



We exist to help those who cannot help themselves

STATEMENT OF
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PAST NATIONAL COMMANDER/
LEGISLATIVE OFFICER
OF THE
AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE/U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C.
MARCH 16, 2016

Chairmen and members of the House and Senate Veteran's Affairs committee and guests, my name is Charles Susino Jr., Past National Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War and Chairman of the Legislative Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to express our comments today.

Last year at this time, we publicly stated that we supported Secretary McDonald's efforts to change the VA culture and reorganize to obtain better access, treatment experience, and understanding for the veteran without compromising efficiencies and accountabilities. Recently, the Secretary outlined to you his plan to transform the VA into a high performance organization. Again, we support his efforts but remind you a year has passed. A year where waiting for medical appointments have decreased only through a one-time costly overtime, but lines are still long. A year where the discussion at the top levels has changed but veterans' experience has not. From our perspective, it is important to empower and leverage the local management at the VA facilities

I have personally dealt with the New Jersey VA system for decades. While I have had my share of frustrations with the VA system and its bureaucracy, I applaud the leadership and efforts of Director Ken Mizrach. Over the past 2+ decades he is accessible, conducts informative and open meetings with veterans groups, and takes action on issues raised by the veterans' community. Are things perfect in New Jersey, no, but we see improvements largely due to strong leadership inside a challenging VA environment. In this regard, among the other initiatives, the Secretary needs to attract and retain top leaders in these key roles. This local level of management is the face to the veterans, veterans' service organizations, the local community, and policy makers at treatment facilities, impacting staff and patients alike.

With respect to Memorials in Washington, it is gratifying to hear the progress of the WWI memorial with its targeted completion to coincide with the centennial of the end of "The Great War", where 5 million Americans served. As time passes there are less and less of us that remember how life in our country changed in support of a large scale war. We need high visibility and informative Memorials to continue the public awareness and education so that history might not repeat itself.

Regarding legislation, work needs to continue addressing the needs of our nation's veterans. Please support us:

S. 290: Increasing the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability to Veterans Act of 2015.

S. 223: Requiring the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a pilot program on awarding grants of furniture, household items, and other assistance to homeless veterans to facilitate their transition into permanent housing.

S. 627: A bill requiring the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to revoke bonuses paid to employees involved in list manipulations, and for other purposes.

I ask that you give special attention to the amendment to The North Korea Sanctions Enforcement Act. The amendment aims to protect efforts to recover the remains of American service members in North Korea since sanctions alone could otherwise hamper recovery.

H.R. 1670: National POW/MIA Remembrance Act of 2015 directing the Architect of the Capitol to place in the United States Capitol a chair honoring American Prisoners of War/Missing in Action.

H.R. 677: American Heroes COLA Act of 2015 so that the COLA increases are automatically provided to our veterans and DIC recipients. In addition as I stated last year, DIC has not been increased, aside from COLA, in decades and we ask for your support to correct this long standing inequity.

H.R. 2974: Veteran Continuity of Care Act to amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to increase the duration of follow-up care provided under the Veterans Choice Program

H.R. 3980: Veterans Freedom of Healthcare Act eliminating the sunset date for the Veterans Choice Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs and to expand eligibility for the program.

H.R. 993: Veterans' Independent Living Enhancement Act to repeal the limitation on the number of veterans authorized to be enrolled in programs of independent living services and assistance administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

During this election year, there have been calls from some candidates to shift VA from its primary role of directly providing care to that of simply paying outside providers. We ask that Congress not waver from its responsibility to protect any intrusion that threatens the promises made to those heroes who serve their country.

Thank you for your time and consideration on these matters.

God bless our troops
God bless America
---Remember---

Charles Susino, Jr.
Past National Commander/Legislative Director
American Ex-Prisoners of War