STATE OF NEW YORK

6706--A

2019-2020 Regular Sessions

IN SENATE

September 11, 2019

Introduced by Sen. BENJAMIN -- read twice and ordered printed, and when printed to be committed to the Committee on Rules -- recommitted to the Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security and Military Affairs in accordance with Senate Rule 6, sec. 8 -- committee discharged, bill amended, ordered reprinted as amended and recommitted to said committee

AN ACT requiring the division of veterans' services to review issues relating to veterans' abilities to access state parks, lands and facilities; and providing for the repeal of such provisions upon expiration thereof

The People of the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

Section 1. This act shall be known and may be cited as the "outdoor Rx act".

§ 2. Legislative findings and intent. The legislature hereby finds and declares that protecting the physical, mental and behavioral health of veterans is critical to ensure successful re-entry into civilian life. Studies have shown that time outdoors can be a valuable adjunct therapy in addition to more traditional health care, while also reducing reliance on prescription medication. The therapeutic benefits of time spent outdoors is clinically proven and is known to help reduce stress, improve concentration, and promote overall well-being, both physical and mental. Outdoor-based therapeutic programs hold particular promise for people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Military Sexual Trauma, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Substance Use Disorders. Outdoor programs including adventure therapy, wilderness therapy, horticultural therapy, walk-and-talk therapy, and other nature-based programs, are currently being used by mental health professionals and are shown to have benefits including reduction of stress, restoration of attention, and an improved sense of well-being. New York state is home to natural beauty from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean, and has a significant

EXPLANATION--Matter in *italics* (underscored) is new; matter in brackets [-] is old law to be omitted.

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amount of open space, including the Adirondack and Catskill parks. Recognizing the healing benefits of outdoor-based therapeutic programs to residents of the state, particularly veterans and individuals recovering from substance abuse or a physical or mental trauma, the legislature supports the establishment of an outdoor Rx act.

§ 3. 1. The director of the division of veterans' services shall, in consultation with the office of parks, recreation and historic preservation, the department of environmental conservation, the department of health, and the office of mental health, review:

a. barriers that exist to provide veterans with increased access to state lands and opportunities for medical treatment and nature-based therapy and programming, including barriers to transportation, handicap accessibility, cultural barriers, mental health stigmas, public awareness of state outdoor resources, lack of experience in the outdoors, and funding for public and private programs;

b. current state policies regarding free and discounted access to state parks, lands, and recreational facilities by veterans, service-connected disabled veterans, gold star families, and other military-connected individuals;

c. opportunities to formalize coordination between the division of veterans' services, other state agencies, and partner organizations regarding the use of public lands or other outdoor spaces to facilitate access, medical treatment and nature-based therapy for veterans;

d. state lands, based on veterans' demographics including, but not limited to, service-connected disabled veterans, that should be prioritized for access;

e. recommendations, following consultation with appropriate veterans' outdoor recreation groups, to reduce barriers and better facilitate the use of state owned and managed lands for access, preventative care, medical treatment, and nature-based therapy; and

f. estimated costs of implementing such recommendations and expanding access/benefits, as well as potential funding sources, including state funding and public-private partnership opportunities.

2. Following such review, which shall be completed no later than six months from the effective date of this act, the division of veterans' services shall submit findings to the governor, the temporary president of the senate, the speaker of the assembly, the minority leader of the senate, the minority leader of the assembly, the chair of the assembly committee on veterans' affairs, and the chair of the senate committee on veterans, homeland security, and military affairs. Information shall also be posted in a timely manner on the division of veterans' services' website and a link to such document shall also be available on the websites of the office of parks, recreation and historic preservation and the department of environmental conservation.

§ 4. This act shall take effect immediately and shall expire and be deemed repealed December 31, 2022.