

THE AMERICAN LEGION



ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES

***THE AMERICAN LEGION NATIONAL
COMMANDER JAMES E. KOUTZ***

***TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE AND HOUSE
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS***

OCTOBER 3, 2012

**STATEMENT OF
JAMES E. KOUTZ
NATIONAL COMMANDER
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE A
JOINT SESSION OF THE
VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEES
UNITED STATES CONGRESS
ON THE
LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES OF THE AMERICAN LEGION**

OCTOBER 3, 2012

Messr. Chairmen, Chairwoman and Members of the Committees:

Issues & Opportunities

Members of the U.S. Armed Forces, veterans, families and communities nationwide stand at a crossroads of history as the 112th Congress draws to a close. Troops are coming home from war, looking for education, jobs and business opportunities worthy of their sacrifices. Defense spending has been targeted for drastic and potentially dangerous cuts. Veterans are waiting in greater numbers than ever for decisions about their VA benefits. Families are trying to adjust to new lives with loved ones who have come home seriously wounded, psychologically changed, or both. And the flag America flew so proudly after 9/11 remains unprotected against those who would burn it in hatred of the freedom it symbolizes.

The American Legion Family, made up of more than 4 million patriotic citizens of this nation, looks to Washington for leadership during this critical period. The American Legion, largest of all veterans service organizations, however, does not expect Washington to act without guidance from the stakeholders of our government's decisions.

The following pages contain that guidance. Included are top issues identified by The American Legion. Thoughtful, effective work by lawmakers and the administration can convert these issues into opportunities, not just for veterans and the military community but for the entire nation.

Protect Defense and VA from Sequestration

Where we are

Last year's failure of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction means that automatic spending cuts, known as sequestration, are scheduled to take effect in January 2013 unless Congress finds other options to reverse the deficit. Cuts in military spending are projected not only to compromise our national security but also increase unemployment by as much as an entire percentage point nationwide. The American Legion is deeply concerned about military

spending reductions during a time of war. The Legion is equally wary about the budget and its potential effect on the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Although the administration has stated that VA programs—including health care, benefits and education—are exempt from sequestration, The American Legion questions the integrity of such promises when so-called “federal administrative expenses” have already been targeted. As recently as July, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki was unable to clearly define “administrative expenses,” leaving the door open to interpretation and possible crippling cuts in VA’s ability to serve our nation’s veterans.

Hundreds of thousands of men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan now rely on VA for health care. They enter our nation’s VA medical centers, clinics and nursing homes at a time when veterans of previous wars are reaching advanced ages, in need of VA’s services. These are services they earned, deserve and were promised. No veteran should have to wait weeks for appointments nor travel hundreds of miles to see providers. Female veterans should have health-care services that meet their needs. Cities such as Orlando, Denver and New Orleans should not have to wait years for the construction of long-overdue hospitals.

The pressure on VA will only mount as defense budget cuts drive down force sizes and more of our military personnel re-enter civilian life. DoD and VA must work in harmony to ease the transition and help the influx of new veterans get the help they need, including timely benefits, access to high-quality health care and careers that match their skills.

Many key veterans programs require coordination with government departments such as Labor, and Housing and Urban Development, which enjoy no protection of any kind from sequestration. Veterans programs within those departments must be protected if they are to succeed.

Where we want to be

The American Legion wants Congress to ensure that national security and veterans programs in VA and other departments are not sacrificed in the budget battle. Previous legislation, such as the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 and the Statutory Pay as you Go Act of 2010, included language specifically protecting VA programs from cuts. As the budget deficit widens, similar and specific protections are necessary today.

What we are doing

Last year, a special American Legion task force met with members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction – the so-called “supercommittee” – as it deliberated in futility over the ailing federal budget. The American Legion is aggressively pursuing a compromise to ensure our nation’s ability to protect itself from harm, provide decent quality of life for members of our armed forces and maintain the necessary level of care for those veterans who have answered the country’s call in its times of need. The Legion understands the importance of sound fiscal management, but neither the soldier nor the veteran caused the deficit, and neither should be required to shoulder an unfair portion of its reduction.

Reverse the VA Claims Backlog

Where we are

When speaking to The American Legion National Convention in August 2010, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki declared VA would “break the back of the backlog by 2015” by committing to 98 percent accuracy, with no claim pending longer than 125 days. Over the past two years, VA has gone backward, not forward, in both of these key areas.

