

# ANDRÉ JACQUE

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*Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs  
State Senator André Jacque  
April 29, 2021*

Chairman Skowronski and Committee Members,

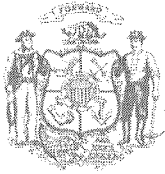
Thank you for holding this hearing on Assembly Bill 48, the Hmong & Laotian Veteran Recognition Act- long overdue and vitally important legislation.

During the Vietnam War, the United States clandestinely recruited and armed more than 40,000 ethnic Hmong and other Laotian fighters in their battle against North Vietnamese and Laotian communist forces in what is known as the “Secret War” in Laos. Organized into Special Guerilla Units, these brave soldiers heroically provided vital intelligence, air rescue for downed American pilots and direct engagement in combat operations in service to our country, at enormous personal risk and the cost of tens of thousands of lives. Hmong soldiers and their people lost their homeland in defense of what is now our shared land.

At its core, this legislation recognizes the sacrifices and honors the bravery of these Hmong and other Laotian soldiers, now U.S. citizens, who joined in a common cause fighting for freedom on the side of liberty decades ago- it is extremely fitting that we should recognize them as veterans under Wisconsin law. At the conclusion of the Vietnam War in 1975, the communist regime in Laos began to brutally persecute these U.S. allies, and approximately 150,000 Laotian Hmong eventually entered the U.S. as refugees, including service members from the Special Guerilla Units. However, due to their lack of official “veteran” status, these courageous heroes have not been eligible for any Wisconsin veteran benefits. Currently, Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the U.S., and it is estimated that there are as many as 1,000 Hmong veterans living in Wisconsin.

Assembly Bill 48 expands the definition of “veteran” in Wisconsin statute to include individuals who honorably served in Special Guerilla Units operating in Laos from February 28, 1961 to May 7, 1975. These individuals must fall under the exemptions enumerated in the “Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 2000” (dependent upon proper documentation and evidence, admission to the U.S. as a refugee from Laos, and a thorough review from the U.S. Department of Defense) to qualify for state veteran benefits, programs, and services (except for admission to a state veterans home and burial in a veterans cemetery due to federal regulations). As originally introduced this session and last session, the bill had provided an alternate pathway to allow a determination from the Wisconsin Secretary of Veterans Affairs that an individual honorably served in a Special Guerilla Unit in Laos, however at WDVA’s request I have introduced an amendment to remove them from the determination process.

This legislation has been supported by a long bi-partisan list of co-sponsors, the Wisconsin Lao Veterans of America, the Wisconsin VFW, the Hmong American Partnership, Hmong Cultural and Community Agency, Former Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Daniel Zimmerman, and the National Association of Social Workers – Wisconsin Chapter.



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While we can't control the federal qualifications for veteran status, we do control Wisconsin standards for state veteran program eligibility, including the Assistance to Needy Veterans Grant, professional and occupational licensure fee waivers, veterans employment assistance, military funeral aid honors, the veteran identifier on Wisconsin driver's licenses and ID cards, and the veterans education grant. But admittedly, the most significant impact of this legislation is not one of financial benefits but of the respect finally conveyed not just in words, but in Wisconsin law.

Most importantly, this legislation provides long overdue recognition and honors the courage and extraordinary sacrifice of these unsung heroes who put their lives on the line for the values and beliefs that we revere as Americans, who repeatedly risked their lives to save American sailors and soldiers. As the son, nephew, and friend of our Vietnam Era Veterans, I am acutely aware of how many we lose with every passing day. And as they tell their stories, they speak often of the valiant service and selfless sacrifice of the Hmong and Laotian veterans whose dedication they relied on for their very lives.

We have an opportunity to correct our statutes and ensure that their service to freedom and our country will not be forgotten. We should do nothing less for so many who did so much for all of us.

Thank you for your consideration of Assembly Bill 48.



# DAVE MURPHY

State Representative • 56th Assembly District

Assembly Committee on Veterans and Military Affairs

April 29, 2021

Assembly Bill 48

Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you for holding hearing on this important bill.

I have a large population of Hmong people in my district and you'll be receiving written testimony from them over the next week. Many wanted to be here but were unable to make it today due to work schedules.

Wisconsin proudly supports and stands behind our veterans. We all do what we can to thank them for the service with real and substantial recognition for what they've done on behalf of all of us.

AB 48 makes changes to our support of veterans that are the right thing to do.

