

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 28, 2019

8:01 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative Harriet Drummond, Co-Chair  
Representative Sara Hannan, Co-Chair  
Representative Matt Claman  
Representative Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins  
Representative Steve Thompson  
Representative Josh Revak

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Sharon Jackson

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

HOUSE BILL NO. 72

"An Act establishing the month of February as Black History Month."

- MOVED HB 72 OUT OF COMMITTEE

HOUSE BILL NO. 56

"An Act establishing May 15 of each year as Hmong-American Veterans Day."

- HEARD & HELD

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: HB 72

SHORT TITLE: BLACK HISTORY MONTH

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) STORY

02/25/19	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/25/19	(H)	CRA
03/26/19	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124
03/26/19	(H)	Heard & Held
03/26/19	(H)	MINUTE(CRA)
03/28/19	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

BILL: HB 56

SHORT TITLE: ESTABLISH HMONG-AMERICAN VETERANS DAY

SPONSOR (s) : REPRESENTATIVE (s) TARR

02/20/19	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/20/19	(H)	MLV, CRA
03/05/19	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
03/05/19	(H)	Heard & Held
03/05/19	(H)	MINUTE (MLV)
03/07/19	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
03/07/19	(H)	Moved HB 56 Out of Committee
03/07/19	(H)	MINUTE (MLV)
03/08/19	(H)	MLV RPT 7DP
03/08/19	(H)	DP: THOMPSON, KOPP, RAUSCHER, TARR, JACKSON, TUCK, LEDOUX
03/28/19	(H)	CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

#### **WITNESS REGISTER**

REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, presented HB 72.

REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, introduced HB 56.

STEPHANIE ANDREW, Staff  
Representative Geran Tarr  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Presented HB 56 on behalf of Representative Tarr, prime sponsor.

VERDIE BOWEN, Director  
Office of Veteran Affairs  
Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA)  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on HB 56.

PASERT LEE, Founder  
Hmong Alaska Community, Inc.  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of HB 56.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[8:01:24 AM](#)

**CO-CHAIR SARA HANNAN** called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 8:01 a.m. Representatives Claman, Kreiss-Tomkins, Thompson, Revak, Drummond, and Hannan were present at the call to order.

**HB 72-BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

[8:02:21 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN announced that the first order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 72, "An Act establishing the month of February as Black History Month."

[8:02:56 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ANDI STORY, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, presented HB 72. She opined that it is important to recognize the contributions African-Americans have made in the nation and in Alaska. The proposed legislation would help people remember the contributions of former Senator Bettye Davis and attorney Mahala Ashley Dickerson, as well as to recognize the contributions currently being made by so many others. She offered to answer questions from the committee.

[8:03:42 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN noted that no amendments had been submitted.

[8:04:05 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE STORY, upon being invited to add final comment, stated that she thinks HB 72 would honor the diversity in communities.

[8:04:23 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND moved to report HB 72 out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, HB 72 was reported out of the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee.

[8:04:46 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 8:05 a.m. to 8:07 a.m.

**HB 56-ESTABLISH HMONG-AMERICAN VETERANS DAY**

8:07:55 AM

CO-CHAIR HANNAN announced that the final order of business would be HOUSE BILL NO. 56, "An Act establishing May 15 of each year as Hmong-American Veterans Day."

8:08:14 AM

REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced HB 56. She said it is an honor to have many Hmong veterans as constituents and she enjoys telling their story, because she thinks it is a story that everyone should know.

8:08:46 AM

STEPHANIE ANDREW, Staff, Representative Geran Tarr, Alaska State Legislature, presented HB 56 on behalf of Representative Tarr, prime sponsor. She said there was a covert operation by the Central Intelligence Agency, in which Hmong people were involved and lost tens of thousands of their people. She relayed that the Hmong are "a distinct ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia." The secret war was fought on behalf of the U.S. government. Ms. Andrew said the Hmong continue to be persecuted to this day, and many have [become refugees] in Australia and the United States - with an estimated 6,000 Hmong-Americans in Alaska currently.

MS. ANDREW advised that HB 56 seeks to recognize the sacrifice made by the Hmong veterans by making May 15, in perpetuity, Hmong-American Veterans Day in Alaska. She explained the reason May 15 was chosen is because May 15, 1977, was the first time the U.S. Government recognized that the secret war happened, and the Hmong people made these sacrifices on behalf of the U.S. She said the legacy of the sacrifice continues to have ramifications throughout the Hmong community and impacts all generations and those [Hmong] living in District 19. She indicated that passage of the bill "would promote, publicize, and increase awareness about the important role the Hmong people played in the United States' history and recognize the service and sacrifices that were made."

8:10:48 AM

REPRESENTATIVE TARR noted that in 2013, Representative LeDoux had passed a resolution naming May 15, 2013, Hmong-American Veterans Day. She indicated her understanding that the Hmong people [in her district] are excited for the possibility of "making this a permanent, recognized holiday in Alaska." She said she thinks this recognition is important, because when the U.S. Government asked for assistance from the Hmong people, "they responded and served honorably," and the U.S. Government has "never fulfilled the promise of veterans' benefits." She concluded that HB 56 would honor the sacrifices that were made.