According to VA’s own figures, over 65 percent of veterans with disability benefits claims have been waiting longer than 125 days for them to be processed. In contrast, when Secretary Shinseki made his promise, only 37.1 percent of claims had been pending longer than 125 days. The American Legion has found through its field research that the problem varies greatly by regional office. While some regional offices may have an average rate of 76 days per claim, others take 336 days—a troubling inconsistency.

Unfortunately, accuracy is also a problem, according to Legion site visits and field research. VA has been reluctant to publicly post accuracy figures in its Monday Morning Workload reports, but VA’s own STAR reports for accuracy place the rate in the mid 80s. The American Legion’s Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) team typically finds an even higher error rate, sometimes up to two thirds of all claims reviewed.

VA is hopeful that the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) will eliminate many of the woes that have led to the backlog, but electronic solutions are not a magic bullet. Without real reform for a culture of work that places higher priority on raw speed than accuracy, VA will continue to struggle, no matter the tools used to process claims.

Where we want to be

While VA’s stated goals of “no claim pending longer than 125 days” and 98-percent accuracy are admirable, many veterans would settle for their claims being initially processed correctly in a timely manner. The American Legion draws on the extensive experience of its service officers nationwide who work within the claims-benefits system every day; they are best qualified to define a new plan for fixing inadequacies of the existing system to adjudicate veterans’ claims.

The American Legion has long argued that VA’s focus on quantity over quality is one of the largest contributing factors to the claims backlog. If VA employees receive the same credit for work, whether it is done properly or improperly, there is little incentive to take the time to process a claim correctly. When a claim is processed in error, a veteran must appeal the decision to receive benefits, and then wait for an appeals process that may take months to resolve and possibly years for delivery of the benefit.

The American Legion believes VA must develop a processing model that puts as much emphasis on accuracy as it does on the raw number of claims completed. Nowhere does VA publicly post its accuracy figures. America’s veterans need to have confidence in the work done by VA, and that requires transparency.

The VBMS system could allow VA to develop more effective means of processing claims, such as the ability to separate single issues that are ready to rate, starting a flow of relief to veterans while more complex medical issues are considered.

Veterans service organizations such as The American Legion are important collaborators with VA in developing solutions to claims-system problems. Only with open lanes of communication, in which the input of VSOs is received, acknowledged and utilized in long-term planning, will the VA-VSO partnership be able to deliver a system that serves needs quickly and accurately.

What we are doing

The American Legion's network of more than 2,500 accredited service officers across the nation provides free assistance to veterans seeking their benefits. Training of these service officers is a top priority; knowledge of the VA system is essential to successfully navigating the complicated claims process. The American Legion Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission conducts annual training schools in Indianapolis and Washington, D.C., bringing in service officers from across the country for multi-day intensive education sessions.

Every year, American Legion service officers assist veterans on more than 850,000 benefits claims and an additional 150,000 death benefits claims, at no cost to the veteran. American Legion service officers help secure more than \$885 million in earned compensation and pension benefits a year for veterans, and more than \$110 million in survivor benefits for servicemembers' widows and widowers.

Improve Medical Transition Process

Where we are

Problems with the processing out of active-duty military personnel continue since the closure of Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, in 2010, when care for seriously injured patients was moved to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. These problems have been identified at Warrior Transition Unit facilities nationwide, as well.

As of January 2012, approximately 24,000 servicemembers were participating in the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) across all branches of service, including National Guard and reserve units.

Where we want to be

The American Legion urges improvements in the medical transition process, including:

- Better oversight to ensure DoD is adhering to the VA rating system, rather than simply using it as a guideline.
- More uniform implementation of the system across all services and all geographic regions.
- More clear and concise explanations of the IDES systems for servicemembers and their families, along with implementation of a single point of contact for families.
- Better use of the Physical Evaluation Board Liaisons, with better-defined responsibilities and scope for those employees.

What we are doing

The American Legion's Medical Evaluation Board/Physical Evaluation Board coordinator is responsible for assisting servicemembers at Washington, D.C., military installations, and has representatives on site at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., under the supervision of the MEB/PEB coordinator. These representatives act as service officers for transitioning servicemembers with medical or physical conditions.

