

Submitter: Craig Wilhelm

On Behalf
Of:

Committee: House Committee On Emergency Management, General
Government, and Veterans

Measure: HB3001

Chair Grayber, Vice-Chairs Lewis and Tran, and members of the Committee, my name is Craig Wilhelm, and I am Oregon's Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army.

I am also a combat veteran, having served almost 14 years in the Army, most recently as a Commander of F/159th Aviation Regiment in Iraq and Afghanistan.

While not the same as losing a child or sibling in combat, as Wendall, Jeff, David, and Zac, I did lose many of my soldiers and friends on the battlefield. As an aviation commander, my unit lost 5 of our brothers in arms and 13 passengers in a Chinook helicopter crash near Ghazni, Afghanistan in 2005. I wrote letters of condolences to their families back home who had already received that horrifying knock at the door from a uniformed soldier and chaplain telling them their loved one would not be returning alive. I have visited these families and still feel their unimaginable loss. I know the selfless way that these service men and women – these heroes -- gave of themselves to our nation, and I am acutely aware of the monumental sacrifice and grief that their precious families continue to endure. Let us take a minute, right here, in this forum, to personally thank Wendell, Jeff, David, and Zac, for their and their loved ones' service to this State and to America in the name of our personal freedoms (stand and clap).

This is the reason I am here today. I sit before you in favor of these two House Bills – 3001 and 3000. As Oregon's Civilian Aide to the Army, it is one of my priorities handed down from Secretary Wormuth to support, advocate, and speak on behalf of our soldiers and families; this includes our Gold Star families.

These Bills will waive the fees for Gold Star Family members who are applying for a Fallen Hero roadside highway sign to memorialize their loved one; and the surcharge to obtain a Gold Star Registration license plate.

The sacrifices of Gold Star families are incredibly understated, and they shoulder the price paid for the defense of our freedoms and the safety of Americans at home and abroad. These bills, and I would hope many more like them, will lift any financial, emotional, or bureaucratic burden on our Gold Star families and give them the most opportunity to honor the legacy of their fallen hero and continue to recognize their life stories. The signs and the plates are small reminders of lives well-lived and lasting memorials....what an incredible tribute you are offering them as a gesture of gratitude for their loss. I think it is the least we can do as Oregonians to support families like

those represented here today and show our appreciation by rallying around all of them, sending a message from the Oregon legislature that: “we will never forget you, we will never forget your sacrifices, and we will always have your back.”

I know there are folks in this room and in your communities who might be swayed against the passing of these two Bills because of the States’ limited resources. There will be minor financial implications of this bill...yes. But, my goodness; we are talking a nominal cost when it comes to caring for the roughly 15,000 Gold Star family members in the State. I think it justifies the positive impacts it would have on our Gold Star families.

I cannot underscore enough my appreciation for the committee’s consideration and I urge their support for House Bill 3000 and House Bill 3001. Passing these two Bills is a simple but meaningful way to thank Gold Star Families for their sacrifice and help them in their journey of hope, healing, and remembrance. Thank you.