

---

## SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair  
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

---

### SB 893 (Seyarto) - State parks: facilities pass: Gold Star Family members

**Version:** January 15, 2026

**Urgency:** No

**Hearing Date:** May 4, 2026

**Policy Vote:** N.R. &W. 7 - 0, M.&V.A. 4 - 0

**Mandate:** No

**Consultant:** Ashley Ames

**Bill 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.

#### **Fiscal Impact:**

- State Parks estimates one-time costs of roughly \$200,000 (General Fund) to promulgate regulations, and ongoing costs of about \$145,000 in the first year and \$133,000 annually thereafter (General Fund) for an additional position in the Pass Office to accommodate the increased workload associated with administering this new pass.
- State Parks estimates this bill could result in increased park visitation with annual General Fund implications of roughly \$5.2 million to support increased operations and maintenance costs.
- Forgone revenue of an unknown but potentially significant amount (State Parks and Recreation Fund) due to free day passes, camping, and boat launching facilities provided by this bill that would otherwise require payment of a fee from park users.

**Background:** According to the Department of Parks and Recreation (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; 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. State Parks offers a number of 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 for 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 veterans meeting certain criteria. o 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.

*Gold Star Families.* According to the Senate Natural Resources & Water 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).

**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.

**Related Legislation:**

SB 55 (Umberg, 2025) This bill is identical to SB 55, which 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.

**Staff Comments:** State Parks estimates that there are roughly 8,800 fallen servicemembers in California whose families would be eligible for the free access pass proposed by this bill. Although the Gold Star website only identifies the state of the fallen member, for purposes of this bill, the department assumes that the family members also reside in California. Using the average number of people in a household, published by the US Census, of 2.86, there would be an estimated 25,000 individuals eligible for the Gold Star Family Pass. State Parks notes it considers this a conservative estimate due to the broad range of extended family members that would be eligible under the bill’s provisions (Section 1126 of Title 10 of the United States Code). State Parks also notes that free camping and boat launching facilities would increase the demand for this pass.

-- END --