

INTRODUCTION

By Representative Mary Schneider
HB 1504--Funding for Homeless Veterans

Senate Agriculture and Veterans Affairs Committee

Senator Larry Luick, Chairman, and Senator Janne Myrdal, Vice Chairman

March 14, 2025

HB 1504 started as a critical but simple concept of veterans helping homeless veterans. It proposed that a portion of gaming funds--funds only from veterans' service organizations--would be directed towards services for veterans. The bill originally requested 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. It was a dual bill to allow veterans to help veterans--in the present and the future.

Perhaps because of the heavy workload in the House Government and Veterans Affairs Committee the bill was assigned to Finance and Tax. The Committee apparently did not want a floodgates effect of groups asking for their gaming tax back, but the members listened to the compelling testimony of the need for veterans' homelessness prevention and remediation funding and amended the bill to keep the same appropriation in the bill but have the money come from the general fund. The bill passed the Committee with a unanimous vote. On February 25, shortly before crossover, the bill you have before you was brought from House Appropriations to the floor. Although the general fund money was removed, the Human Services Appropriations Chairman explained that the funding would be considered with the Veterans Affairs budget, and they hadn't gotten to that yet, and still haven't. The bill passed the House unanimously, on a vote right after that speech, 89-0.

So to keep this important bill going, I'm going to ask that this Committee amend the bill back to its House Committee passage language with the appropriation in it to keep funding alive. It is a funding bill to address a really serious problem for some pretty special people.

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.

This bill can have 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.