

Good Morning,

My name is Mark Whisenhunt. I am advocating for disabled veterans, and I hope that you all support HB 17 for the following reasons.

Disabled veterans often face challenges like limited employment opportunities, difficulties in accessing quality healthcare, and higher rates of mental health issues such as PTSD. The transition to civilian life can be particularly challenging. Some servicemembers find themselves contributing to their communities through state and local government roles. As they make the transition from active duty to civilian life, veterans often downplay the physical or emotional impact of their service. However, it's important to recognize that, for some, these impacts simply cannot be ignored.

There is a class of veterans who are totally and permanently disabled, and they can face even greater struggles to work and keep gainful employment due to their service-connected disabilities. As such, this class of veteran often struggles with income stability.

I am one of those veterans who is now permanently disabled. Through the years not only have I personally experienced these challenges, but I have watched many those I served with face similar obstacles. I recently realized that something can be done to help, and that you all have the power and ability to make a difference.

HB 17 can serve a crucial role in addressing the unique needs of disabled veterans in state and local government service. Your support in advocating for and ensuring the implementation of this legislation emphasizes our unwavering support to those who have devoted their lives to serving our country and our communities with pride and distinction.

HB 17 provides a means for totally and permanently disabled veterans to access the retirement benefits they earned through their state and local service, at a time when they need it the most. It offers vital support and truly serves as a lifeline for disabled veterans as they navigate the financial, physical, and emotional challenges associated with their service-connected disabilities.

Inaction on this matter would not only run counter to our shared values but would also be a disservice to those who have given so much for our nation, our state, and our local communities.

Less than four percent of all veterans have been deemed totally and permanently disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The VA authored a study in 2019, on the mortality rate of 100% Service-Connected disabled Veterans. The study revealed that this small group U.S. Veterans have a significantly diminished life expectancy when compared to the U.S. civilian population. Women veterans of this group have a 22% reduced life expectancy and men have an 11% reduced life expectancy. So, what does that mean? It means that our disabled Veterans are dying, on average, 15 years sooner than their civilian counterparts.

So how many totally and permanently disabled veterans currently have a PERS account? The retirement division does not collect that data but knowing the make-up of our state we can get an estimation. The estimation is derived by looking at the number of applicable members in the program (13,338). Then you multiply that by the percent of residents who are veterans (10%). Finally, you multiply that by the percent of veterans who are totally and permanently disabled (3.6%). After doing so, one can estimate the number of totally and permanently disabled veterans with a PERS account to be approximately 48 people.

It is my believe that allowing approximately 48 disabled veterans, who have a significantly reduced life expectancy, to access their hard-earned retirement funds will in no way cause an undue hardship to the PERS system.

In conclusion, I humbly ask each of you to stand united and vote in favor of HB 17. Remember, it is less than four percent of all veterans that have a designation of totally and permanently disabled, yet this modest change is very impactful in supporting their well-being.

I'd be happy to take any questions you may have. Thank you for your attention and for your dedicated service to our State.

Respectfully,

Mark Whisenhunt
US Army Veteran