

Legislative Analysis



BLUE STAR MOTHERS DAY

Senate Bill 235 as passed by the Senate
Sponsor: Sen. Rick Outman
House Committee: Government Operations
Senate Committee: Veterans and Emergency Services
Complete to 6-9-23

Phone: (517) 373-8080
<http://www.house.mi.gov/hfa>

Analysis available at
<http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

SUMMARY:

Senate Bill 235 would create a new act to designate February 1 of each year as Blue Star Mothers Day in recognition of the contributions that Blue Star Mothers of America, Inc., has made to the state and the nation through the following aims and activities:

- Perpetuating the memory of those who have served the United States as members of the armed forces.
- Welcoming home returning veterans.
- Visiting wounded veterans in hospitals and rehabilitation centers.
- Assisting in veterans' ceremonies.
- Attending patriotic rallies and meetings.
- Maintaining true allegiance to the government of the United States.
- Upholding the American institutions of freedom, justice, and equal rights.
- Caring for the unsupported mothers who gave their children to the service of the nation.
- Providing moral support for its members.

The bill would take effect 90 days after being enacted.

BACKGROUND:

Service flags are most often hung as banners (vertically) in the front windows of homes where a family member is serving in the armed forces during a war or other hostilities. They also can be flown as flags (i.e., horizontally, from a pole). They have a white field bordered in red. A blue star is sewn on for each family member in military service. If the family member dies while serving, the blue star is covered with a slightly smaller gold star so that the blue forms a border around it. (In addition, some use a silver star for a service member wounded in action. This practice, while not officially sanctioned, goes back to when service flags were first widely used.)

The picture to the right shows a service flag with two blue stars in the window of a home in Oswego, New York, in June 1943.¹

The service flag was designed by a retired Army captain in Cleveland, Robert Quissner, shortly after the United States entered the First World War in April 1917. His flag was about



¹ Photo by Marjory Collins, 1943. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USW3-034572-C (b&w film neg.). <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/fsa/item/2017859603/>

the size of a legal-sized sheet of paper (8-1/2 by 14 inches).² He designed it to honor and show his pride in his two sons for their service in the war, mark his family's sacrifice, and express the hope that they would come home safely. He thought that, until they did, the flag would be a comfort to his family.³

The new custom quickly caught on with other families across the nation who had loved ones serving overseas—as can be seen in the titles of popular songs of the period: “There’s a Little Blue Star in the Window (And It Means All the World to Me),” “There’s a Service Flag Flying at Our House,” or “When the Little Blue Star in the Window Has Turned to Gold.” Service flags were also displayed by churches, schools, businesses, and local communities to honor their members or employees who were serving in the war.

As use of the flags and familiarity with them grew, the terms “blue star” and “gold star” came to be used to describe those who had a family member in active service, or who had lost such a family member, in phrases such as “blue star family,” “gold star mother,” or “blue star wife.” These phrases, rooted in service flags, continued to be used long after the war had ended and the flags had been taken down.

In Michigan, US-131 in St. Joseph County was designated the Gold Star Memorial Highway in 1924.⁴ American Gold Star Mothers, Inc., received its federal charter in 1928. The following year, Congress allocated \$5.0 million to pay the expenses of gold star mothers and gold star widows to enable them to visit the European gravesites of those they had lost. These “Gold Star pilgrimages” took place from 1930 to 1933 and provided the basis for a 1933 movie, “Pilgrimage,” directed by John Ford. Eventually about 6,700 women took the two-week trip, out of over 17,000 found to be eligible.⁵ A few years later, in 1936, the last Sunday in September was designated Gold Star Mother’s Day.⁶

During the Second World War, service flags were even more widely adopted, becoming a common and symbolically powerful feature of life on the home front, a reminder of shared sacrifice. That they were seen to be everywhere was mostly because of the scale of the mobilization—so many more Americans were serving, both numerically and proportionally,⁷ than in the First World War—but may also have been in part because the language of service flags had been used through the 1920s and 1930s to remember the First World War and commemorate its sacrifices. When the next war came, families and communities across the nation had a means still freshly in mind through which to express their wartime hope and pride.⁸

² This remained a common size for home banners. Note, though, that the policy prescriptions for service flags do not specify a size. See <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/134836p.pdf>

³ <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/sep-keyword/service-flag/>

⁴ LeRoy Barnett, “Roads of Remembrance,” *Michigan History Magazine*, July/August 2002, 20-21.

