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WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR

Senate Bill 880
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, for the opportunity to speak today on Senate Bill 880.

As you may know, throughout the Vietnam War, the United States recruited and worked in cooperation with thousands of the Hmong to fight against the North Vietnamese and Laotian communist forces in what is now referred to as the “Secret War.” Their role was to disrupt the supply chain of munitions and soldiers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, help to protect and defend strategic points such as communication towers and radar stations, and to retrieve American fighter pilots shot down behind enemy lines.

Following the fall of Saigon in April of 1975, many of these Hmong patriots and their families fled the region, leaving behind their homes and possessions to resettle in pro-democracy Western nations, including nearly 30,000 refugees who had settled in the United States by 1978. Today, it is estimated there are as many as 1,000 Hmong veterans living in Wisconsin.

Each veteran has their own personal story of bravery and sacrifice, one that should be both commemorated and appreciated. To that end, the Wisconsin Lao Veterans of America was formed to recognize these veterans who gave their lives to the cause of democracy -- and those who served and fought valiantly, and relocated to Wisconsin. The group provides camaraderie, community, and assistance to its members. It provides help to Hmong-Lao veterans to adjust to their lives in American culture and earn US citizenship, as well as to honor recently-deceased members of the group by arranging and assisting in their funeral expenses.

Currently, these expenses are paid out of the pocket of the members themselves. To help cover the ever-rising costs of these endeavors, this bill would direct the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs to provide a one-time cost assistance payment of \$20,000 from the existing veterans’ nonprofit grant program in the 2022-23 fiscal year. While these activities would certainly be eligible under the program, these Hmong veterans do not qualify as “veterans” under Chapter 45 of the statutes, and thus they are not able to apply for the grant.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on this bill. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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