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A M V E T S

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STATEMENT OF

LARRY E. VIA
AMVETS NATIONAL COMMANDER

BEFORE THE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. SENATE

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

CONCERNING

AMVETS' LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

WEDNESDAY, 20 MAY 2015

216 HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING

10:00 A.M

AMVETS - 2015 Legislative Priorities

Federal Government Reform

- Extend Advanced Appropriations to all Remaining Discretionary & Mandatory Programs
- Strengthen Accountability & Ease VA Hiring Protocols
- Implement Whistleblower Protections
- Ensure Adequate Investment in VA Capital Infrastructure
- Improve & Modernize VA/DoD Information Technology Systems

Toxic Wounds – Recognition & Treatment

- Recognition of Gulf War Illnesses and the Need for Continued Research
- Compensation for Gulf War Veterans

Veteran Unemployment

- Veteran Anti-Discrimination
- Civilian Credentials for Military Training & Experience
- Veterans Priority of Service in Employment & Training Program

VA/DoD Health Care & Mental Health

- Ensure Timely Access to Highest Quality Care
- Modernize Appointment Scheduling System
- Leverage Coordinated Purchased Care

Veterans Benefits

- Protect Earned Retirement and Health Care Benefits
- Create Fully Developed Appeals Pilot Program

Women Veterans & Service Members

- Eliminate Military Sexual Trauma (MST)/Sexual Harassment
- Ensure Availability of Specialized Housing for Veterans with Dependent Children
- Improve Access to Gender-Specific Health Services

POW/MIA Recovery/Identification & Cemetery Affairs

- Continuing Over Site of DPMO & Mortuary Affairs Operations
- Increase Veterans Burial Benefits
- Creation of POW/MIA Forever Stamp
- Provide VA Headstones for Unmarked 19th & Early 20th Century Veterans Graves

Honor/Support/Recognition

- Support of the State of Israel
- Recognize Contribution of LAO/HMONG Special Forces
- Support Federal Court Ruling for the National Old Soldiers Home at WLA
- Support for the Republic of China on Taiwan
- Recognition of USS Frank E. Evans
- Creation of an AMVETS Stamp

Prologue: Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members, on behalf of the quarter of a million members of AMVETS, we appreciate this opportunity to share our legislative concerns and comment on issues of importance to all American veterans.

AMVETS, a leader since 1944 in preserving the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces, has been proudly providing support for veterans, active duty and reserve component service members, their families and survivors, for well over half a century. Originally founded by World War II veterans, AMVETS, the most inclusive Veteran Service Organization in the country, is comprised of individuals who have honorably served in the U.S. Armed Forces from every era, every branch of service, and every rank.

Guided by our core principles – Veterans, Family, Patriots and Volunteers, AMVETS seeks to enhance and defend the earned benefits of all American men and women, who are serving or have served honorably and selflessly in our Armed Forces, through leadership, advocacy and service. As a leading advocate for veteran's rights and benefits, as well as one of the four authors of the *Independent Budget*, AMVETS serves as one of the preeminent voices of American Veterans on Capitol Hill.

Introduction: We should always be mindful of the many contributions made by our veterans to the growth and development of the United States. In fact, the very foundations of the American way of life were, in large part, hewn by individuals who, at some point in their lives served in the United States Armed Forces. During our nation's infancy it was understood that military service was a highly accepted and even expected obligation of U.S. citizenship. Then and now, thanks to the strong leadership and willingness of our service members and veterans to set the example as true influential frontrunners in all areas of society - economic, political and social, we are able to enjoy the stature that comes from being a leader in the global community.

Our service members have a long history of shouldering the burden and bearing the sacrifice of defending this country on behalf of all its citizens. It is for this reason that our veterans and military members have been the recipients of the promises and support of a grateful nation. Veterans 'benefits' have always been bought and paid for through an individual's service exacted sacrifice and therefore should not be adversely affected by politics or any dereliction of duty on the part of congress. The promises made to our service members, who stepped forward and selflessly raised their right hands as part of a solemn oath to 'support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic', must be unswervingly upheld and fulfilled in good faith. Congress must rebuild the store of our nation's moral capital, while simultaneously eradicating the chronic dysfunction plaguing it and adopt a renewed culture of respect and responsibility for our nation's service members and veterans.