Treat All Veterans Exposed to Hazardous Chemicals

Where we are

The American Legion applauds VA for processing nearly 230,000 claims through June 2012 that involved the three newest Agent Orange-related conditions. The recent expansion of conditions presumed to be linked to Agent Orange exposure certainly created additional work for VA, which already faces a heavy claims backlog, but VA Secretary Eric Shinseki argued correctly that it was the right thing to do. Decisions about treating and compensating veterans exposed to deadly toxins must never be motivated by whether or not the road will be challenging or costly, but whether or not the veteran has suffered and requires treatment because of the exposure.

The American Legion supports the establishment of a unified policy to deal with the consequences of exposure to hazardous materials in the military.

Where we want to be

The American Legion urges continued study of all environmental hazards and their effects on servicemembers and veterans. New challenges, such as burn pits, must be addressed. Evidence suggests more than 227 metric tons of waste have been burned in conjunction with JP-8 jet fuel, releasing countless carcinogens into the air that servicemembers have breathed. At the very least, a full accounting of exposed veterans through a burn-pit registry or similar means would be an important step forward.

Agent Orange remains a concern, as thousands of veterans exposed to the toxin are left behind when it comes to vital treatment and benefits. The American Legion remains committed to ensuring all veterans who served in areas of exposure receive recognition and treatment for conditions linked to Agent Orange. Time is running out for those veterans not designated as having "boots on the ground" during the Vietnam War. Studies indicate "Blue Water Navy" veterans may have experienced higher exposure rates to Agent Orange than those who were on the ground, due to water desalination systems on the ships; this never has been satisfactorily addressed by VA. The time is now to recognize all Vietnam veterans for their exposure to Agent Orange, not just those who had boots on the ground.

The American Legion urges VA to work with DoD to finally complete the list of exposure locations outside Vietnam, including the C-123 K transport aircraft, Thailand and other supporting areas of the Vietnam theater, as well as Korea.

The American Legion urges continued close scrutiny by the Institute of Medicine into Agent Orange, Gulf War illness and other concerns. When problems are identified, VA must act swiftly to ensure current compensation and treatment are based on the most recent scientific findings.

What we are doing

The American Legion believes in treating the veteran first, funding the necessary research, and ensuring that service members are not exposed to chemical hazards again. The American Legion will continue to publicly support, and keep abreast of, ongoing DoD and VA research related to environmental hazards and exposures due to deployment, such as the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center's study on the effects of deployment as they relate to cardiopulmonary function and the medically unexplained autonomic functions of Gulf War veterans.

Improve VA Health Care

Where we are

The Veterans Health Administration manages the largest integrated health-care system in the United States, with 152 medical centers, nearly 1,400 community-based outpatient clinics, community living centers, Vet Centers and domiciliaries serving more than 8 million veterans every year. The American Legion believes those veterans should receive the best care possible.

The needs of veterans continue to evolve, and VHA must ensure it is evolving to meet them. The rural veteran population is growing, and options such as telehealth medicine and clinical care must expand to better serve that population. Growing numbers of female veterans, and a system that has traditionally catered to men must adapt to meet the needs of male and female veterans, regardless whether they live in urban or rural areas.

An integrated response to mental health care is necessary, as the rising rates of suicide and severe post-traumatic stress disorder are greatly impacting veterans and active-duty servicemembers alike.

Where we want to be

If veterans are going to receive the best possible care from VA, the system needs to continue to adapt to the changing demands of the population it serves. The concerns of rural veterans can be addressed through multiple measures, including expansion of the existing infrastructure through CBOCs and other innovative solutions, improvements in telehealth and telemedicine, improved staffing and enhancements to the travel system.

Patient concerns and quality of care can be improved by better attention to VA strategic planning, concise and clear directives from VHA, improved hiring practices and retention, and better tracking of quality by VA on a national level.

VHA's budget must be protected in order to ensure improved quality. Critical need areas such as construction and ongoing maintenance are already facing reductions, which will prove disastrous and more costly to VA in the long run. The American Legion supports sound investment in the infrastructure of VA to best meet the needs of a changing veteran population.

