

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SHB 1197

As Amended by the Senate

Title: An act relating to gold star license plates.

Brief Description: Concerning gold star license plates.

Sponsors: House Committee on Transportation (originally sponsored by Representatives Riccelli, Irwin, Lovick, Barkis, Reeves, Blake, Ortiz-Self, Ormsby, Valdez, Bergquist, Mead, Fey, Volz, Chapman, Pellicciotti, Kilduff, Dolan, Sells, Maycumber, Shea, Griffey, Leavitt and Stanford).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Transportation: 2/4/19 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/20/19, 95-0.

Senate Amended.

Passed Senate: 4/10/19, 47-0.

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires Gold Star license plates to be issued to all eligible applicants without payment of any vehicle license fees and motor vehicle excise taxes.
- Allows widows and widowers who are eligible to receive the Gold Star license plates but choose instead to receive a standard license plate or any other qualifying special license plate to be exempt from payment of motor vehicle excise taxes.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 29 members: Representatives Fey, Chair; Slatter, 2nd Vice Chair; Valdez, 2nd Vice Chair; Wylie, 1st Vice Chair; Barkis, Ranking Minority Member; Walsh, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Young, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Boehnke, Chambers, Chapman, Dent, Doglio, Dufault, Entenman, Eslick, Goehner, Gregerson, Irwin, Kloba, Lovick, McCaslin, Orcutt, Paul, Pellicciotti, Ramos, Riccelli, Shea, Shewmake and Van Werven.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Staff: Patricia Hasan (786-7292).

Background:

The Department of Licensing (DOL) issues special vehicle license plates that may be used in lieu of standard license plates. Generally, special license plates are sponsored by a governmental or nonprofit organization and are available to all Washington residents for an additional fee that is due annually upon vehicle registration renewal. Other special license plates are available to individuals who meet certain requirements. One such special license plate is the Gold Star license plate, which may be issued to an eligible family member of a member of the United States Armed Forces who died while in service to his or her country, or as a result of his or her service.

To qualify for a Gold Star license plate, a registered vehicle owner must:

- be a resident of Washington;
- provide proof to the satisfaction of the DOL that they are an eligible family member to the deceased service member;
- provide certification from the Department of Veterans Affairs that they qualify for a Gold Star license plate;
- be recorded as the registered owner of the motor vehicle on which the Gold Star license plates will be displayed; and
- pay all fees and taxes required by law for registering the motor vehicle.

Eligible family members include:

- widows and widowers;
- biological and adoptive parents;
- stepparents;
- adults in loco parentis and foster parents;
- biological and adopted children; and
- siblings.

Gold Star license plates are issued without payment of any license plate fees and are replaced free of charge if a plate is lost, stolen, damaged, defaced, or destroyed. Widow and widower recipients of Gold Star license plates are exempt from annual vehicle registration fees for one personal use motor vehicle. Additionally, in lieu of a Gold Star license plate, a qualifying widow or widower may apply for a standard issue license plate or any qualifying special license plate for one personal use motor vehicle and be exempt from both annual vehicle registration fees and license plate fees for that vehicle.

Gold Star license plates may be transferred from one motor vehicle to another motor vehicle owned by the eligible family member upon application to the DOL, county auditor or other agent, or subagent appointed by the Director of the DOL.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

All qualifying applicants of the Gold Star license plate must be issued the plates without payment of any vehicle license fees and motor vehicle excise taxes in addition to the current exemption from payment of license plate fees. Widows and widowers who are eligible to

receive the Gold Star license plates but choose instead to receive a standard license plate or any other qualifying special license plate are exempt from payment of motor vehicle excise taxes in addition to the current exemption from payment of license plate fees and vehicle registration fees.

EFFECT OF SENATE AMENDMENT(S):

The Senate amendment limits the vehicle license fees and motor vehicle excise tax exemptions on Gold Star license plate issuances to one motor vehicle for applicants who are a widow, widower, biological parent, adoptive parent, stepparent, or an adult in loco parentis or foster parent of a member of the United States Armed Forces who died while in service to his or her country. The Senate amendment requires biological children, adopted children, and sibling applicants for a Gold Star license plate to pay all fees and taxes required to register a vehicle except for the license plate fee.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This is an opportunity the Legislature has to correct an issue that is brought forth by constituents. Some constituents have had issues at the DOL office with verifying certain information to continue receiving the Gold Star license plates. This issue affects only a few hundred people in Washington, but it is nonetheless an important issue.

There is no pain quite so acute as that experienced by immediate family members of fallen soldiers; in particular, mothers carry the heaviest burden in burying a child. The group of mothers who have lost children in service are collectively called Gold Star mothers. No one wants to be a member of the Gold Star club. It is a world-shattering journey of grief that never ends. The Gold Star license plate is a way to honor a fallen family member; it is a poignant moment to put the plates on your car for the first time. It is a message to the world of one of the most personal and painful details of your life. It is a demonstration that freedom has a cost and that certain families have had to bear that cost.

Gold Star license plates have previously been renewed online with no problems, but the last renewal process had to be completed at a DOL office. The overall process took more than an hour, and what began as merely an inconvenience quickly became very uncomfortable and emotionally charged as the DOL main office required a reverification of the qualifications to have Gold Star license plates. This was not supposed to happen, but it did, and more than one family has had to endure this process.

No Gold Star member should have to be put in the situation of having to reverify Gold Star status because of a computer error. Gold Star members should not be paying for the Gold Star license plates at all because they have already sacrificed so much in losing a loved one.

Within Washington, Medal of Honor recipients are eligible for permanent license plates, and in New Mexico Purple Heart recipients and disabled veterans also qualified for permanent license plates. Gold Star status never changes, and it would be symbolic of the permanent loss that is felt to have permanent license plates. This bill would eliminate the need to renew these plates every year. It would be a very generous and kind act that the Legislature could extend to Gold Star families.

Gold Star families are somewhat invisible members of the community. Recognition is given around Memorial Day, but for Gold Star families, every day is Gold Star day. Gold Star families fear being forgotten, so moments of recognition are cherished. The life of every fallen service member had enduring value, and they mattered. In displaying a Gold Star license plate, this message is communicated. It would be nice to be able to say that Washington is a state where service is recognized, appreciated, and remembered, especially in a time when wars are still being fought and deployments are still happening. When children don't come home from war, families carry the weight of that every single moment of every single day.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Riccelli, prime sponsor; and Matt and Keirsten Lyons.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.