

- KELLY GORDON:** For the first time, veterans of the Secret War who live in Minnesota are being recognized for their service. During the Vietnam War, the CIA recruited tens of thousands of predominantly Hmong soldiers for covert operations in Laos. So for years, those men fought on behalf of the US.
- A new state law that went into effect Saturday now allows those veterans to claim benefits. And, in fact, right now, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs is holding its first clinic to help Secret War veterans apply for those benefits. Joining me now with more is Democratic state Senator Susan Pha. She authored the bill that helped make this happen. Thanks for joining us, senator.
- SUSAN PHA:** Thanks for having me.
- KELLY GORDON:** So the legislature first passed this law in 2025. I know there were new additions in '26. Those went into effect this past Saturday. Tell us, overall, what are the new benefits that Secret War veterans can now apply for?
- SUSAN PHA:** So now, our veterans can get a veteran's designation on their Minnesota driver's license and Minnesota ID. They also have benefits to honor guards. They have burial privileges at state and national cemeteries. They have permanent grave marker availability to them. They have veteran's preference for veterans jobs. And that's really important.
- But most of our veterans are over the age of where they're working. And so they're mostly retired. So this is a benefit and recognition of them, but probably wouldn't be using it that often. And then they also get copies of the vital records provided to them. So, in general, I would say the most important benefit that they get is the official recognition that they are a US and Minnesota veteran.
- KELLY GORDON:** I know you were chair of the legislative task force that helped to create this. So how did you work with the VA to make it a reality?
- SUSAN PHA:** Oh, my gosh. The MDVA Commissioner Lindsey, Deputy Commissioner Ben Johnson, John Kelly are amazing to work with. We worked with them to make sure that we pulled together a task force and that we work through all of the benefits, we work through the criteria for eligibility, and we met, I believe it was, 10 times in the eight months to go over all of that. And we also brought in a lot of people, like the VSOs and the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs in to consult with us on some of the criteria and eligibility.
- KELLY GORDON:** So what impact-- you said that they don't necessarily need that job intro for these men because they're getting elderly. But what impact would these benefits have for them?
- SUSAN PHA:** The most important for them is really the burial privileges and the designation on their driver's license, honestly, in the honor guard. Most of these are in their 70s and 80s, a few in their 90s. They're not in the workforce, but it's that official recognition that finally they've been saying to everybody, we fought alongside American veterans and soldiers in the Vietnam War. But today, they finally have that recognition that, yes, we acknowledge that. And we fully recognize that you did fight in this war alongside the United States. And you are one of our veterans.
- KELLY GORDON:** Right. I understand that your father was a Secret War soldier. So I'm curious-- that had to have impacted how you put this together and why.

SUSAN PHA: It's deeply personal to me. My father fought in the Secret War. And I was only two years old when he got killed in battle. And I grew up my whole life without a father, but I grew up with my uncles and grandpas who would tell me stories. And so it's finally come full circle to really see that our veterans, who bled and who fought, are finally getting that recognition and that honor.

KELLY GORDON: Have you been able to talk with any veterans who would now qualify for these benefits about what this means to them?

SUSAN PHA: I did. So today was the very first claims clinic for people to come in, and apply, and fill out the application for benefits and eligibility. And there were literally over 200 of our veterans that came today. We filled up the entire room. And as they were waiting in line to do their application, they were sharing stories from back then in Laos during the war and just meeting with each other, almost like a reunion for these war heroes. And it was wonderful to see.

KELLY GORDON: Oh, that's fantastic. I think about the different places that veterans will go right now to meet with their comrades to say, hey, this was a unique experience that we shared and how important that community is to them and to healing. So I have to imagine that both having the chance to gather and having this official recognition from the government means so much to them.

SUSAN PHA: It does. And today, as everybody came together, they were all smiles. They brought all their documents that proved that they served in the war. And they were just so excited. And many of them said, we waited 50 years for this day today.

And as they were holding up all their documents to prove their eligibility, they were just so proud. It was really quite emotional to watch all of our veterans there together, and laughing, and sharing stories, and just together.

KELLY GORDON: Right. So this clinic that happened today, I think it's actually just starting to wrap up. I'm assuming there will be more in the future? How are you getting the word out to this community, this kind of specialized community-- mostly Hmong community, I'm guessing?

SUSAN PHA: Yep. And our Hmong and Lao community. And we've been working with a lot of our Hmong and Lao SGU veterans organizations to get the word out. We've also been advertising that. Today was extremely successful. And we will be having more of these clinics so that people can come, and do their application, and get help with their application-- make sure that anyone who is unsure about the criteria and eligibility can get help with that.

KELLY GORDON: OK. And I'm assuming there's some more information on the website if people want to look up what they would need or how they can get information to, maybe, an uncle or a grandfather-- they can pass that along so that they can make sure that they get signed up for these benefits, yes?

SUSAN PHA: Exactly. So on the MDVA website, they can go in under SGU, and they'll find all the information on there about upcoming clinics like this. We call it open house, but it's also clinics for people to come in and fill out an application. They also will get all the information about what documents they should be bringing and what are the benefits that these veterans will actually get.

KELLY GORDON: OK. Thank you so much. Really, I just am impressed with the program. And I'm sure this means so much to this community. So thank you, Senator Pha.

SUSAN PHA: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

KELLY
GORDON: State Senator Susan Pha is a Democrat from Brooklyn Park. And we should just mention that Senator Pha is running in a contested Democratic primary race next week against Nehemiah Garley.