

Association of the United States Navy  
Written Testimony in Support of 2018 Legislative Agenda

Submitted to the United States  
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee and  
House Veterans Affairs Committee



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National Executive Director

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## **Introduction**

Distinguished Committee Chairmen Senator Johnny Isakson and Congressman Phil Roe, and Ranking Members Senator John Tester and Congressman Tim Walz and other members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to present the 2018 Legislative Agenda for the Association of the United States Navy.

## **About Association of the United States Navy**

The Association of the United States Navy (AUSN) is an IRC 501[c][19] organization based in Alexandria, Virginia, that works for the benefit of the U.S. Navy Sailors and Veterans. Through legislation and education, AUSN works to advance benefits for those who are serving or have served in the U.S. Navy. AUSN champions legislation on the state and federal levels and engages in targeted issues to support our men and women of the U.S. Navy.

## **Opening:**

On behalf of the Active Duty, Veteran and civilian membership, friends and supporters of the Association of the United States Navy, I would like to thank the Committees for the stewardship and oversight you have provided for all those who have answered the call of duty.

It is an exciting time at AUSN – we are innovating, partnering and aligning ourselves to meet the needs of modern-day Sailors and their families, in parallel with our dedication to our Veterans who have given so much. We are breaking the mold that once formed so many sea-service veteran service organizations (VSOs) as AUSN represents the interests of the entire United States Navy. Soon you will be learning a lot about how AUSN's strong alliances with organizations like the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation and the Navy's Wounded Warrior Safe Harbor Program will transform how our Sailors at sea are readied for battle and how our

returning warriors, especially our Navy's wounded warriors and their families, are cared for and supported the Navy way.

Since we met last year, AUSN has been encouraged by the focus your Committees have taken on – from the very large and looming, like the Enhancing Veteran Care Act, to smaller but equally important issues such as the Veteran's Care Financial Protection Act, to name a few.

We hear from our Veterans about the truly compassionate care they receive from their health-care providers and a system that performs when needed the most. We also hear first-hand accounts of some of our Veterans' struggles to lead healthy, productive lives. Even with the massive efforts your Committees and our fellow VSOs have undertaken to end such matters as Veterans' homelessness, joblessness, mental illness and broken family lives – our Shipmates still struggle at times to obtain health-care services or they encounter uncertainty in their treatment options. Ultimately, AUSN views the current state of Veterans affairs in our country in the context of our current place in history and of the complex demands that affect every citizen of every state in the union. Today we have unprecedented access to information, spontaneous collaboration of intellect and humankind's profound scientific abilities.

A healthy balance of care for our Veterans calls for new, innovative and compassionate ideas to meet the needs of those suffering and of their caregivers, who are often family members. Uncertainty and turbulence must and can be managed. AUSN is committed to helping the process of modernization currently under way by Secretary of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin. AUSN applauds an especially compassionate mechanism Secretary Shulkin implemented which treats every Veteran as an individual through the creation of the Veterans Experience Office, under the exceptional direction of Lynda Davis, PhD.

Yet, with this transformation comes the reality that while many Veterans are well cared for, there are many who are not. AUSN is working vigorously to ensure that all Sailors, all Veterans – past and future – can rely on a system that squares with the honor and service that was given in defense of the freedoms we all enjoy today. When the result of our Navy Veteran’s service impinges on the lives of their families, especially their children, we vow to help your Committees and all other mechanisms to provide them relief. We rely on AUSN’s Veteran members to identify when a Shipmate is in harm’s way – we connect young Sailors with “Old Salts” to inspire learning by example, by expertise and by pride.

We vigorously encourage your Committees to support Secretary Shulkin as he aligns his department to help Sailors by harnessing the power of partnerships,

the power of innovation and the awesome power of the memory of our nation's Veterans.

AUSN believes that to best care for those who have borne the scars of our nation's battles, the medical care priorities of our Veterans must be aligned as:

- 1) Continuity of care between the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA),
- 2) Consistent quality of care, and,
- 3) Sustained certainty in funding to provide timely, high-quality health care for our Veterans.