The ethnic Hmong and other Laotian people who fought against communist forces beside our own military in the Vietnam War deserve veteran status and the benefits that come with that status. They've earned it.

These brave soldiers provided vital intelligence, air rescue for downed American pilots and direct engagement in combat operations in service to our country, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. When the war ended in 1975, the communist regime in Laos brutally persecuted our allies, leading approximately 150,000 Laotian Hmong to eventually enter the U.S. as refugees, including service members from the Special Guerilla Units.

Unfortunately, because they lack official "veteran" status, these fighters have not been eligible for any Wisconsin veteran benefits. Wisconsin has the third largest Hmong population in the U.S., and it is estimated that there are as many as 1,000 Hmong veterans living in Wisconsin.

Our bill expands "veteran" in Wisconsin statute to include individuals who honorably served in Special Guerilla Units operating in Laos from February 28, 1961 to May 7, 1975. These individuals must either fall under the exemptions enumerated in the "Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000" or receive a determination from the Wisconsin Secretary of Veterans Affairs that an individual honorably served in a Special Guerilla Unit in Laos to qualify for state veteran benefits, programs, and services (except for admission to a state veterans home and burial in a veterans cemetery due to federal regulations).

Most importantly, this legislation provides long overdue recognition and appreciation for the bravery and sacrifice of these unsung heroes. Thank you.

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# FRANCESCA HONG

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State Representative • 76th Assembly District

April 29, 2021

Chair Skowronski, Vice-Chair Vander Meer and honorable committee members,

As you know, we all often distinguish ourselves as Americans by our patriotism — those who have served in our military have honored us with their dedication to preserving democracy. It is especially incredible that Hmong fighters in Laos risked their lives for a country they did not know during the Vietnam war and showed incalculable bravery under extraordinary duress.

The recognition of Hmong-Lao Veterans day and the expansion of veterans benefits to them is therefore a debt that has been owed and one we must honor as patriots.

We must also acknowledge that the history of the Hmong people in Wisconsin is inextricably tied to the story of Wisconsin; you cannot talk about the Hmong community without touching on the invaluable service Hmong veterans have done for our country.

Not only are these Veterans pillars of their communities here in this state, but they have contributed to the fabric of Wisconsin twice-fold; first as soldiers and then as refugees.

Their story has been of hardships, including language barriers, ostracization, and alienation. But their story continues to be one of perseverance and humility.

Indeed that humility has historically been utilized by society to erase the Hmong American experience and voice — and we cannot let that happen any longer. We must signal, as a legislative body, that we are not only proud to be their fellow countrymen, but that we will protect them as they have protected us. Let's never forget their story is part of the Wisconsin story and it is part of the American story.

Over the years, bills to the likeness of AB 248 and AB 154 have stalled in the legislature; obstructed by a legislative process that did not assign adequate importance to the recognition of our Hmong Veterans.

These bills must pass and become law, recognition of all of our veterans is the least of what is owed for their service.

Respectfully,



Representative Francesca Hong  
76th Assembly District



April 29, 2021

Dear Chair Skowronski, Vice-Chair Vander Meer and honorable committee members,

I am writing in support of AB 248 Relating to: expanding veterans benefits to individuals who served in Laos in support of the United States during the Vietnam War.

My predecessor, Rep. Amanda Stuck worked tirelessly last session when she introduced this legislation which is now AB 248. She worked in partnership with one of Appleton's Hmong community leaders, Kor Xing. Mr. Xiong's uncles and grandfathers fought with the guerilla forces alongside American soldiers and has yet been able to access veteran benefits for the same dedicated service and risk to life that their American brothers can access for the same war.

Wisconsin has an estimated 1,000 Hmong veterans who fought with and for American interests in Vietnam, yet because of their lack of veteran status, levels of support and opportunity have not been afforded to them that are afforded to other veterans for the same service. Amending our state statutes to include these soldiers is the morally right thing to do to honor their contributions. Wisconsin's Hmong residents are part of America and part of what makes our communities so vibrant and strong.

As Mr. Xiong once remarked, "They lost so many lives to do their jobs." Let's do right by those who fought and call Wisconsin their home and provide them with opportunity to access education, property tax credits, license fee waivers for hunting and fishing, homeless veteran assistance and workforce resources and military funeral honors like those American born soldiers they fought alongside.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rep. Snodgrass", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Rep. Snodgrass



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