



We exist to help those who cannot help themselves

STATEMENT OF
CHARLES SUSINO, JR.
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 22, 2017

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

We are grateful for your committees' efforts in the 114th Congress. However, there is more work to be done to protect our veterans - both on new legislation and improving implementation of legislation already passed.

We welcome VA Secretary David Shulkin. We worked well with him in his position as Under Secretary of Health under Secretary McDonald and expect that relationship to continue in his new position. We understand he will want to develop his agenda for the VA however we want to insure that critical initiatives do not get sidelined with the change in administration.

A VA directive targeted to eliminate veteran's homelessness has been in effect for several years and results have been positive - an almost 70% decrease in the homeless veteran population. Sadly, however, that means that nearly 40,000 veterans are still on America's streets, without the basic shelter they both need and deserve. - The Secretary should report progress and provide a fresh look at proposed actions to achieve this goal. It is a National disgrace that any American veteran has no place to call home.

President Trump has instituted a hiring freeze. There is an exception protocol to receive permission for hiring. We ask the Secretary to be both aggressive and vigilant in requesting authorizations to hire for all open positions that are health care service providers to the veterans. The commitment begun under President Abraham Lincoln cannot be compromised.

Recently, President Trump stated his commitment in supporting our troops. We accept and welcome his commitment and ask for his support in achieving the legislative agendas of the veterans' service organizations. Actions need to accompany the words to provide the necessary results.

Our legislative agenda has been very consistent year to year. It is based on the earned benefits of the veteran for serving their country. Its center is healthcare and fair compensation to the veteran and their family. This level of consistency helps focus our efforts but there is unfinished business.

In 1986, Congress and the President mandated VA health care for veterans with service connected disabilities as well as other special groups of veterans. It included veterans up to WWI. We ask Congress to revisit the special groups and update to include veterans of WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Cold War, and our recent conflicts in the Middle East.

A common thread among the veteran service organizations has been improving the performance of the VA. 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. The Secretary outlined to you his plan to transform the VA into a high performance organization. It was based on changing the VA culture and reorganize to obtain better access, treatment experience, and understanding for the veteran without compromising efficiencies and accountabilities. We are anxious to hear from Secretary Shulkin outlining his initiatives and any changes he determines are required to achieve the goals necessary to best serve our veterans. We realize it is challenging but the changes must start at the top and get to where the veterans' experience occurs in the near future.

To achieve the needed results in the VA the rules need to change. The VA needs to broadly adopt management policies to facilitate the culture change required within the VA. There are several Bills that partially address the issue but it must be broad in nature and provide management latitude but require a high level of accountability. Any single Bill on the management bonuses, employee discipline, etc. is insufficient. It must mirror HR policies of select businesses where achievement is high in efficiency and accountability therefore a comprehensive Bill is needed to achieve the desired result.

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.

I draw your attention to the following Bills that are strongly supported by the American Ex-Prisoners of War:

H.R. 104: Helping Homeless Veterans Act of 2017 which to make permanent certain programs that assist homeless veterans and other veterans with special needs

H.R. 333: Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act permitting veterans with a service-connected disability of less than 50% to concurrently receive both retired pay and disability compensation

H.J. Res. 3: Approving the location of a memorial to commemorate and honor the members of the Armed Forces who served on active duty in support of Operation Desert Storm or Operation Desert Shield

H.R. 544: Private Corrado Piccoli Purple Heart Preservation Act. To provide for penalties for the sale of any Purple Heart awarded to a member of the Armed Forces.

H.R. 369: To eliminate the sunset of the Veterans Choice Program, and for other purposes

S. 24: A bill to expand eligibility for hospital care and medical services under section 101 of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to include veterans who are age 75 or older, and

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 in order to control costs and manage service. We ask that Congress not waiver from its responsibility to protect any intrusion that threatens the promises made to those heroes who serve their country. While the VA may be cumbersome and unwieldy, it offers the best care for our veterans in terms of efficiency and quality of service. VA providers have walked the "mile in their shoes" as veterans themselves.

With respect to funding Memorials, it is gratifying to hear the progress of the WWI memorial and others. We encourage Congress to continue to fund public awareness initiatives. It is a critical component of public awareness and education on the hardships of war. As time passes, there are less and less of us that experienced first-hand how life in our country changed in support of a large scale war. While we need to protect our freedoms we also must remember the cost of freedom is very high.

Please eliminate the veterans' means test for access health care. Should a veteran who worked two or three jobs to provide better for his family later be deprived of healthcare? Each has served his country and earned the same benefits so let us not deprive any deserving veteran of healthcare.

It is most insulting to us when we hear the use of the word entitlements regarding any benefits to the veteran. These are all earned benefits where the veteran has served and sacrificed. Calling them "entitlements" relegates the program to a handout and needs to be eliminated from the language used for veterans.

Thank you for your recent efforts in the last Congress. There were many accomplishments and without your leadership none of it would have been possible. Please continue your tireless work.

Thank you for your time and consideration on these matters.

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

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

Charles Susino, Jr.- Abridged Bio

Staff Sergeant Army Air Force WWII: Gunner on B-24 Bomber

Flew 13 missions in the European theatre. On March 5, 1944 on their 13th mission, the bomber was shoot down over France. With the plane on fire, the crew parachuted out into enemy territory. I suffered injuries to both legs and was captured by the Germans. There was no medical treatment provided. The Germans held us prisoners in deplorable conditions for 14 months, never knowing what or if we were going to eat and drink. We never knew if we would live to see another day. We were moved between several prison camps during captivity. Was force marched for 86 days at which time, I and several of my crew escaped. We were hunted by German soldiers with dogs. We managed to avoid recapture and survive on anything we could find to eat. We ultimately ran across an Army truck which drove us to safety and to the 48th Field Hospital in Hanover for treatment arriving on May 8, 1945.

Facing the enemy twice, both in the battle field and again in their prison camps at their mercy, is a life experience that never leaves your mind.

Military Medals

- French Medal of Honor- Cavalier Level
- Purple Heart
- Airman medal cluster
- POW

As a civilian, I have been active with veterans' organizations for decades in leadership roles

- *National Commander of American Ex-Prisoners of War
- Senior Vice Commander of American Ex-Prisoners of War
- Junior Vice Commander of American Ex-Prisoners of War
- Director- Board of Directors American Ex-Prisoners of War
- *National Service Officer
- *New Jersey State Commander American Ex-Prisoners of War
- *Director- Legislative Affairs American Ex-Prisoners of War