What we are doing

The American Legion's System Worth Saving Task Force regularly travels across the country to evaluate VA medical facilities and ensure they are meeting the needs of veterans. This past year, the task force focused on rural health care and patient satisfaction.

From November 2011 to February 2012, the task force conducted 25 site visits to VA medical facilities and coordinated with VA's Office for Rural Health VA's Veteran Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) 1, 15, 18 and 19; VISN Rural Health consultants; Project Access Received Closer to Home (ARCH); and VA community-based outpatient clinics.

The American Legion System Worth Saving Task Force emerged from its field work with several concerns, including:

VA's definition of "rural veteran" is derived from the U.S. Census Bureau and may not accurately reflect the needs of veterans who must travel long distances through rural areas to receive health care. The American Legion recommends VA expand the U.S. Census Bureau definition to incorporate access and driving times to VA facilities. The American Legion also recommends that VA medical centers implement a veterans transportation department that would coordinate all transportation programs for hospitals and their catchment areas.

Quality of care, as always, was carefully studied by the task force. From April 2012 to June 2012, the task force conducted site visits at 25 VA medical centers and conducted 24 veteran town hall meetings in American Legion posts near the VAMCs to assess patient satisfaction and quality of care. The task force examined three categories: patient safety, clinical performance, and access and satisfaction. Although VA has made many improvements in care, many challenges remain, including recruitment and performance of staff, personal and electronic communication, and delivery of female-specific services. The American Legion will publish a detailed report of the care-quality findings this fall.

Better Care for Female Veterans

Where we are

A 2011 American Legion study revealed several areas of concern about VA health-care services for women. Today, VA still struggles to fulfill this need, even though women are the fastest-growing segment of the veteran population. Approximately 1.8 million female veterans make up 8 percent of the total veteran population, yet only 6 percent use VA services.

VA needs to be prepared for a significant increase of younger female veterans as those who served in the war on terrorism separate. Approximately 58 percent of women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are ages 20 to 29, and they require gender-specific expertise and care. Studies suggest post-traumatic stress disorder is especially prevalent among women; among veterans who used VA in 2009, 10.2 percent of women and 7.8 percent of men were diagnosed with PTSD.

The number of female veterans enrolled in the VA system is expected to expand by more than 33 percent in the next three years. Currently, 44 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan female veterans have enrolled in the VA health-care system.

What we want

The American Legion recommends VA conduct a comprehensive study of military sexual trauma, in conjunction with the Department of Defense if possible, to develop a better plan to counteract the problem.

VA needs to develop a comprehensive health-care program for female veterans that extends beyond reproductive issues. Provider education needs improvement. Furthermore, as female veterans are the sole caregivers in some families, services and benefits designed to promote independent living for combat-injured veterans must be evaluated, and needs such as child care must be factored into the equation. Additionally, many female veterans cannot make appointments due to the lack of child-care options at VA medical centers. Since the 2011 survey, The American Legion has continued to advocate for improved delivery of timely, quality health care for women using VA.

What we are doing

The 2011 survey revealed concerns that have led to the establishment of a new American Legion Women Veterans Outreach Program whose coordinator is tasked with identifying best practices to improve services for female veterans and work with Legion departments to establish state coordinators to oversee female veterans programs at that level.

The Women Veterans Outreach Program aims to educate veterans and communities that support them; to collaborate with local, state and federal agencies that can provide needed services; and to provide continued oversight of VA's execution of benefits and services. The American Legion's advocacy efforts seek to ensure that the identified needs of female veterans are being met, and, more importantly, that veterans are informed on the issues that affect their lives.

Many states have coordinators and have vibrant programs while other states have not yet identified coordinators. Coordinators will be trained and educated on their responsibilities and provided the necessary assistance to get their programs up and running.

Repair Problems in Mental Health

Where we are

Post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury are the signature wounds of today's wars. TBI is defined as a blow or jolt to the head, or penetrating head injury, that disrupts brain function. PTSD is a disorder resulting from exposure to a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury. Both conditions are increasing in number, particularly among those who have served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

A 2011 Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs survey of 319 VA mental health staff revealed that services for veterans coping with mental health issues and TBI are lacking. Among the findings:

- New mental health patient appointments could be scheduled within 14 days, according to 63 percent of respondents, but only 48.1 percent believed veterans referred for specialty appointments for PTSD or substance abuse would be seen within 14 days.

