



March 3, 2025

Ashleigh Barry Testimony Opposing Minnesota Senate File 1894

Thank you, Chairman Putnam and Members of the committee. My name is Ashleigh Barry, Senior Vice President of Communications for the National Association for Veterans Rights (NAVR). I am testifying as an advocate for Veterans and as someone who has spent years exposing the consequences of government inefficiency—both as an investigative journalist and as a senior executive at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

I am here to strongly oppose Minnesota SF 1894 as currently written because it threatens Veteran choice, worsens an already overburdened system, and ultimately harms the very individuals this legislation claims to protect.

A decade ago, I was reporting for CBS News in Phoenix, and helped to uncover the VA wait-time scandal that shocked the nation. I reported on Veterans who suffered and even died while waiting for benefits and care. That crisis was supposed to be a wake-up call. It was supposed to lead to real reform. And yet, here we are—still waiting, still failing Veterans, and now considering legislation that would take away their right to seek faster, more effective assistance.

Minnesota is home to more than **285,000 Veterans**, yet there are just under **300 Veteran Service Officers** available to assist them with benefits claims. That means each VSO is responsible for more than **350 Veterans**—a completely unsustainable workload. Meanwhile, the VA's average wait time to process a claim in Minnesota is **152 days**. In contrast, private-sector professionals, like those in NAVR, in many cases, help Veterans receive decisions in just **85 days**—nearly **two months faster**. That difference is more than just a statistic; it's a lifeline for Veterans who cannot afford to wait.

SF 1894 does nothing to address this disparity. Instead, it restricts Veterans' ability to choose expert claims assistance outside of an overwhelmed and bureaucratic system. This bill forces them into longer wait times, fewer resources, and unnecessary delays—precisely the same conditions that led to the Phoenix VA scandal in the first place.

Minnesota should be expanding options for Veterans, not limiting them. We need policies that prioritize efficiency, accessibility, and above all, **Veteran choice**. Senate File 1894, as currently

written, does the opposite. It strips Veterans of their right to seek the best possible assistance and forces them into a system that is already stretched beyond capacity.

I urge you to reject this bill. Our Veterans deserve better. They deserve choice, efficiency, and a system that works for them—not against them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ashleigh Barry', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ashleigh Barry

Senior Vice President of Communications

National Association for Veterans Rights (NAVR)