

**THE
MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART
OF THE U.S.A., INC.**



**THE ONLY CONGRESSIONALLY CHARTERED VETERANS ORGANIZATION
EXCLUSIVELY FOR COMBAT-WOUNDED VETERANS**

ANNUAL TESTIMONY

**J. PATRICK LITTLE
NATIONAL COMMANDER**

**BEFORE A JOINT HEARING OF THE
SENATE AND HOUSE COMMITTEES ON VETERANS AFFAIRS**

MAY 20 2015

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Chairman Isakson, Chairman Miller, Ranking members Senator Blumenthal and Representative Brown, members of the committees, and ladies and gentlemen.

As the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, it is an honor and privilege to appear before this *body representing members of the Order.*

My oral testimony will be as brief as possible with the understanding that the full written testimony will be entered into the record. I am sure that all of you are aware that the Military Order of the Purple Heart is unique among Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) in that our membership is comprised entirely of combat wounded veterans who were wounded on battlefields in the numerous wars that this nation has been engaged in. For the wounds they suffered they were awarded the Purple Heart Medal.

Since it's organizing in 1932, the Military Order of the Purple Heart has been, and continues to be, the Original Wounded Warriors Veterans' Organization. We continue to serve veterans of all wars,

at no cost, by providing tangible benefits to those veterans and their families who require our assistance.

Military Order of the Purple Heart will assist any veteran in filing a claim with the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA). To assist veterans Military Order of the Purple Heart has 87 service officers and 41 support personnel serving at 79 locations throughout the United States and its territories.

In the past 18-months, at no charge to the veteran our service officers were able to assist veterans and their dependents in filing 22,560 VA claims that resulted in \$459,292,340 monetary awards.

Military Order of the Purple Heart also participates in the VA Volunteer Services (VAVS) program which provides volunteer services at VA Medical Centers and VA and State Veterans' Nursing Homes. Last year 1,335 Military Order of the Purple Heart volunteers logged 142,178 hours which VA values as \$3,749,837 including \$543,724 in donations to the VA.

“In addition to funding the National Service, VAVS, and other programs of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, our Purple Heart Service Foundation helps finance Research and assistance that tackle the unseen wounds impacting veterans, things like Post Traumatic Stress (PTS), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI); suicide, and sexual abuse. Through grants and outreach programs we lend support to other organizations whose programs align with Purple Heart’s mission, as well as make smaller direct contributions to veterans facing exceptionally difficult financial challenges.”

I am certain that we can all agree that the VA budget can never cover all the costs of caring for veterans and this volunteer program is a great example of the federal government partnering with a non-profit to care for America's veterans. It is also a further amplification of the military veterans' motto that we "leave no one behind" and care for our brothers and sisters who have served in harm's way.

On behalf of the Military Order of the Purple Heart I would like to thank the previous Congress for passing legislation that was good and made a positive impact on the lives of veterans and their families, particularly the "Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014". The advanced funding for additional VA accounts is also appreciated.

I would also like to thank this Congress for passing H.R. 203 "Clay Hunt Legislation". There is still much to be done to ensure that those who were willing to risk their lives for this great country are cared for upon their return from conflicts. Military Order of the Purple Heart is acutely aware of the budget negotiations and the fiscal problems facing our nation but they should have nothing to do with caring for those who have honorably served this nation and now require medical attention or other benefits that they have earned by their honorable military service.

I would also like to state that Military Order of the Purple Heart supports the recommendations made by the VSOs who devote their time and effort to publish the Independent Budget. Military Order of the Purple Heart is also a proud member of The Military Coalition (TMC) and the National Military Veterans Alliance (NMVA).

MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART 2015 PRIORITIES:

VA CLAIMS:

This is an issue that your Committees, Military Order of the Purple Heart and other VSOs have been struggling with for many years. While there has been much progress there remains much to be done.

Congress has provided increased funding to help improve the process, which enabled VA to hire more personnel and invest in information technology and other infrastructure.

In 2010 when the backlog of disability claims was growing rapidly VA began to modernize the claims system. The VA Secretary, at that time, set a goal that in 2015 the Veterans' Benefits Administration (VBA) would decide all claims for disability compensation within 125 days with a 98 percent accuracy rate.

VA has reported that as of January 2015 the backlog of claims over 125 days in the decision process is just over 200,000 this is down from over 600,000 in 2013 so obviously there has been progress. The 12 month accuracy rate as of January 2014, as reported by VA, is 90 percent as opposed to 89 percent in 2013, so once again there has been improvement.

One other statistic that is significant is that the average time to complete Fully Developed Claims (FDC) is 147 days while the average time for completion of non-FDC claims is 202 days. Obviously veterans should use the FDC system to expedite their claims.

Statistics from the VA Board of Appeals, from FY 2013, indicate that there were over 47 thousands appeals received and that the average time for a decision between the time of the appeal and a decision was 960 days.

The VBA implemented numerous changes that have helped to lower the claims backlog but the backlog is still large and the chance of meeting the 2015 goals are slim; however VBA appears to be making progress on getting the claims process under control.

One example of this is that in 2010 no claims were processed electronically. In 2014 over 93 percent of the claims were processed electronically and the number of paper claims was reduced to less than 40,000.

This is significant and something that Congress and VSOs have been advocating for several years.

RECOMMENDATION:

While there has been progress in the area of claims processing the veteran who has been fighting the process for maybe years does not see that progress.

They just know that they have not been afforded, in a timely manner, the benefits that they earned by their military service.

VA needs to continue to be transparent and work with Congress and the VSOs as it moves forward with new initiatives.

TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY (TBI):

TBI is common among veterans of the current conflicts. It is the "signature injury" of modern combat and it estimated that at least 20 percent of those wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan have been affected by TBI. Department of Defense has reported that in excess of 300,000 cases of TBI were reported among members of the military between 2000 and 2014. Military Order of the Purple Heart is certain that veterans of previous wars, who suffered from TBI went undetected and untreated.

RECOMMENDATION:

VA should screen all Iraq and Afghanistan veterans for TBI and provide those who screen positive with the latest treatment available.

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS (PTS):

I think that we can all agree that this is one of the most serious conditions that those returning from the current conflicts, some who have been deployed numerous times face. This condition is especially severe because it not only affects the veterans but their families and their return to civilian life. It is also a significant contributor to drug/alcohol abuse, homelessness and in all too many cases suicide. This condition not only affects those involved in combat but those members who have been victims of Military Sexual Assault, which can do the same damage to the victim as other violent incidents.

Military Order of the Purple Heart is gratified and appreciates that both Houses of Congress passed the "Clay Hunt Legislation" very quickly this session. This legislation will provide increased access to mental health care and close some of the "loop holes" in mental health care for those who suffer from PTS.

RECOMMENDATION:

Congress continues its oversight of this issue to ensure that VA implements all aspects of the "Clay Hunt Legislation" and other programs.

Congress and the VA utilize all available resources and venues to do everything possible to assist the veterans suffering from PTS to integrate back in to civilian life and become a positive member of their community.

A military member who survived on the battlefield should not be put into a situation to want to end their life. We must do everything within our power to stop this needless loss of life by providing everything the government can to assist these veterans.

HEALTH CARE:

Military Order of the Purple Heart applauds Congress for passing the "Veterans' Access, Choice and Accountability Act" last year. This Law now provides those veterans enrolled in the VA health care system with more options for timely care.

This law is especially beneficial to those veterans living in rural areas where there is no VA facility near their home. There has been a long time and often overlooked need for more emphasis on health care in rural areas.

Female Health Care is another area that has shown some long overdue improvement but there is still much to be done to care for these veterans.

With females making up approximately 16 percent of the active military they are the fastest growing segment of the veteran population. Not only should they have access to the best medical care available but they have special needs that need to be addressed.

Female veterans are the fastest growing segment of the homelessness population. Those who suffer from Military Sexual Trauma (MST) require special attention in order to restore some normality to their lives.

Congress did the right thing when it passed the Caregiver Act but we believe that this Law should be expanded to cover all veterans not just those that have served since 9/11.

There are many veterans who suffered severe wounds and injuries in WWII, Korea, Vietnam and other conflicts who have had to face the same challenge of giving up their careers to care for a loved one who required 24/7 care. Severely injured veterans and the conflicts they fought in should have no bearing on the care they receive.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

VA should continue its efforts to provide more and better care to those veterans living in rural areas and should continue to authorize Choice Cards to these veterans.

Women veterans deserve special consideration and VA should make additional special efforts to bring them into the VA Health Care system and retain them there by providing the best medical care available.

Congress should introduce legislation to expand the "Caregiver Law" to include severely injured veterans of all conflicts not just those injured since 9/11.

Congress should continue oversight of the VA Health system to ensure that there are no further scandals regarding wait times or other manipulation of data and that veterans receive the best timely health care available.

NATIONAL PURPLE HEART HALL OF HONOR COMMEMORATIVE COIN ACT:

MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART supports this legislation H.R. 358, which will assist the Purple Heart Hall of Honor to continue its efforts in commemorating the sacrifices of America's military members who were killed or wounded in combat while serving our great nation.

The Purple Heart Hall of Honor is located at the New Windsor, New York Cantonment Site where General Washington's army camped during the revolutionary war and where the General first awarded the Badge of Military Merit, which later became the Purple Heart Medal.

There is no cost associated with this legislation as the Treasury will recover the cost of producing the coins before any remaining funds are distributed to the PH Hall of Honor.

This concludes my testimony and I will be pleased to answer any questions.

Thank you,

Pat Little

J. Patrick Little

National Commander

Disclosure of Federal Grants and Contracts:

The Military Order of the Purple Heart (MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART) does not currently receive, nor has MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART ever received any federal money for grants or contracts other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources at government facilities for outreach and direct veteran assistance services through its Department of Veterans' Affairs accredited National Service Officer Program.