- Seventy percent of providers said their sites had shortages of mental health space.
- Forty-six percent reported that a lack of off-hours appointments was a barrier to care.
- More than 26 percent reported that demand for Compensation and Pension (C&P) exams pulled clinicians away from direct care.
- Just over 50 percent reported that growth in patient numbers contributed to mental health staff shortages.

VHA and, at the request of Congress, VA's Office of the Inspector General have studied the problem since the survey was conducted. On April 23, 2012, the VAOIG released the report, "Review of Veterans' Access to Mental Health Care." It found that VHA's mental health performance data was neither accurate nor reliable. In VA's fiscal 2011 Performance and Accountability Report, VHA grossly over-reported that 95 percent of first-time patients received a full mental health evaluation within 14 days. However, it was found that VHA completed approximately 64 percent of new-patient appointments for treatment within 14 days of their desired date, but approximately 36 percent of appointments exceeded 14 days. VHA schedulers also were not following procedures outlined in VHA directives, and were scheduling clinic appointments on the system's availability rather than the patient's clinical need.

During a congressional hearing on April 25, VA announced that it would hire an additional 1,600 mental health clinicians, as well as 300 support staff across the country to address three major areas of improvements: mental health access, staffing and quality. VA has developed a hiring and tracking task force to monitor and speed up the staffing effort. The task force also is assisting in the recruitment and filling of another 1,500 vacancies in mental health VA had prior to announcing the new positions. VHA's plan is to have most of these new positions filled by fiscal 2013's second quarter.

Where we want to be

The American Legion believes VA must focus on head injuries and mental health without sacrificing awareness and concern for other conditions afflicting servicemembers and veterans. As an immediate priority, VA must ensure staffing levels are adequate to meet the need. The American Legion also urges Congress to invest in research, screening, diagnosis and treatment for PTSD and TBI. As with any increases to funding, increased oversight also is necessary to ensure the money is going directly to the needed programs.

What we are doing

The American Legion Ad Hoc Committee on PTSD/TBI has closely examined issues related to these conditions and has begun assembling a set of recommendations for VA and DoD. The committee consists of mental health experts, dedicated senior Legion service officers and past national commanders of The American Legion. The committee has found that various alternative treatments may be effective but are not recognized by VA, and that some prescription drugs—such as Risperidone, which is not approved by the FDA for the treatment of PTSD—are often over used. The committee continues to meet to better understand the issue, present findings to American Legion groups and share concerns with VA.

Turn Military Experience Into Careers

Where we are

Servicemembers and veterans have attended and graduated from some of the finest technical and professional training schools in the world. Many have experience in health care, electronics, computers, engineering, drafting, air-traffic control, nuclear energy, mechanics, carpentry and other fields. Many of their skills require some type of license or certificate to qualify for civilian jobs. In too many cases, this license or certificate requires schooling already completed through military training programs. Unfortunately, the agencies that issue the licenses or certificates do not recognize military training or experience. For example, a medic who treated gunshot wounds in Operation Enduring Freedom is qualified as a medic but will not be certified as an emergency medical technician in the civilian workforce without additional, redundant schooling.

The American Legion is a leading voice in advocacy for the unique job skills veterans bring to the table. In 1997, The American Legion commissioned the report “Study of Civilian Licensure and Certification for Veterans,” which detailed the problem while focusing on the areas of aircraft maintenance and health care. In the past, barriers to this effort have included resistance from military and civilian sectors alike, but top defense officials now offer support on Capitol Hill for the idea of transferring military experience for credits.

This subject has grown more important as the veteran unemployment rate exceeds that of civilians and has been as high as 30 percent for the youngest veterans. For veterans, who have already sacrificed so much in service to the country, the additional stresses and strains of unemployment, and the financial hardship that accompanies joblessness, can become almost unbearable, and contribute to already-high rates of depression and PTSD.

Where we want to be

The American Legion is fighting for a major overhaul of the licensure and certification policies as they relate to military job skills, on the national and state levels alike. As demand for qualified workers in a diverse range of occupations continues to grow, veterans offer skills, training, dedication and discipline that translate well into specialized fields and trades.