[8:11:49 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DRUMMOND said the Municipality of Anchorage offers property tax exemptions for veterans. She asked if the proposed legislation would need to be recognized federally in order for the Hmong veterans to access benefits.

REPRESENTATIVE TARR responded that the piece missing is "the federal side of it," such as health care or other retirement benefits associated with service. She indicated that under HB 56, Hmong Veterans would be eligible for state benefits to veterans, such as the aforementioned property tax exemption. She said there previously have been resolutions supporting burials in military cemeteries. She said there had been a prominent leader who died a number of years ago and was not able to be buried as a military veteran. She said the budget bill that passed last year allowed veterans to be buried at any veterans' cemetery, with the exception of Arlington National Cemetery. She said she does not think there is any movement at the federal level "to offer the other benefits." She explained that is why she thinks it is so important to take steps to honor the service of the Hmong veterans. She said a driver's license bill for Hmong veterans was significant. In response to Co-Chair Drummond, she offered her understanding that the driver's licenses are soon to be released. She deferred to Verdie Bowen for further information on that topic.

[8:16:03 AM](#)

VERDIE BOWEN, Director, Office of Veteran Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA), gave the committee an update regarding the Hmong veteran license plates. He said the licenses probably would be ready for issue in 30-40 days.

[8:16:41 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN asked if there are additional benefits that could be offered to Hmong veterans.

MR. BOWEN answered yes; however, he said each piece offered would have to be done through separate legislation. He explained that as the state begins the process of recognizing the Hmong veterans, it will put pressure on the federal government to pass the federal benefits that are needed to honor these veterans.

[8:17:53 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TARR advised that Mr. Bowen could offer more information regarding the background of the Hmong veteran issue.

[8:18:32 AM](#)

MR. BOWEN, in response to a request from Co-Chair Hannan, offered an historical perspective. He stated that Hmong veterans began serving in 1961 and completed their service to the CIA in 1975, after which they were "left to their own to try and find their way out of the country." He said sadly, although many agreements were made between Hmong leadership and the CIA to facilitate care for the Hmong after the [Vietnam] War, because the war became a stalemate, not only did the Hmong no longer have a country, they had no place to live. He remarked that Laos claims to accept the Hmong people but is "still doing horrible things to the Hmong community." Mr. Bowen said the U.S. has been a safe haven [for the Hmong people], and he stated his belief that without the care that the U.S. has provided for them, [more Hmong people would have been lost]. As it stands, he reported, there used to be 300,000 Hmong people, but there are approximately 200,000 worldwide now. In Alaska there are about 93 Hmong veterans.

MR. BOWEN said he met with the Hmong to try to establish a birthdate for those who served, which he said is difficult to do because of the manner in which Hmong soldiers were drafted. He explained that Hmong soldiers were "drafted by the size of weapon they carried." He explained that a large weapon would be taken into the school, a mark [that was at the height of that weapon] would be made on the wall, and those children who were at least as tall as the mark were drafted. As the losses mounted, a smaller size of weapon was used as the marker. There was no education requirement, just the need for "a warm body behind a weapon." He stated the reason this army was so

significant is that it was over 30,000. He indicated that was the largest army the CIA has ever had.

MR. BOWEN concluded that within Alaska's communities the Hmong are teachers, principals, police officers, medical care professionals, and National Guard members who really contribute to the state of Alaska.

[8:22:06 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE TARR recollected one of her [Hmong-American] neighbors had been recruited at age 13.

CO-CHAIR HANNAN commented, "A pretty tragic chapter in our history."

[8:22:22 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN opened public testimony on HB 56.

[8:22:44 AM](#)

PASERT LEE, Founder, Hmong Alaska Community, Inc., testified in support of HB 56. He mentioned the dates February 8, 1961, to May 18, 1975, and said [the Hmong] volunteered to support [the CIA] during that time. He indicated that the Hmong fought against the communists. He mentioned the number 300,000 and indicated 35,000 died. He offered further statistics [audio indiscernible]. Mr. Lee said he hopes May 15 would become Hmong-Veterans Day.

[8:25:01 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE THOMPSON thanked Mr. Lee for his service.

[8:25:08 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE REVAK thanked Mr. Lee for his service and asked how many times he was wounded in Vietnam.

MR. LEE indicated that he had worked for radio operations. He mentioned the B-52 and F-14, 15, and 16. He indicated there was a bomb in his bunker that caused him to pass out for 86 hours; he said he had an AK-47 bullet in his left hand that had to be cut out; he mentioned an injury in his skull, at which point he referred back to the bunker incident.

REPRESENTATIVE REVAK noted he is a co-sponsor of HB 56, and he said he thinks the proposed legislation honoring the Hmong people who fought with U.S. military in Vietnam is "fantastic" and "long-overdue."

[8:27:20 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN closed public testimony on HB 56.

[8:27:44 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR HANNAN announced that HB 56 was held over.

[8:28:03 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 8:28 a.m.