While military action has continued to decline in Afghanistan, there has been a commensurate increase in emerging areas threats from around the globe. Even as we look ahead to future threats, we must not forget the legacy of unmatched damage to the physical and mental well-being of all those who have served in our most recent conflicts. It is both your responsibility and ours to ensure that these veterans receive any and all appropriate healthcare and other benefits in a timely, competent, compassionate and efficient manner.

Detail of AMVETS' legislative priorities for 2015:

- **Federal Government Reform:**

1. VA Accountability (including extending advanced appropriations to the remaining discretionary & mandatory accounts) – AMVETS fully supports the following legislation: [H.R.575](#) : Stop Wasteful Bonuses in Department of Veterans Affairs Act of 2015; [H.R.658](#) : VA Regional Office Accountability Act; [H.R.571](#) : Veterans Affairs Retaliation Prevention Act of 2015; [H.R.502](#) : Veterans Health Administration Management Improvement Act; and [H.R.473](#) : Increasing the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability to Veterans Act of 2015
2. DoD – including auditing the Pentagon;
3. Fiscal Matters – including getting control of the National Debt & Spending - AMVETS fully supports the following legislation: [H.R.119](#) : Budget and Accounting Transparency Act of 2015; [H.R.579](#) : THRIFT Act of 2015; and [H.R.522](#) : Commission on the Accountability and Review of Federal Agencies Act

- **Toxic Wounds:**

This has become a critical issue for AMVETS this year since we are chairing a national Toxic Wounds Task Force and as such, we plan to take every opportunity to advocate for of veterans suffering from the effect of all forms of toxic exposure.

After many years, science is finally making significant progress toward understanding Gulf War Illness and identifying recommended treatments. Research has shown that Gulf War illness: is associated with service in the 1991 war; that it affects at least 175,000 veterans; and that it is physiologic, rather than a psychiatric condition caused by toxic exposures.

This progress has been achieved largely through the work of two organizations created by Congress, the Gulf War Illness research program of the DoD Congressionally Directed Medical Research Programs (CDMRP) and the VA Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses.

AMVETS supports continued funding of the CDMRP Gulf War illness research program at last year's level of \$20 million. We also support legislation to restore the oversight component and independence of the Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses.

Furthermore, legislation is urgently needed to assert appropriate Congressional authority over Gulf War Illness research and enable scientific progress to continue, including the need to:

- re-establish the independence of the Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses, restoring its oversight role and providing for appointment of its members by Congress, rather than VA; and
- require VA to properly conduct Institute of Medicine Gulf War studies previously ordered by Congress. The studies have not been conducted in strict accordance with Congress's direction, or in some cases, have not been conducted at all, which may suggest some level of effort to manipulate research by government employees. Importantly, these studies relate to the health of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Gulf War veterans.

- ***Veteran Unemployment:***

During this time of persistent unemployment in our country, the problem of Veteran unemployment, especially for our National Guard and Reserve members, should be seen as a national disgrace. In recognition of those who honorably and selflessly fought to maintain the freedoms of those who stayed behind, we as a nation cannot do enough to ensure that American Veterans get the proper skills, certifications/credentials and degrees necessary to be successful and competitive in the civilian job market.

Veteran unemployment is a complex problem which will require the efforts of federal and state governments, the business community and the military/veterans community working in concert if any meaningful solution is to be developed. The efforts of any one entity alone will be insufficient to meet the challenges posed by this massive problem facing American Veterans everywhere and it's important to keep in mind that veterans, like their civilian counterparts, require not just a job, but living-wage employment following their service. The vast majority of working-age veterans want to continue to be productive citizens and they need to be provided every opportunity to achieve their career goals. In recognition of the unimaginable sacrifices made by American Veterans, Congress and the Administration need to continue to make a concerted effort to guarantee that veterans have access to employment and training opportunities.

