

INTRODUCTION

By Representative Mary Schneider
of

HB 1504--Allocation of Veterans Service Organization Gaming Taxes

Finance and Tax Committee, Craig Headland, Chairman

February 3, 2025

HB 1504 proposes changes to ensure that a portion of gaming funds--funds only from veterans' service organizations--is directed towards services for veterans. The bill requests that 50% of gaming tax money from veterans' groups be allocated to two places; half would go to the Department of Veterans Affairs Post War Trust Fund, a source of funds for future veteran needs, and half would go to prevent and eliminate current homelessness among North Dakota's veterans. It would be using money generated by veterans' groups for the benefit of **future** veteran needs, and also the **present** critical need to address potential and current homelessness. This is a dual bill to allow veterans to help veterans--in the present and the future.

Veterans face significant challenges when it comes to homelessness. There are funding needs for rent, deposits, utilities, childcare, transportation, moving expenses, furniture, and other costs. Here are some other key factors and issues:

1. **Affordable Housing:** There is a severe shortage of affordable housing, which makes it difficult for veterans to find stable and safe places to live. High rental prices and limited availability exacerbate this problem.
2. **Health:** Many veterans struggle with mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, and anxiety. There are also issues getting access to general health care, ongoing treatment, and needed prescriptions. These problems can make it challenging to maintain stable employment and housing.
3. **Employment:** Transitioning from military to civilian life can be difficult, and finding stable employment is often a challenge. Service-connected disabilities may further complicate steady employment.
4. **Social Support:** The camaraderie and community found in military service are often missing in civilian life, which can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. This lack of social support can make it harder for veterans to cope with the stresses of homelessness.
5. **Access to Benefits:** Navigating the VA healthcare system and accessing benefits can be complex and time-consuming. Many veterans may not receive the support they need due to bureaucratic hurdles and gaps in mental health services.
6. **Substance Abuse:** Some veterans turn to substance abuse to cope with their challenges, which can further complicate their efforts to find stable housing and employment.

7. **Families:** Veteran families face additional challenges, and if they have children, they are more likely to be homeless with children. Family-specific support is crucial for these veterans.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes providing affordable housing and auxiliary costs, mental health support, and social services and resources tailored to the unique needs of veterans.

You work hard on issues of finance and taxation in this committee. This bill is a bit different in that you're having a life and death impact. Homelessness can be as much a terminal condition as cancer. In my legal work, I had three veteran clients die from conditions related to homelessness: one from exposure, one hit by a train, one needing medical attention he couldn't get.

The veteran suicide rate in North Dakota is also a serious concern, and is often related to spiraling down in poverty, homelessness, and hopelessness. According to the 2022 North Dakota Veteran Suicide Data Sheet, the veteran suicide rate in the state was considerably higher than the national general population suicide rate. One of the years I've been in the legislature, our state's veteran suicide rate was the highest in the nation. That data highlights the need for continued efforts to support veterans and address the factors contributing to this tragic issue.

The fiscal note calculations would allow \$590,045 per year to the post war trust fund to grow that fund for future use for all veteran services, and that same amount to address the pernicious and persistent problem of homelessness for veterans over the next two years.

Our service men and women make a lot of sacrifices to help maintain our safety and security in the world and in our state. What we owe them when they call North Dakota home, is to have one to live in. This bill gives us that chance.