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NATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland
20706-4380
TELEPHONE: 301-459-9600
FAX: 301-459-7924
E-MAIL: amvets@amvets.org

TESTIMONY

OF

**DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**

FOR THE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. SENATE

***ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION***

CONCERNING:

LEGISLATIVE HEARING (HEALTH & BENEFITS):

S 2106, S 2134, S 2170

&

DRAFT LEGISLATION

WEDNESDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2015

Distinguished members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, it is my pleasure to be here today representing AMVETS' position on the following pending legislation:

- S. 2106, the Wounded Warrior Employment Improvement Act of 2015
- S. 2134, the 'Grow Our Own Directive: Physician Assistant Employment & Education Act of 2015
- S. 2170, the Veterans E-Health & Telemedicine Support Act of 2015
- S. 2253, the Veterans Education & Restoration Act of 2015
- S. ____, Discussion draft – to establish procedures within the VA for processing Whistleblower complaints.

I would like to begin today's statement with the following introductory remarks prior to turning to each specific piece of legislation: As the United States absorbs the aftereffects of more than a decade of continuous war and in the face of the planned draw-down of military personnel, the physical and mental health of our military and veterans will continue to be priority issues for AMVETS, the veteran's community and hopefully congress. Thanks to improvements in battlefield medicine, swift triage, aeromedical evacuations and trauma surgery, more combat-wounded than ever before are surviving horrific wounds and will be needing long-term rehabilitation, life-long specialized medical care, sophisticated prosthetics, etc. Your committee has a responsibility to ensure that the VA and our nation live up to the obligations imposed by the sacrifices of our veterans.

It is encouraging to acknowledge at this time that, despite the extraordinary sacrifices being asked of our men and women in uniform, the best and the brightest continue to step forward to answer the call of our nation in its time of need. I know that each of you is aware of, and appreciates the numerous issues of importance facing our military members, veterans and retirees.

Pending Legislation

S. 2106, the Wounded Warrior Employment Improvement Act of 2015 - AMVETS supports this legislation which directs the VA Secretary to develop & publish an action plan for improving the vocational rehabilitation program of the VA. AMVETS believes that the VA needs to provide veterans with the highest level of transition assistance, giving special attention to disabled veterans, in a more efficient and timely manner.

AMVETS suggests improving currently existing VA public/public partnerships and making new connections with providers in order to provide veterans with the broadest array of services and resources as possible.

It is our belief that part of the reason for the disproportionately low participation of Post-9/11 veterans in the VA's Voc-Rehab program is that it is not as well publicized, and therefore not as well known, as it could be in the veteran community.

This legislation's ultimate goal should be to better enable catastrophically injured, eligible veterans to return to productive lives. Hopefully, the provisions outline in this bill will better able the VA to do just that.

S. 2134, the Grow Our Own Directive: Physician Assistant Employment & Education Act of 2015 - AMVETS enthusiastically supports this legislation which seeks to address the physician assistant shortage within the VA. AMVETS loves this approach which would serve the dual purpose of:

- helping to improve timely access to healthcare; and
- helping to reduce veteran unemployment

AMVETS also applauds the fact that the eligible participants must meet certain requirements including: previous military healthcare experiences, which make this effort more cost effective.

It seems obvious that by increasing the number of PAs within the VA system, the burden on Physicians and other clinicians, would be reduced. This in turn should make it easier for a veteran to get in to see their doctor.

S. 2170, Veterans E-Health & Telemedicine Support Act of 2015 – AMVETS supports this legislation which seeks to increase timely access to healthcare resources through the use of telemedicine services by licensed, registered or state certified clinicians in any state, regardless of whether either or both are located in a VA facility.

There's no denying that the practice of telemedicine continues to expand as one of the fastest growing and viable healthcare options. Just as importantly however, is to ensure that those services are being provided by the properly accredited professionals.

