parks benefit to Gold Star Family members, even though that group is separately recognized in connection with the death of an immediate family member during military service.

This proposal would expand California's existing state park pass structure to include Gold Star Families, a group not currently eligible for that benefit. By extending free access to state park facilities, the bill would incorporate recognition of their loss into an existing public benefit connected to recreation, family gathering, and remembrance. In that way, the measure would broaden the categories of individuals who may receive no-cost park access based on military service and sacrifice.

This bill would also make California's approach more consistent with federal practice. Gold Star Families are already eligible for free access to National Parks under federal policy. Extending a similar benefit at the state level would align California more closely with that existing model and create greater consistency between state and federal park access benefits.

Previous legislation

AB 308 (Alanis, 2023) would have required the Department of Parks and Recreation to issue a pass providing free day use at state-operated park units to eligible Gold Star Family members. The bill was held in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

SB 55 (Umberg, 2025) would have pursued the same policy in broader form by requiring a pass for eligible Gold Star Family members to use all state park facilities, including boat launching facilities. The bill was held in the Assembly Committee on Appropriations.

POSITIONS

Sponsor: Author.

Support: American Legion, Department Of California
Amvets, Department Of California
California State Commanders Veterans Council
Military Officers Association Of America, California Council Of Chapters
San Bernardino County
Vietnam Veterans Of America, California State Council

Oppose: None

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