Currently, there are two distinctly different medical systems dedicated to dealing with our service members and Veterans – the DoD and the VA. While each medical system services a different population – either those who currently wear or who have previously worn the uniform of our nation's Armed Forces – the problem lies in the fact that each system is structured to treat its patients in different ways. The DoD medical system treats Active Duty service members, generally healthy men and women answering the call of duty to our nation. The VA medical system is dedicated to a wide range of Veterans, varying in age and with complex medical issues that may not have begun to impact them until long

after they left the service. Even more complex is the care required for the children of our Veterans whose afflictions originate with their parent's service.

AUSN believes that the DoD and VA medical systems should not be concerned with whether the patient is a Sailor deployed on a ship, submarine or ashore, or if the patient is a Veteran trying to receive assistance for a disability that he or she suffered while on active duty. Our men and women should be receiving the same treatment and the same quality care from the day they enter the military and swear their oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America until the day they die.

### **Our Navy's Shipmates in Need:**

AUSN's membership is passionate about providing comfort and care to our Shipmates and Veterans whose service has resulted in hardship and scars, both seen and unseen. AUSN has embarked on an innovative project designed to dramatically augment how our country cares for our wounded Shipmates that focuses on providing the resources that our government does not provide. AUSN's partnership with the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation throws open opportunities to assist those suffering from illness, injury, or battle wounds to engage in new approaches to recovery. Right now, the Navy Wounded Warrior Safe Harbor Program does its mightiest, herculean in fact, to address the needs of these

Shipmates. But, like many Federal programs, it is limited by resources. The reality is that this program can only bring so much care to these Sailors. AUSN – in partnership with the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation – can provide financial, emotional and informational assistance for a healthy transition from military life.

### **Continuity of Care:**

Our nation has a long history of caring for our servicemembers when they go into harm's way, and to continue medical treatment when required. For many years, organizations have called for overhauling the VA system due to lack of continuity of care. AUSN believes that a solution to continuity may be to incorporate the successful medical care aspects of the DoD medical system with that of the VA.

AUSN stands with your Committees to ensure those who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) receive world-class medical care. While both the DoD and VA medical systems treat PTSD and TBI, they have their own distinct medical care processes. A Sailor injured in combat while serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere may be medically evacuated back to the United States to be treated at Walter Reed Medical Center. That Sailor may receive care and treatment not currently available for their Shipmates with the same injuries being treated at VA facilities. Conversely, if a

service member is being provided specific health-care treatment while on active duty and is then transferred to receive health care at a VA facility, the current dual system may not recognize the medicine or health-care treatment they have been receiving. Some Veterans have been required to restart treatment, from the beginning, in the VA system, leading to significant medical condition regression compared with the progress that had been made while they received DoD medical care on active duty. Additionally, when a service member or Veteran is transitioning from one facility to another, the only thing that should change is their doctor, not the treatment or quality of care received.

Members of these honorable Committees, a successful way to ensure continuity of care is expediting the full digitization of medical records. At this time last year, we offered the example that almost every county in the country has digitized their patients' medical records. It is intuitively obvious to medical service providers that expedited continuity of care is largely enhanced with access to a patient's digitized medical records. Is it possible for the VA and DoD to have one common digitized medical records program? AUSN says yes, it is possible. We suggest that to improve alignment, expedite continuity of care and fluidity between the DoD and VA medical systems, digitizing VA medical records should be a top priority.



## **Quality of Care:**

The nation's quality of medical care for our Veterans runs the complete gamut. Some private institutions or organizations provide high-end medical care for their patients, sometimes at a significant cost. Several recommendations have circulated with respect to privatizing the VA Department to provide Veterans the choice to seek and keep their own doctors.

In some current DoD medical systems, with no military treatment facilities nearby, it is a common practice to provide service members the ability to choose their own doctors. It is then the responsibility of the service member to ensure that medical documents are provided to their Command, so they can be filed in the military medical record.

Veterans should not only have the right to choose, but also should receive the best treatment and quality of care in the facility where medicine excels – be it a DoD or VA facility – if it is the best fit for the Veteran.

AUSN recommends that by aligning and combining programs, the U.S. government could save money and provide additional benefits for our service members and Veterans. Uniting the best of these two medical systems into a cohesive unit would allow for quality and continuity of care among our service members when they transition from DoD medicine to VA medicine.

It is important that the VA focus on what it does best: caring for service-related injuries. The VA should align its policies and work more closely with DoD medicine, along with medical research institutes, to strive to provide the most modern, transparent and best possible care for our Veterans.