Additionally there needs to be a better system to connect employers with open positions to unemployed veterans; the current system of merely posting jobs online, while beneficial, just isn't enough. There are literally hundreds of online employment and career sites catering to veterans and civilians alike, which unfortunately can leave veterans confused and overwhelmed. What is needed is a comprehensive 'veteran employment resource guide' along with a single portal or site where all of these opportunities can be accessed in one place. The 'Hero2Hired' program is a good example and should serve as a good foundation to build on.

In addition to the previous issues, there is the very real problem of licensing and credentialing which is required in certain career fields. AMVETS believes that if an individual has received training and practical experience in a career field while serving in the military there should be a streamlined process for demonstrating their knowledge and expertise in order to qualify for any necessary license or credential.

Congress and the Administration also need to consider the very real connection between unemployment and its effects on the already vulnerable mental health of our veterans. Common sense suggest that individuals who are gainfully and appropriately employed, who are able to support themselves and their families, who are able to utilize their skills and abilities, who are receiving any necessary health care, who feel useful, challenged and appreciated are less likely to suffer from depression, substance abuse problems and/or commit suicide.

As you may know, AMVETS was instrumental in getting legislation introduced in the House which would make it illegal, at the federal level, to discriminate against individuals based on their military or veteran status in the workplace and housing.

AMVETS formally invites each of you to become a co-sponsor of **HR 501**, the Veterans & Servicemembers Employment Rights & Housing Act of 2015.

Interestingly, research as already identified at least 13 states which have enacted similar legislation at the state level including: Massachusetts; Washington; Minnesota; Wisconsin; Illinois; Ohio; New York; Oregon; Missouri; New Jersey; California; Delaware; and Indiana.

AMVETS believes that perhaps the greatest and most comprehensive assistance this nation could provide for its veterans is to protect them from all forms of discrimination and employer bias by enacting HR 501.

Since moving to an all-volunteer military, the number of veterans serving in congress, and at all levels of leadership, is the smallest it's ever been and this, added to the years of constant focus on the negative aspects of war, has created the negative perception that all veterans are flawed, dangerous and unstable.

While it is true that veterans should be protected from all forms of discrimination under USERRA, sadly that is not the case, in part, due to ignorance of its legal requirements as well as lax oversight and enforcement. Sadly, those who have served and fought for their country do not enjoy the same protections and advantages under the law as many other citizens. In fact, just the opposite is often true; frequently those who

have served and sacrificed are at a disadvantage in comparison to their civilian peers.

This comprehensive, nearly cost-neutral legislation would enhance veteran access and equity in all areas and it would provide legal recourse to veterans experiencing any form of discrimination.

- **VA/DoD Health Care & Mental Health:**

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is not only the largest direct provider of healthcare services in the nation, it also provides the most extensive training environment for health professionals as well as providing the most clinically focused setting for medical and prosthetic research. While providing primary care to American Veterans is among the VA's prime responsibilities, it also provides specialized health care services including: spinal cord injury, blind rehabilitation, traumatic brain injury, prosthetic services, mental health, and war-related poly-trauma injuries. AMVETS believes that in order to avoid catastrophic degradation to these critical services that congress needs to:

- pass a budget on a regular basis. The need for sufficient, timely and predictable funding cannot be over-emphasized;
- continue and extend advance appropriations to all VA discretionary and mandatory programs, services and benefits; and
- continue to introduce and support legislation that protects veterans benefits

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) & Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) – Despite the VA's clear efforts in the identification and treatment of the various mental health issues plaguing our military members and veterans, including serious mental illness, more routine mental health challenges, post-deployment mental health readjustment issues, persistent incidents of military suicide and military sexual trauma, these concerns continue to take their toll on America's military and veterans.

- DoD needs to seeks ways to build and improve the resiliency of all members of the Armed Forces, as well as continuing to develop protective gear which evolves simultaneously with current combat practices and weapons and effective incident monitoring equipment
- Simultaneously, VA needs to continue aggressively seeking effective mental health identification and assessment tools, they need to ensure that there is sufficiently trained staff available to meet the current and growing mental health care needs of our military and veterans, and they need to develop timely, effective, evidence-based therapies.

