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**James M. Jeffords Center's
*Vermont Legislative Research Service***



Expanding Gold Star License Plates Eligibility

Currently, 47 states and one United States Territory have legislation that allows for mothers, if not more family members, to display a Gold Star license plate after the death of a family member in active duty.¹ Currently, the only states that don't include any legislation for Gold Star license plates are Washington D.C., Hawaii, Maine, and Michigan;² however, Michigan is currently in the final stages of passing legislation that would also allow the same benefit.³ In all states, the requirements for who is allowed to attain a Gold Star license plate and under what circumstances they are able to attain a Gold Star license plate differ.⁴ While Gold Star lapel buttons and service flags are issued by the Department of Defense, many states direct Gold Star license plate requests to state Departments of Motor Vehicles or state Offices of Veteran's Affairs.^{5,6} The awarding of Gold Star license plates is not controlled by the American Legion.

Background

During World War I, it became commonplace for the parents of soldiers who were serving in active duty to display a Blue Star Banner outside their home to signify their child was participating in the War. As the War progressed, the parents of those who had died in combat, training, accidents, or from sickness began to replace the top star of the Blue Star Banner, with a Gold Star to signify the sacrifice of their child. In 1928, a group of mothers formed an organization called the *Gold Star Mothers* to provide support for other mothers who lost children in World War I.⁷ In 1984, the organization was Congressionally Chartered and today,

¹ Stonesifer, Ruth V. "Gold Star Family License Plate Status, undated." (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.goldstarmoms.com/Resources/GSFLicensePlateStatus/GSFStatus.htm>

² Stonesifer, undated.

³ Morrow, Terry. "Veterans; Gold Star license plate eligibility extended." March 10, 2010. (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/bs/86/hf2567.html>

⁴ Stonesifer, undated.

⁵ American Gold Star Mothers. "Getting Your Gold Star Pin." (accessed April 21, 2011). <http://www.goldstarmoms.com/Join/GoldStarPin/GettingYourGoldStarPin.htm>

⁶ American Gold Star Mothers. "Gold Star Family License Plate Status." (accessed April 21, 2011). <http://www.goldstarmoms.com/Resources/GSFLicensePlateStatus/GSFStatus.htm>

⁷ Stonesifer, Ruth V. "History of the American Gold Star Mothers." (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.goldstarmoms.com/WhoWeAre/History/History.html>

serves to console the parents of those who have lost children in the Armed Forces and commemorate the sacrifice they gave.⁸

States with Restrictive Requirements

Many state regulations have key eligibility differences. Massachusetts, Ohio, Nebraska, New Jersey, California, and Arizona share similar guidelines constraining the license plate to parents of soldiers who have died specifically in a combat zone or on “active duty in the military service of the United States.” These guidelines omit the families of soldiers who died in training exercises and in some cases, as in the case of Arizona, are restricted to those who “died in a war while on active duty.”⁹ Massachusetts grants plates to “parents, children, or spouses of members of the military who were killed in action during wartime service.”¹⁰ California requires soldiers fall in the line of duty “during wartime or military operations,” including terrorist attacks.¹¹ Nebraska requires soldiers to have been in “good standing on active duty in the military service of the United States.”¹²

States With Broader Requirements

Many states have broader policies for family members that are eligible for Gold Star plates, though policy wording is extremely particular for each state. Many states do not specify whether families of U.S. military members who died in training accidents qualify for Gold Star plates. Connecticut, for example, allows Gold Star plates for families of soldiers who were killed in the “line of duty.”¹³ Minnesota’s policy includes families of soldiers who died “while serving honorably in active military service, whether of combat-related causes or otherwise.” A bill introduced in the Minnesota House of Representatives in March 2010 proposed to expand Gold Star eligibility from originally including spouses and parents of the deceased service member to surviving children and siblings as well.¹⁴

Ohio’s policy specifies that Gold Star plates are available to any member of the immediate family of a person who died in a combat zone while a member of any branch of the armed

⁸ Morrow, "Veterans; Gold Star license plate eligibility extended." March 10, 2010. (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/bs/86/hf2567.html>

⁹ Arizona State Legislature. "Gold star family special plates." (accessed February 8, 2011). www.azleg.state.az.us/FormatDocument.asp?inDoc=/ars/28/02431.htm&Title=28&DocType=ARS.

¹⁰ MassDOT. "Gold Star Family Plate." MassDOT. (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.mass.gov/rmv/veteran/goldstar.htm>.

¹¹ Walker, Mark. "Military: Marine dad first to get Gold Star California license plate." North County Times. (accessed February 8, 2011). http://www.nctimes.com/news/local/military/article_80ae912d-e295-5474-9737-861107459d83.html.

¹² "Gold Star Family License Plates." Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles. (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.dmv.ne.gov/dvr/specialty/goldstar.html>.

¹³ State of Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. "Gold Star Family License Plates." (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.ct.gov/dmv/cwp/view.asp?a=811&q=395440>

¹⁴ Minnesota House of Representatives. "Bill Summary H.F. 2567." (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/bs/86/hf2567.html>

forces of the United States. Ohio's definition of "immediate family" includes "a spouse, parent, (step parent, or other person who acted in loco parentis), grandparent, sibling (whether of the whole or half-blood, or by adoption), child (including those by adoption, or stepchild)." ¹⁵

Wisconsin has a similar policy that includes anyone who has had an immediate family member (spouse, grandparent, parent, sibling, child, stepchild, stepparent, grandchild, or the spouse of a grandparent, parent, sibling, child, stepchild, stepparent, or grandchild) that died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces or in forces incorporated as part of the U.S. armed forces. ¹⁶

Conclusion

It is clear that most states feel that it is necessary to recognize the sacrifice our soldiers have made by honoring at least their mothers with the recognition of a Gold Star license plate. With the ambiguous legislation that most states have, the common trend now seems to be to open up the restrictions family members are given to display a Gold Star Plate. However, due to the blurred wording of some states' legislation, it is unclear if these states do in fact differentiate between awarding this honor to those who have only died in active combat or those who have died at any point during their active duty. It appears as though more states allow for a broader definition in order to encompass more servicemen and women and to more wholly represent the original mission of the *Gold Star Mothers* organization.

This report was produced in response to a request from Representative Charles W. Bohi of Hartford by Luke Martin, Julie Seger, and Kristen Skager under the supervision of graduate student Kate Fournier and Professor Anthony Gierzynski on February 8, 2011.

Disclaimer: This report has been compiled by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

¹⁵ Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles. "Gold Star Family License Plates." (accessed February 8, 2011). http://www.bmv.ohio.gov/sp_gold_star_family.stm

¹⁶ Wisconsin Department of Transportation. "Gold Star license plates." (accessed February 8, 2011). <http://www.dot.wisconsin.gov/drivers/vehicles/personal/special/goldstar.htm>