

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees

*March 3, 2021
Presented by
John Hilgert*

*President, National Association State Directors of Veterans Affairs
Director, Nebraska Department of Veterans' Affairs*

INTRODUCTION

Chairman Tester, Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Moran, Ranking Member Bost and distinguished members of the committees on Veterans Affairs, my name is John Hilgert, and I serve as the President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) and as the Director of the Nebraska Department of Veterans' Affairs.

NASDVA is comprised of the State Directors of Veterans Affairs for all fifty States, the District of Columbia, and five territories: American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. In person I would have been joined by – John Scocos, NASDVA Executive Director, and former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs, and Tom Palladino, Executive Director, Texas Veterans Commission and NASDVA Senior Vice President.

Let me highlight our interests to leave time for your questions.

States and Territories continue to increase their role as holistic service providers to Veterans. We coordinate, connect, and convene teams of state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other stakeholders to address veteran employment, education, economic empowerment, and continued whole health and wellness. Despite constrained State budgets and the challenges of COVID-19, States collectively contribute over \$10 billion each year in service to our nation's Veterans and their families. NASDVA, through its Member States and Territories, is the single organization outside of the federal VA that serves 19 million Veterans.¹ Given that SDVAs are tasked and held accountable by our respective Governors, State Boards or Commissions, we are well positioned to deliver efficient, effective, and veteran focused services.

Veterans Healthcare Benefits and Services: NASDVA supports the continued implementation of the provisions of the VA MISSION Act. NASDVA's priorities for the care of

¹Veteran population estimate, as of September 30, 2019 (VetPop 2016) 19,119,131. See FY 2019 GDX available: <https://www.va.gov/vetdata/Expenditures.asp>

our Veterans are consistent with those of the VA, especially in the area of behavioral health and suicide prevention. NASDVA supports an “all of the above” strategy for health care delivery which recognizes the diversity, geography, and demographic makeup of today’s Veterans.

State Veterans Homes: The State Veterans Home Construction Grant Program is the largest and one of the most important partnerships we have with the VA.

COVID-19 focused national attention on State Veterans Homes. In Nebraska, I am responsible for four State Veterans Homes located across the state with over 480 residents. Given that a number of State Veterans Homes (roughly 30%) are not CMS certified, the VA may need to provide more support to State Veterans Homes when health measures are directed but unfunded. The VA may also consider defining what a maintenance charge covers in a State Veterans Home relative to what specialty care the VA covers. Arguably, both VA and State Veterans Homes have a role to provide mental health care services. The challenge is delineating the cost of care associated with geriatric psychiatry. To be direct, NASDVA would offer that the VA should allow mental health services to be deemed as specialty care services and not a basic service expected to be provided by the State Veterans Home through the basic per diem allowance. This would allow VA to provide the services desperately needed by veterans. Additionally, the VA with congressional support could also consider changing the 70% Service Disability provision for full State Veterans Home per diem from the VA to 50% Service Disability. This would be an immediate and tangible step to help states fund the cost of care.

Despite all of the challenges of COVID-19, NASDVA supports a continued commitment to the significant funding of the State Veterans Home Construction Grant Program. NASDVA strongly supports increasing funding to at least \$500 million given the increases in demand for long-term care for veterans.²

² Government Accountability Office, VA Health Care: Veterans’ Use of Long-Term Care is Increasing, and VA Faces Challenges in Meeting the Demand, GAO-20-284, (February 19, 2020). Available: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-284>

NASDVA is encouraged by the Committee's oversight and interest in examining and improving the VA's support to State Veterans Homes. Use NASDVA as resource to validate lessons learned, test ideas, and identify potential legislative changes. For example, as the VA's Millennium Electronic Health Record is deployed, use the State of Washington to test consistency for the seamless delivery of quality care. Don't let the COVID-19 crisis go to waste.

Veterans Benefits Services: Given the claims backlog and number of claims on appeal, NASDVA recommends serious consideration to making federal funding available to States to assist with outreach efforts "on the ground" to further reduce the backlog and maintain progress on expediting existing and new claims. NASDVA also recommends funding and focus for VA adjudication of these claims. Beyond funding, the VA should offer more virtual training to accredited service officers to improve the "inputs" (changes to forms, processes, or policies) to the benefits systems. Finally, NASDVA would like to emphasize the important role of the National Personnel Records Center in providing the vital records which are the lifeblood for the system.

Burial and Memorial Benefits: NASDVA appreciates the National Cemetery Administration's collaborative partnership with States, Territories and Tribal governments. We recommend the FY 22 Veterans Cemetery Grant Program budget be increased to at least \$60M, comprised of \$50M for construction and \$10M specifically designated for improvements and emergent needs.

VA Funding: Once released, NASDVA would welcome the opportunity to review the details of the President's Fiscal Year 22 VA budget request. Full Congressional support of the President's Fiscal Year 22 VA budget request will likely be a vital starting point to meet the growing needs of Veterans. NASDVA is committed to working with Congressional and VA leaders to ensure scarce resources are allocated to priorities that will meet our Veterans' most pressing needs. NASDVA is encouraged by the committee's efforts to add the Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary to the

Defense Production Act Committee to elevate the needs of veterans to combat COVID-19.³

Transition Assistance: Our organization strongly encourages the most effective transition program possible for all military service members. A successful warm hand-off between the Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to a veteran's state of residence can mean the difference between starting the journey to school, employment, and economic stability or spiraling downward to unaddressed medical and behavioral health challenges and even homelessness. NASDVA strongly encourages the Department of Defense to revise the 12 year old iteration of the DD-214 and add a block for a veteran's email address. We are very encouraged by changes to the program over the last few years; however, we see the transition as a critical point to prevent subsequent challenges in the veteran lifecycle.

Women Veterans: Women now comprise nearly 20% of the Armed Forces and assume roles in nearly all military occupational specialties.⁴ NASDVA strongly encourages the VBA to make the Women Veteran Coordinator role a full-time duty instead of a collateral duty. We believe this simple change will support women as they access their benefits and services through VBA.

Distinguished members of the committees on Veterans Affairs, we respect the important work that you have done and continue to do to improve Veteran services and benefits. With your continued support, **we can** ensure that the needs of our Veterans and their families are addressed, adequately resourced and remain a priority.

Use State Directors as a resource.

Thank you for including NASDVA in this very important hearing.

I look forward to your questions.

³ SCVA Press Release. "Tester, Moran Urge President Biden to Include VA Secretary on Defense Production Act Committee to Combat COVID-19." (February 19, 2021). Available: <https://www.veterans.senate.gov/newsroom/majority-news/tester-moran-urge-president-biden-to-include-va-secretary-on-defense-production-act-committee-to-combat-covid-19>

⁴ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Personnel and Readiness. Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2017 Summary Report. Published in 2018. Accessed Feb 24, 2021. <http://www.cna.org/research/pop-rep>