⁵ <https://blogs.loc.gov/manuscripts/2022/09/the-pilgrimages-of-gold-star-mothers-and-widows-in-the-1930s-a-view-into-veterans-and-womens-history/>

See also <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/summer/gold-star-mothers-1.html>

⁶ <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11200>

⁷ About 4.7 million Americans served in World War I, and about 16.1 million in World War II. The U.S. population was about 106 million in 1920, and about 132 million in 1940. The Smithsonian says that one in five families displayed a service flag during World War II. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/price-of-freedom/world-war-ii/star-window>

⁸ After World War II ended, several blue star and gold star memorials were dedicated throughout the nation. Most notably, the National Council of State Garden Clubs selected several roadways to beautify (e.g., by planting trees) and dedicate as Blue Star Memorial Highways. US-31, on the west side of the Lower Peninsula, became a Blue Star Memorial Highway in 1952 (per Barnett, cited above). New blue star and gold star memorials are being dedicated to this day. See <https://gardenclub.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/blue-star-program-history.pdf>.

Blue Star Mothers of America, Inc. is a national organization of mothers whose children are serving honorably in the United States Armed Forces.⁹

The group first met in Flint, Michigan, less than two months after the Pearl Harbor attack had brought the United States into the Second World War. A retired Army captain, George Maines, the military editor of the Flint *News-Advertiser*, published a notice in late January requesting information from mothers whose children were serving in the armed forces. He received over 1,000 responses. On February 1, 1942, Maines facilitated a meeting of about 300 women who gathered at Flint's Durant Hotel to create the Blue Star Mothers. The organization expanded quickly, with chapters forming in communities across the nation. Its first convention was held at Flint Central High School in March 1942, with 800 attending. By the time of its next convention, in 1943, it had 300,000 members. When the war ended in 1945, there were more than 500,000 members, with chapters in every state.¹⁰

During the Second World War, members provided moral and emotional support to one another and economic assistance to families who were having a hard time making ends meet with the service member gone. Members prepared care packages for service members overseas, and volunteers worked in train stations and visited hospitals to greet, comfort, cheer, and tend to those who were returning. They raised money to provide medical supplies and care for hospitalized and wounded veterans, and they led drives to collect material such as steel cans for the war effort.

According to the *Encyclopedia of the Veteran in America*:

Today the Blue Star Mothers of America have extended their support responsibilities to include work in rehabilitation centers, assistance with children of service members, civil defense including hurricane relief, and aid with securing veteran's benefits. This work is in addition to their traditional service of preparing care packages, raising money, and supporting USO endeavors.¹¹

The organization has nearly 6,000 members and around 200 chapters today, according to its website, with 14 chapters in Michigan.¹²

FISCAL IMPACT:

The bill would have no fiscal impact on the state or local units of government.

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■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House Fiscal Agency staff for use by House members in their deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.

⁹ Since 2011 the organization has also included grandmothers and female legal guardians. Its congressional charter is available here: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2010-title36/pdf/USCODE-2010-title36-subtitleII-partB-chap305.pdf>

¹⁰ Barbara Platz, "Blue Star Mothers: First in Flint," *Michigan History Magazine*, September/October 2011, 42-45.

¹¹ William Whyte III. "Blue Star Mothers." In *Encyclopedia of the Veteran in America*, vol. 1, edited by William Pencak. ABC-CLIO, 2009.

¹² <https://www.bluestarmothers.org/>