

Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

I'm grateful for the opportunity to voice support for SB 30, State Park Permits for Disabled Veterans. My name is Phil Hokenson and I'm an Army veteran from Fairbanks. I serve as the Chair of the Alaska Veterans Advisory Council and a member Alaska Pioneer Home Advisory Board.

Alaska is often heralded for being home to the highest per capita population of Veterans—we also have the youngest veteran population and the highest percentage of women veterans. But why do so many veterans choose to relocate to or stay in Alaska once they hang up their uniform? One reason is that this state is among the best in the country at supporting our veterans and acknowledging the value that military veterans bring to our communities. And that's not only through education dollars at the University of Alaska or healthcare dollars through the VA's community care program or the dollars that military retirees and disabled veterans spend in our economy, we also recognize the value they bring as citizens who have stood up on behalf of their country and who often continue to serve in many different ways.

While Alaska is a national leader in supporting veterans in many ways, one place we fall short of a standard that was set by the National Defense Authorization Act of 2022 is in providing veterans with expanded access to the state's parks. That NDAA established free, lifetime access to national parks for all military veterans. With SB 30, we have the opportunity to bring the state closer to that benchmark by offering free, lifetime state park permits to disabled veterans.

Providing disabled veterans with this access not only honors their service but also supports their well-being by offering them a greater opportunity to enjoy the pristine wilderness of the Last Frontier and connect with the land they defended on our behalf. I urge you to pass SB 30 to continue strengthening Alaska's reputation as a state that values and supports our veterans to the utmost.

Thank you for your time and consideration.