### **Helping Lost Shipmates:**

A goal moving forward for AUSN members is to activate their state and local resources with the goal of bringing relief to our homeless Veterans. As you know, homelessness is a complex issue and our Navy Veterans reflect a microcosm of our society. Our efforts focus on transitioning the Sailor to civilian life and providing avenues to employability, training and socialization. AUSN plans to report to you when next we meet the impact our membership is making to help our homeless Shipmates.

### **Proper Funding:**

AUSN believes that the key to improving Veteran care is providing consistent, sustained funding. The biggest issue facing the implementation of a modernized VA medical care program is figuring out the best way to pay for it.

One way is through community partnerships with other health-care providers. Veterans often find themselves using the VA for everything, because, to them, they feel connected to the people they encounter while at the VA. One

possibility for ensuring that Veterans are using the VA for only service-related injuries is to provide insurance for Veterans who did not retire from service and were honorably or medically discharged. Providing Veterans this option for insurance would allow the VA to use the revenue to fund other medical care benefits that are urgently needed for our Veterans. When Veterans require medical care from a doctor, because of PTSD, TBI, or from an injury they received while on active duty, the VA may or may not be the best facility to care for them. If these Veterans have medical conditions outside of military-related injuries, they should be able to go to any health-care center provided through the Tricare system.

DoD medicine has been constant, consistent, and adaptive when it comes to caring for our Sailors, and AUSN suggests there should be no difference when it comes to the continuity and quality of care of our Veterans.

The funding for the DoD and VA for Veteran medical care must be sustained and consistent. At the time of a service-related injury or an exposure to toxins, for example, a Veteran may be unaware of current or long-term medical dangers. The Congress and our nation should hold the bottom line that Veterans should NOT be denied medical care for deserved and required treatment of service-related injuries or exposure to toxins.

## **Closing:**

In closing, the Department of Veterans Affairs was originally established to fulfill President Abraham Lincoln's promise to care for those who have "borne the battle, and for the widow, and the orphan." Those immortal words were followed by a single thought that has served as a guiding principle of our nation since President Lincoln spoke them, "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Caring for our Veterans – all Veterans, all equally – can only be accomplished by a nation that has evolved to endeavor to bring lasting peace amongst nations everywhere.

The Association of the United States Navy is dedicated to assisting your Committees, our Veterans, and the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense to truly care for our Veterans.

We must work together across departments, agencies and systems to ensure that the proper outcome for the care of our Veterans and the brave men and women who currently call themselves Sailors, Soldiers, Marines, Airmen and Coast Guardsmen, and, also looking into the future, for those who have yet to wear the cloth of our nation.

Senators and Representatives, permit us to leave you with a single take-away message that we hope will guide you in the days and weeks to come. AUSN is

committed to helping bring alignment in support of the promise of continuity and quality of care, and the required funding for the care of Veterans from the day that our service members join the military until the honorable day that we lay our Veterans to rest.

Thank you for your continued bipartisan support of our Veterans, and I stand by for any questions the Committees may have.



**REAR ADMIRAL CHRISTOPHER W. COLE, USN (RET)**  
*National Executive Director*

Using the breadth of experience gained from his career in the Navy and private sector, Rear Admiral Cole comes to AUSN through his service as President of the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation. RADM Cole's chief platform while serving as National Executive Director is to bring about an alignment of our organization's modernization plan with the needs of the US Navy in three areas; 1) professional development of Sailors throughout their career; 2) providing opportunity for Sailors transitioning, and; 3) addressing the needs of our struggling and wounded Shipmates and offering relief and support.

During his military career as an aviator, Rear Admiral Cole served in various flying and staff positions, ultimately commanding two aircraft squadrons and two amphibious ships. He graduated from the Naval War College, was a member of the Secretary of Defense Strategic Study Group and attended the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

As a Flag Officer, Rear Admiral Cole served as the Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Korea in Seoul, Republic of Korea; Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic in Norfolk, Virginia; and Director, Ashore Readiness Division (N46) in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, D.C.

Upon retirement from active service in January 2004 and prior to joining AUSN Rear Admiral Cole was a consultant to the Defense Industry in national security, energy strategy, environmental protection, BRAC, military construction, and installation management. In addition to his AUSN work he serves as President of the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation and is Chairman of the Board of Directors of Military Bowl Foundation.