Unfortunately, the VA also faces significant challenges ensuring that newly returning war veterans have access to post-deployment

readjustment services and specialized treatments while guaranteeing that all other enrolled veterans gain and keep access to effective, timely, high-quality mental health services. In fact, outreach to veterans from all eras needs to continue to improve.

The mental health of our service members and veterans may be one of the greatest challenges facing the VA today and while there have been improvements, there's still a long way to go. This is especially true in the case of women veterans who not only respond to and deal with combat stress differently than their male counterparts, but also need gender-specific treatment.

Even more significant are the alarming number of service members and veterans who experienced repetitive, low level TBI that did not require medical attention but, taken cumulatively, produce serious medical conditions years later. These conditions often exhibit symptoms that affect mood, behavior and thoughts. Many of our veterans are experiencing a complex combination of mental and physical health problems, the weight of which should be viewed as a contributing factor to the feelings of pain, hopelessness, loneliness, helplessness and depression that can lead to suicide.

There can be no doubt that the problem of military/veteran suicide is of great concern to everyone in the military community and sadly the problem continues to grow. The fact this the number of military/veteran suicides is not substantially declining is especially distressing in light of the ongoing efforts of the Department of Defense (DoD), Veterans Affairs (VA) and a variety of public and private enterprises. It seems obvious that more needs to be done to uncover the complex mental and physical factors that lead military service members and veterans to commit suicide.

One significant aspect that may shed some additional light on this unacceptable situation is the possible correlation between blast injuries caused by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicide. By collecting information about the physical injuries sustained by suicide victims, we may be able to get a clearer idea of the underlying causes of military and veteran suicide.

Additionally, IED survivors face a wide variety of challenges ranging from the minor to the monumental: fractures, amputations, disfigurement, cognitive and motor impairments, emboli, headaches, personality changes, visual and auditory disturbances, altered effect, hypersensitivities, and dulled judgment.

While the good news is that more servicemembers than ever are surviving the battlefield wounds, the bad news is that those same individuals will likely require highly specialized neurological,

psychological, and ophthalmological care, life-long mental health care, sophisticated prosthetics and other vital services. At this juncture, there is no definitive connection between IED injuries, these conditions, and veterans' suicides because this possibility has not been adequately investigated. Now is the time to do so.

As previously mentioned, untreated/unhealed physical and mental health combat injuries play a significant role in the number of military/veteran suicides in this country. The data on these suicides are startling and they have continued to rise. This horrific trend is a national disgrace and finding effective, practical solutions should be not only a service-wide, but a nation-wide priority.

Finally, it must be remembered that we are looking at an issue that will span decades. AMVETS applauds the VA for working to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health concerns/treatment and the increase in support services. We recommend that the VA consider both clinical and non-clinical treatment options when deciding how to fill the gap between need and timely access. Non-clinical mental health treatment options are readily available in most communities, are generally much more cost effective than clinical options with shorter wait times and can be an effective segment in an overall mental health treatment program.

- ***Veterans Benefits***

AMVETS believes in the solemnity of the promises made to our military members and veterans when they agreed to leave their homes and families to go fight in our stead. In addition to providing physical and mental healthcare to millions of veterans, the VA is also the primary federal agency providing a variety of benefits to our nation's veterans including: disability compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation, pensions, retirement, education benefits, home loans, ancillary benefits for service-connected disabled veterans, life insurance and burial benefits. It is absolutely crucial, that veteran's benefits become a national priority, as they had been following earlier conflicts, and they must be viewed in the context of the service and sacrifice performed by our men and women in uniform. These benefit programs however must not only be maintained, they need to be carefully monitored and constantly improved so they maintain their value and effectiveness.

For some time now, the VA has been engaged in a comprehensive transformation process designed to convert the current claims processing system from an antiquated paper-based system to a 21st century, electronic-based system. As VA continues to move forward with improvements and innovations, it is essential that Congress provide the resources and oversight necessary to complete the work at hand. This being said, AMVETS is somewhat encouraged by the progress VBA has made in reducing the claims backlog, thousands of veterans or their survivors are still waiting too long to receive their just compensation. Now

is the time to really ramp up implementation of new organizational and operational practices including: position-specific training/cross-training and testing; improved IT systems and quality control.

