

Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Max Taylor 271-1403

HB 404, relative to information on the hike safe card.

Hearing Date: April 10, 2025

Time Opened: 9:45 a.m.

Time Closed: 10:09 a.m.

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Pearl, McConkey, Watters and Rosenwald

Members of the Committee Absent : Senator Watters

Bill Analysis: This bill includes domestic partners and their children in the definition of family for purposes of purchasing a "Hike Safe" card.

Sponsors:

Rep. Darby

Rep. Telerski

Who supports the bill: Representative Will Darby (Hillsborough County District 11), Major David Walsh (NH Fish & Game), Noah Telerski

Who opposes the bill:

Who is neutral on the bill:

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Representative Will Darby

Hillsborough County District 11

- Representative introduced HB 404, explaining the bill seeks to expand the definition of “family” under the voluntary Hike Safe Card program administered by the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.
- He explained the bill was developed in response to recommendations from the 2023 study committee on Fish and Game funding and partnerships.
- He stated that currently, the definition of family under the Hike Safe Card is limited to legal spouses, children, stepchildren, and guardians. Representative Darby stated this excludes many modern family structures, including cohabiting partners who share a household and raise children together.

- He stated the bill aims to increase engagement and revenue by making the program more inclusive and appealing to younger and more diverse family units.
- Representative Darby shared personal and constituent examples to illustrate the need for this change and emphasized that expanding the definition will help unlock partnerships with organizations that align with broader family definitions.
- He explained the term “domestic partner” is defined in the amended bill as someone who shares the same address as the purchaser, a definition added after consultation with Colonel Jordan of Fish and Game to ensure enforceability.
- He stated current Hike Safe Card prices are \$25 for an individual and \$35 for a family. He added that the program generates \$100,000 to \$300,000 annually, with last year being the most successful to date.
- Senator Rosenwald asked if Representative Darby considered also adding the purchaser’s parents or the spouse’s parents. Given the rise in multi-generational households.
 - Representative Darby stated he had considered adding that to the definition. However, he preferred the bill as written to avoid unintended complexity.
- Senator McConkey asked if the revenue from the cards is growing or declining.
 - Representative Darby stated that based on findings from the relevant study committee, revenue is increasing with last year being the highest year yet.
- Senator McConkey asked if the bill is addressing a real problem, given the growth in revenue.
 - Representative Darby explained that the bill originated from a constituent with a personal experience. Additionally, he stated outdoor organizations such as the Granite Outdoor Alliance have testified that Fish and Game needs better engagement with younger and nontraditional families. He stated this bill supports that outreach and that he believes the bill is a proactive step to sustain and grow support for Fish and Game.

Noah Telerski

Resident of Nashua

- Mr. Telerski state that HB 404 originated from his personal experience with the Hike Safe Card program.

- He explained that two years ago, while preparing for his wedding, he attempted to buy a family Hike Safe Card with his fiancée, but found that the program limited eligibility to legally married spouses.
- He explained that as a result, they were forced to buy two individual cards, since they were not yet married and did not want to risk ineligibility in the event of a hiking emergency.
- Mr. Telerski emphasized that this experience made him realize that many modern families, including cohabiting couples with children, are excluded by the current legal definition of “family” in the program.
- He argued that updated the definition to include unmarried domestic partners would encourage greater participation in the program, increase revenue for the Fish and Game Department, and promote trail safety through better engagement and outreach.
- Mr. Telerski stressed that the definition of family should reflect modern realities, where many couples and parents choose not to marry but still function as family units.

Major David Walsh

New Hampshire Fish and Game

- Major Walsh stated Fish and Game believe HB 404 modernizes and simplifies the definition of “family” for the Hike Safe Card and makes the program more inclusive, without deterring participation.
- He reported that the Hike Safe Card generated \$390,000 in revenue in 2024, marking a continued year-over-year increase since its inception in 2015.
- He stated that for the first time in 2023, more non-residents than residents purchased the card, a trend that Fish and Game views positively for tourism and engagement.
- He explained that on average, Fish and Game conducts 180 search and rescue missions annually, but only recommends billing in about 12 cases, all of which are reviewed by the Attorney General’s Office.
- He stated the bill’s flexibility in defining family is not expected to reduce revenues, as many households still prefer to purchase their own cards individually if not hiking together.
- Senator Pearl asked if most rescue subjects hold the Hike Safe Card or hunting license holders.
 - Major Walsh stated the majority are not Hike Safe Card holders, but also not reckless. He explained billing only occurs in cases of recklessness, such as ignoring extreme weather conditions.

- Senator McConkey asked if there is a limit to how many people can be listed on a family card, and would expanding it to include extended family, such as grandparents, help revenue.
 - Major Walsh stated there is no current cap, and expanding the definition would not harm revenue. He stated that most people in large households would not buy separate cards anyway, so broadening eligibility wouldn't result in a net loss.
- Senator McConkey asked if Fish and Game could improve outreach using modern tools.
 - Major Walsh stated the department is working with the DMV, Welcome Centers, and social media platforms to increase visibility and advertising for the Hike Safe Card.
- Senator Rosenwald asked if Fish and Game has considered implementing different fee schedules for residents and non-residents.
 - Major Walsh stated Fish and Game has not implemented different fee schedules for residents and non-residents. However, the topic has been raised, but Fish and Game is cautious about changing the pricing structure due to the program's success. He stated the card now covers more than half of all search and rescue costs.
- Senator Rosenwald asked if Major Walsh could elaborate on information provided by the LBA, on how much the card covers.
 - Major Walsh stated Fish and Game has seen conflicting figures as well. However, based on internal data, the Hike Safe Card program provides the majority of search and rescue funding.
- Senator Rosenwald asked how the department verifies someone as a spouse if they do not share a last name.
 - Major Walsh stated rescue personnel ask basic questions on scene. He stated that if needed, they verify addresses. He explained there is no requirement to present a marriage certificate. Rather, self-reporting and address checks are sufficient.

Summary of testimony presented in opposition: None.

Neutral Information Presented: None.