The American Legion is working with credentialing and licensing agencies to help veterans receive credit for their experiences, maximize their abilities and move quickly into productive careers. While the VOW to Hire Heroes Act and the Veterans Skills to Jobs Act of 2012, are important steps that The American Legion strongly supported and helped shape, they are only a good start in a long march to improve career opportunities for those who have served in uniform.

What we are doing

For over a decade, The American Legion has been a leading voice in the argument to provide veterans the opportunity to transfer military experience into credits toward licenses and certification. The case has been made to VA, the Department of Labor, DoD, through legislation, and at least one presidential task force. The Legion’s efforts enthusiastically continue with the momentum of legislation passed in 2012.

The Legion’s strategy going forward includes:

- Working with and counseling government agencies about the value of a workforce with military experience.
- Working with the American National Standard Institute and Solutions for Information Design to advise the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine and identify 10 credentialing agencies to evaluate their instruction programs.
- Lobbying successfully for an industry credentialing amendment to the fiscal 2013 National Defense Authorization Bill.
- Working closely with Congress on “The Hire at Home Act,” which would amend Title 38 to require – as a condition to receive selected veteran employment and training funds – that the state ensures that training received by a veteran while on active duty is taken into consideration in granting certain state certifications or licenses.

The American Legion will continue to work with the National Governors Association, the White House, the National Conference of State Legislatures, government agencies such as the departments of Defense, Transportation, Energy, Labor, and others, as well as congressional representatives, military training commands, credentialing boards and the private sector. The American Legion is in the process of creating toolkits to assist Legionnaires in advocating on a state-by-state basis to address the issue of credentialing.

Expand VETS Program

Where we are

The Department of Labor’s VETS program offers employment and training services to eligible veterans through its Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program. The American Legion is eager to see this program grow and would like greater expansion of entrepreneurial-based, self-employment opportunity training. Adequate funding is necessary to allow the programs to increase staffing to provide comprehensive case-management job assistance to disabled and other eligible veterans.

Where we want to be

For the program to succeed, it needs to:

- Implement recent reforms to the Transition Assistance Program so veterans can be better informed on education, employment and business opportunities as they transition into the civilian workforce.
- Expand outreach efforts with creative initiatives designed to improve employment and training services for veterans.
- Provide information about military occupations that provide qualifying training for required licenses, certificates or other credentials at the local, state or national levels.
- Eliminate barriers to recently separated servicemembers and assist in the transition from military service to the civilian labor market.

The American Legion believes staffing levels for DVOPs (Disabled Veterans Outreach Programs) and LVERs (Local Veterans Employment Representatives) should match the needs of the veteran community in each state and should not be based solely on the fiscal needs of the

state government. VETS should remain a national program with federal oversight and accountability. The American Legion seeks legislation that will transfer all DVOPs and LVERs from the state agencies to VETS for supervision and oversight to ensure that the individuals employed to serve veterans are not used for other programs.

What we are doing

The American Legion is working closely with VA and the Department of Labor to ensure this program receives the attention it needs to assist veterans, and continues to grow and thrive through changes and improvements to the programs involved. The American Legion also continues to work with state departments of veterans affairs to improve the delivery of benefits at that level.

Help Veterans Start Businesses

Where we are

Small business is the backbone of the U.S. economy. It has been the mobilizing force behind America's past economic growth. It will continue to be a major factor as our nation moves through the current recession. Reports show that businesses with fewer than 20 employees account for 90 percent of all U.S. firms and are responsible for more than 75 percent of all new jobs. There are 27 million small businesses in the U.S., and 99.7 percent of all firms are small businesses.

Where we want to be

The American Legion urges Congress to establish a direct lending program through the Small Business Administration that would offer low-interest loans to otherwise healthy veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses (SDVOSB) having trouble obtaining credit for necessary operating expenses or expansion. In addition, The American Legion seeks and supports legislation to require a 5-percent goal, with set-asides and sole-source authority for federal procurements and contracts for businesses owned and operated by service-disabled veterans, and businesses owned and controlled by veterans. This includes small businesses owned by reserve-component members who have been, or may be, called to active duty, or may be affected by base closings and reductions in our military forces.