There is certainly no shortage of problems plaguing VA's claims processing system, including:

- the unprecedented numbers of claims being filed;
- the failure of claims adjudicators to equitably and accurately decide claims the first time;
- the large number of appeals of claims decisions being filed;
- the VA's outdated and inefficient infrastructure; and
- the layer of middle managers entrenched within the VA who are not only uncooperative and unproductive, their lack of cooperation is actually undermining all of the good work that both the Secretary and General Hickey are attempting to accomplish.

AMVETS offers the following recommendations as part of a holistic solution to the problems plaguing VA's claims processing system:

- that there be an increase in the quantity and quality of training provided to employees involved in the adjudication of claims;
- that all testing or skills certifications instruments be reviewed to ensure that they accurately measure the appropriate job skills;
- that VA continues to engage and utilize the expertise of its VSO partner organizations;
- resources must be equitably distributed between the various claims processing lanes; and finally
- Congress must ensure that the VA receives sufficient funding to appropriately implement its mandate to serve veterans.

- ***Women Veterans and Service Members***

It is a little recognized, and perhaps unappreciated, fact that every woman who ever served in America's Armed Forces has done so as a volunteer! Women have a long and proud history of service to this country even though their service prior to the Civil War was strictly unofficial; they have been involved in every battle, one way or another, going back to the Revolutionary War. Today, women comprise between 18% – 20% of the U.S. military and there are currently over 2 million women veterans.

As the women veterans population continues growing, there will be corresponding growth in the enrollment and utilization of all VA services. In order for VA to meet the needs of current, and future, women veterans, AMVETS believes that VA needs:

- to continue to increase capacity in women's clinical services; and

- ensure that all providers are competently trained in all facets of women's health care, including ob/gyn and other reproductive specialties.

Among the most critical issues facing women veterans today are: homelessness, military sexual trauma (MST), employment and the lack of gender specific health care. These issues are essentially the trifecta of degradation and deprivation for women veterans. They are also somewhat of a 'Catch-22' in that each issue overlaps and effects the others, making it that much more difficult for women veterans to escape this negative cycle.

How can we as a nation allow some of our most vulnerable veterans, many of whom also have children, to be living on the streets of our cities? Why is it that a woman should have to fear for her personal safety, not only from foreign enemies, but from her comrades-in-arms simply because she made a conscious decision to serve in the military? All veterans, by their very service to their country, should be guaranteed some basics: shelter, any necessary physical and mental health care, food, job training or education, and an opportunity to support themselves and their children upon exiting the military.

Many of our homeless women veterans are already victims of MST and PTSD due to their military service and once they transition back to civilian life, many are faced with the dangers and lack of appropriate physical and mental health care inherent in being homeless. These veterans are often unable to locate temporary housing at local homeless shelters because many of these facilities are not set up to house to accommodate the specific safety and privacy needs of women, not to mention their children. It's a sad fact that homeless individuals are not infrequently involved in the criminal justice system for a variety of offences, including crimes against women and children. This situation is truly a national disgrace and must not be allowed to continue.

For a complete rundown on the unique problems and needs of women veterans along with specific recommendations, please see the FY 2015 *Independent Budget*.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and for all you do to support veterans through your public service. While we did not expound on each of our priorities in this document, we invite you to reach out to us with your inquiries. If there are any questions regarding this testimony or any of our legislative priorities, please contact, Diane Zumatto, AMVETS, National Legislative Director, dzumatto@amvets.org or 301-683-4016



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.

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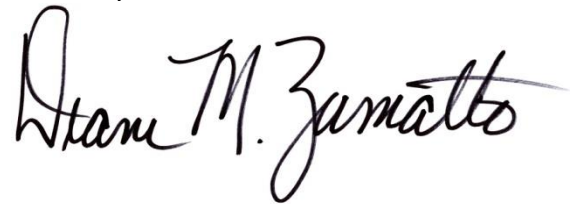
2 March 2015

The Honorable Representative Jeff Miller, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives, Veterans Affairs Committee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Miller:

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane M. Zumatto". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "D" and a long, sweeping underline.

Diane M. Zumatto, AMVETS
National Legislative Director