S. 2253, Veterans Education Relief & Restoration Act of 2015 – AMVETS supports this legislation, which seeks to protect education benefits if a veteran, due to no fault of their own, is forced to discontinue a course as a result of an educational institution's permanent closure and did not receive credit or lost training time toward completion of the education program, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) educational assistance payments shall not, for a specified period of time, be:

- charged against the individual's entitlement to educational assistance, or
- counted against the aggregate period for which such assistance may be provided.

This seems pretty straight forward in its intent, though I have no actual data on how often this type of situation occurs. It seems only right and proper, however, not to penalize a veteran for something entirely out of his/her control, especially because whatever course they didn't get credit for will have to be repeated elsewhere at a future date.

S. ____, Discussion draft – to establish procedures within the VA for processing Whistleblower Complaints – AMVETS wholeheartedly supports this very important piece of legislation which seeks to address the issue of retaliation by VA supervisors against whistleblower employees. This is an absolutely heinous practice which needs immediate, system-wide action.

If a VA employee, at any level, is violating laws or regulations, misusing or wasting funds, stealing or putting veterans in danger, either by their actions or lack thereof, then they are the ones who should be targeted by the department, not the person (whistleblower) who steps forward to report the illegal actions. Unfortunately, this is not how the process currently works, in fact, it's just the opposite – the whistleblower seems to get all the negative attention and is the one who gets prosecuted, while the evil doer is allowed to continue unpunished. This is both wrong and a travesty of justice and it should not be allowed to continue under any circumstances.

This completes my testimony at this time and I thank you again for the opportunity to offer our comments on pending legislation. I will be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.



Diane M. Zumatto

AMVETS National Legislative Director



Diane M. Zumatto of Spotsylvania, VA joined AMVETS as their National Legislative Director in August 2011. Zumatto a native New Yorker and the daughter of immigrant parents decided to follow in her family's footsteps by joining the military. Ms. Zumatto is a former Women's Army Corps/U.S. Army member who was stationed in Germany and Ft. Bragg, NC, was married to a CW4 aviator in the Washington Army National Guard, and is the mother of four adult children, two of whom joined the military.

Ms. Zumatto has been an author of the *Independent Budget* (IB) since 2011. The IB, which is published annually, is a comprehensive budget & policy document created by veterans for veterans. Because the IB covers all the issues important to veterans, including: veteran/survivor benefits; judicial review; medical care; construction programs; education, employment and training; and National Cemetery Administration, it is widely anticipated and utilized by the White House, VA, Congress, as well as, other Military/Veteran Service Organizations.

Ms. Zumatto regularly provides both oral and written testimony for various congressional committees and subcommittees, including the House/Senate Veterans Affairs Committees. Ms. Zumatto is also responsible for establishing and pursuing the annual legislative priorities for AMVETS, developing legislative briefing/policy papers, and is a quarterly contributor to '*American Veteran*' magazine. Since coming on board with AMVETS, Ms. Zumatto has focused on toxic wounds/Gulf War Illness, veteran employment and transition, military sexual trauma, veteran discrimination and memorial affairs issues.

Zumatto, the only female Legislative Director in the veteran's community, has more than 20 years of experience working with a variety of non-profits in increasingly more challenging positions, including: the American Museum of Natural History; the National Federation of Independent Business; the Tacoma-Pierce County Board of Realtors; The Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs; Saint Martin's College; the James Monroe Museum; the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield and The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States. Diane's non-profit experience is extremely well-rounded as she has variously served in both staff and volunteer positions including as a board member and consultant. Ms. Zumatto received a B.A. in Historic Preservation from the University of Mary Washington, in 2005.

AMVETS, National Legislative Director
4647Forbes Blvd, Lanham, MD 20706
[301-683-4016](tel:301-683-4016) / dzumatto@amvets.org


16 November 2015

The Honorable Johnny Isakson, Chairman
U.S. Senate, Committee on Veterans' Affairs
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6375

Dear Chairman Isakson:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any federal agency or program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane M. Zumatto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Diane M. Zumatto
AMVETS National Legislative Director