Pressures on the federal contracting community likely will result in greater use of the General Services Administration's Federal Supply Schedule Program, and while this program holds a higher contracting preference than the small business programs, it unfortunately does not allow set-asides for any small-business group. The American Legion agrees that expanded use of this program will further diminish opportunities for small businesses, especially those owned by veterans. The American Legion makes the following recommendations:

- Service-disabled, veteran-owned small business set-asides should be allowed under the Federal Supply Schedule Program. Without this change, SDVOSBs will be limited in their quest for opportunities to compete for federal contracts.
- Implementation of a coordinated standardized training program for procurement staff that focuses on SDVOSB procurement strategies in their respective agencies.

- President Obama should reissue Executive Order 13-360, “Providing Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran Businesses,” to increase federal contracting and subcontracting opportunities for veterans, and require that its tenets be incorporated into SBA regulations and standard operating procedures.
- SBA needs to emphasize Executive Order 13-360 and establish it as a procurement priority across the federal sector. Federal agencies need to be held accountable by the SBA for implementing the executive order, and SBA needs to establish a means to monitor agency progress and, when appropriate, establish a report to identify those that are not in compliance and pursue ongoing follow-up.
- To achieve the mandates of Executive Order 13-360, SBA must assist federal agencies in developing a strategic plan that is quantifiable and will assist them in establishing realistic reporting criteria.
- The House Small Business Committee should embrace and promote development of stronger policy and legislative language that champions the utilization of veteran-owned small business joint-venturing as a ready solution to the small-business spending requirements of the stimulus spending initiative.
- Agency leadership must be held responsible for meeting the 3 percent congressionally mandated goal. The American Legion recommends the committee schedule a hearing with all federal agencies that consistently do not meet their federal procurement goals with SDVOBs.
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What we are doing

The American Legion continues to work closely with business leaders and government authorities to help veteran-owned small business and increase the roles of veteran-owned businesses in communities around the world. Veterans know the value of veteran employees better than anyone else, and veteran-owned small businesses are one among the best employers of veterans.

End Veteran Homelessness

Where we are

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has promised to devote resources necessary to end veteran homelessness by 2015. To fully implement that pledge, VA is going to have to work closely with Congress to continue making responsible investments in affordable housing and supportive service programs to help more veterans and their families. Current estimates put the number of homeless veterans at approximately 76,000 on any given night, down from 2010 numbers of 131,000 or more.

Where we want to be

The American Legion recommends providing funding for a broad range of appropriate and effective interventions, including:

- Appropriation of funds for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program. SSVF funds have been used effectively by community organizations to prevent many veterans from becoming homeless and to quickly assist veterans who need nothing more than

short-term rental assistance and limited case management to get back on their feet. SSVF funds also can be used to pay for employment services, utility assistance, child care costs and other housing-related expenses.

- Congressional support for the homeless veterans Grant and Per Diem transitional housing program. This program provides short-term housing help to homeless veterans, allowing them to get connected with jobs, supportive services and more permanent housing, ultimately allowing them to become self-sufficient. Promising new models for using Grant and Per Diem funds – including allowing veterans to remain in their GPD housing units once support from the program ends – and new programs focused on women veterans are helping to ensure that GPD continues to meet the ever-changing needs of returning veterans and their families.
- Congress should provide 10,000 new HUD–VASH vouchers designed to serve homeless veterans (and in many cases their families) who need long-term housing, intensive case management and supportive services. Since 2008, 37,975 vouchers have been awarded, contributing substantially to major reductions in veteran homelessness.

What we are doing

The American Legion continues to lead communities by volunteering, fundraising, and advocating for programs and resources to help homeless veterans. In addition, The American Legion directly provides housing for homeless veterans and their families, including facilities in Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Connecticut. One of the goals of The American Legion is to help bring federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions and other stakeholders to the table to discuss best practices, along with funding opportunities, so homeless veterans and their families can obtain the necessary care and help to properly transition from the streets and shelters into gainful employment and/or independent living.

Ease the Military-to-Civilian Transition

Where we are

Successful adjustment from military service to civilian life is a complicated process. It involves culture shifts, career changes, government paperwork to obtain benefits, health-care services that must be understood, and much more. How well a veteran makes the adjustment often determines the rest of his or her life.

Unfortunately, this transition has been hampered in past years by poor communication and coordination between DoD and VA. Efforts have been made to correct the process, which is improving, but too many veterans still slip through the cracks and fail to receive the benefits they earned and deserve or the support they need to restart their lives.

Transition Assistance Programs (TAP) are now mandatory across all branches of military service, a change The American Legion commends. While TAP will require much fine tuning to accurately deliver what veterans need, implementing the program universally already is a major improvement.

Current DoD policy requires new inductees to enroll in the eBenefits portal, which will help all future generations of veterans. While VA and DoD still try to iron out differences in electronic

data systems necessary to make the Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) effective, the eBenefits portal holds great promise. VLER delays are deeply troubling to The American Legion because the program has been a major focus of veterans groups, lawmakers and the federal government for several years.

What we want

Fast-tracking the VLER program to ensure seamless transfer of medical records must be a top priority, and necessary funds must be allocated to fulfill it. The delays that have plagued this program are inexcusable. The American Legion urges Congress and the administration to work together to put the program back on track.

While The American Legion is encouraged by the progress made in TAP, the program is still new and will require dedicated oversight and attention to ensure it is meeting the needs of the servicemembers it is designed to help.

What we are doing

The American Legion is reaching out to servicemembers as they transition into the civilian world. American Legion service officers offer free guidance and assistance to any veteran who needs to understand or file for VA benefits.

During the past year, The American Legion has developed a “Claims Coach” app for smart phones and other mobile devices to help veterans better understand the disability claims process and compile the necessary data to file complete claims for benefits. The American Legion is working to ensure transitioning veterans have access through TAP or other means, such as the Claims Coach app, to successfully navigate the transition process and better integrate into the next phase of life.

Protect the U.S. Flag

Where we are

Since the American Revolution, countless men and women have proudly defended this nation under the Stars and Stripes. There is hardly a more poignant image of the sacrifices made by America’s heroes in defense of this nation than a U.S. flag draped over a coffin, the last full measure of respect to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. However, since the 1989 U.S. Supreme Court 5-4 decision in *Texas v. Johnson*, the American people have been denied the ability to make laws protecting from desecration this great symbol of our nation.

Where we want to be

Surveys have shown that over 80 percent of American citizens support passage of a constitutional amendment that would protect the flag, but Congress has repeatedly fallen short of the 66-percent Senate supermajority needed to pass it.

The House of Representatives has passed the amendment six times by supermajority, only to see it fall short in the Senate—by just one vote the last time it made it to the floor.

Congress must unite in respect of the patriotic will of the American people and pass a flag-protection amendment to the Constitution that will once again allow the people to live under such laws as they deem prudent and to show proper respect and reverence for their flag.

What we are doing

Together with the American Legion Auxiliary, The American Legion founded the Citizens Flag Alliance, Inc., to garner and focus grass-roots support for the amendment. The CFA now includes 109 member organizations and more than 30 million Americans. Through this organization, The American Legion will continue to fight for passage of the flag-protection amendment.

The American Legion is also dedicated to promoting positive flag-related activities, such as promoting education about the U.S. Flag Code, flag etiquette, proper disposal and sharing information through a growing email network.

CONCLUSION

The American Legion is the conscience of a patriotic nation. It is made up of men and women who have served in uniform. Its family extends to spouses and parents who have known the fear and uncertainty of deployed loved ones. The American Legion, the American Legion Auxiliary, Sons of The American Legion and all their supporters are connected by a love of country that cannot be compromised.

Through more than 13,000 local posts around the world, The American Legion Family wraps its arms around four pillars of service: Veterans, Defense, Americanism and Youth.

To learn more about what The American Legion does every day in support of those pillars, visit **www.legion.org** or “like” The American Legion National Headquarters on Facebook. The American Legion can also be found on Twitter and in mobile media. Those who really want to help veterans, their families and communities are urged to join The American Legion Family, where they can go to work every day on behalf of the nation they love.

American Legion National Contacts

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Public Relations

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The American Legion Magazine

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The American Legion Online Update

(317) 630-1272
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Preamble to The American Legion Constitution

FOR GOD AND COUNTRY WE ASSOCIATE OURSELVES  TOGETHER FOR THE FOLLOWING PURPOSES:

To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. To maintain law and order

To foster and perpetuate a one hundred percent Americanism

To preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars

To inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state and nation

To combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses

To make right the master of might

To promote peace and goodwill on earth. To safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy

To consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness.