



Statement for the Record

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Before a Joint Hearing of the
House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs

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Chairman Tester, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Moran, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs, I am honored to present you with the 2024 legislative priorities and policy recommendations of AMVETS. For over 75 years, our organization has led the charge in veterans' advocacy work. As the largest veteran non-profit open to all of our nation's veterans, this annual address allows AMVETS to share the voices of our membership and ensure they remain part of the legislative decisions that serve their interests across the country.

We are thankful for your staff's time, efforts, and attention throughout the 118th Congress. AMVETS continues to make meaningful connections with these individuals that speak to the heart of what makes these Committees so critical: serving those who have served. We work with them, your offices, and other veteran organizations to ensure that the hard work does not stop as this Congress comes to a close. We have a lot of work to do, but having so many caring Members of Congress and Staff Members makes all of the difference in tackling the many difficult challenges the mil-vet community faces.

Since the last time we addressed both Committees, we have seen progress of which we can be proud. On both sides of the aisle, you have shown a remarkable capacity for cooperation and resolution around key areas of priority for AMVETS. We ask that this momentum continues through the end of the year so we can pass meaningful legislation for our nation's veterans.

Our veterans deserve more than empty words and large platitudes. While AMVETS appreciates the hard work of these Committees, our organization wants to see laws passed that back them up. AMVETS asks Congress to consider these overarching policy goals as a roadmap to

successfully representing American veterans. They need your support now more than ever, and AMVETS is proud to help lead the way.

AMVETS Primary Legislative Goals for the 118th Congress

- Mental Health and Suicide Prevention in the VA and Armed Forces
- Create Equitable Non-Profit Policies for Veteran Non-Profits
- Support the Immediate Passage of the Major Richard Star Act
- Support the Increase of DIC for Our Survivors
- Support the Completion of a Successful and Seamless Electronic Healthcare Record
- Increase Women Veterans' Voices in Policy and Government to Address Issues Disproportionately Affecting Them
- VA Must Prioritize and Properly Compensate Optometrists to Ensure Quality Eye Care for Veterans
- Create a National Veterans Strategy to align care and benefits to focus on outcomes and success
- POW/MIA
- Readiness/Recruitment for the Next Generation of Veterans

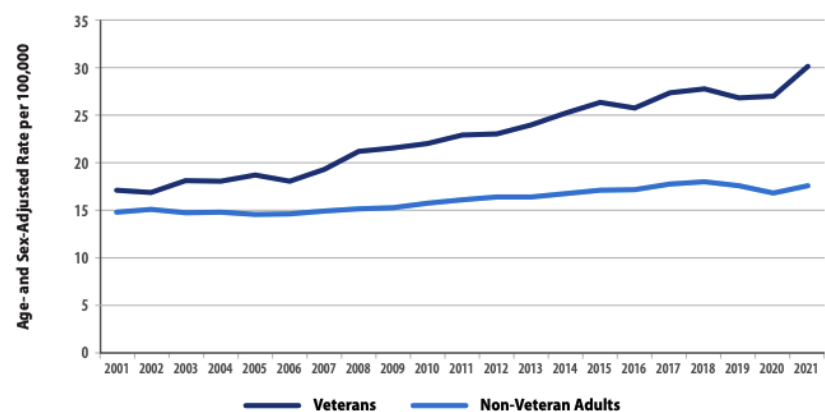
Ending Veteran Suicide & Pursuing Positive Mental Health Outcomes

This year signifies the sixth consecutive year that AMVETS will emphasize its top legislative priority: the development and funding of effective programs and services aimed at substantially reducing suicides within the VA and the Department of Defense.

Veteran suicides have continued to climb, as displayed in the VA's National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report released last November.

AMVETS adamantly urges Congress and the VA to do everything in their power to prevent the loss of veteran life by suicide. We have seen numerous hearings held and listened to our Representatives and Senators say: "Enough is enough." This trend is destroying the lives of those who served, their families, and the broader community. Enough *is* enough, and AMVETS asks Congress to seek innovative solutions to get these numbers down.

Figure 3: Age- and Sex-Adjusted Suicide Rate, Veterans and Non-Veteran U.S. Adults, 2001-2021



Recent discussions concerning the VA's' mental health services are part of a broader conversation about how our nation supports those who've risked their lives for our freedom. We

are not simply asking for an improvement to this model; we are pleading with Congress and the VA to consider transformation in the face of demonstrated systemic struggle and outright failure.

For context, while the general U.S. adult population's suicide rate remained fairly consistent, a JAMA report indicates a ten-fold rise in suicides among post-9/11 veterans from 2006 to 2020.¹ This increase persisted despite, or possibly due to, the VA's budget for mental health services skyrocketing from \$600 million annually to over \$16.6 billion.

AMVETS strongly advocates for a reevaluation of existing strategies and tactics. With such a significant annual budget, Congress and the VA must strive for clear, measurable outcomes instead of minor adjustments and unfulfilled promises. Given that a large portion of the VA's budget is allocated to interventions that have proven ineffective, AMVETS suggests that exploring innovative solutions focused on holistic mental health could provide more substantial benefits to veterans while providing a better value for our taxpayers.

Immediate reform is necessary. Our veterans deserve leadership as committed as they were to our country and services that genuinely improve their lives. We are proud of the work done by these Committees and Secretary Denis McDonough, and we want to see everyone deliver on their promises to American veterans and save their lives.

We commend Congress for its recent focus on the critical issue of veteran suicide through hearings and discussions about veterans' mental health by Committee members. However, we firmly believe that the actions taken thus far amount to little more than superficial, and unfortunately wasteful in time and lives, adjustments over the last twenty years. The practice of naming new legislation after veterans who tragically lost their lives to suicide after undergoing VA clinical interventions highlights the need for a more profound change. We argue that it's crucial to go beyond the failed promises of better outcomes from the mental health and pharmaceutical sectors, which have not materialized despite increased clinical interventions, suicide prevention campaigns, and the expenditure of hundreds of hundreds of millions of dollars in research funds searching for a nonexistent "golden" clinical solution.

AMVETS encouraged Congress and the VA to take a new tack six years ago. Congress has largely stayed the course except for some small and meaningful changes such as providing grant funding for "new and novel approaches," as recommended by JAMA nearly eight years ago.

With two decades of data and efforts, we can now say the following have failed to reduce the ratio of veterans' deaths by suicide:

- Veterans who utilize VA are more likely, not less, to die by suicide.
- Despite massive increases in funding for clinical interventions, the veteran ratio of suicide has risen, not dropped. Civilian suicide, without this massive infusion of clinical and negative public campaign intervention, has largely stayed static, insinuating that VA interventions are likely systematically contributing to these negative outcomes.

¹ Howard JT, Stewart IJ, Amuan ME, Janak JC, Howard KJ, Pugh MJ. Trends in Suicide Rates Among Post-9/11 US Military Veterans With and Without Traumatic Brain Injury From 2006-2020. *JAMA Neurol*. Published online August 28, 2023. doi:10.1001/jamaneurol.2023.2893

- The first (and last) joint VA/DoD Suicide Prevention Conference (2004)
- The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act (2007)
- The launching of the Veterans Crisis Line (2007)
- The Clay Hunt SAV Act (2015)
 - Further, Congress has not held a hearing on the Clay Hunt SAV Act report, which Congress required in this legislation to understand better the effectiveness of VA mental health interventions or lack thereof.
- Numerous negative and reinforcing public campaigns (billboards, radio ads, etc.) highlighting veterans as suicidal
- Combatting suicide as a public health issue
- VA's campaign highlighting suicide as their number one clinical priority

We are heartened to see an awakening in Congress to the reality that our community has been misled regarding the costly lack of tangible positive outcomes due to clinical interventions. Another positive development is the growing recognition among veterans and their families of the benefits of adopting healthy, positive, holistic approaches over traditional clinical and psychotropic treatments. It's imperative that the VA modernizes its approach and that funding priorities shift to support these proactive and positive interventions early in veterans' journeys. Only through such transformative measures can we hope to achieve a meaningful reduction in the rate of veteran suicides.

This Memorial Day weekend, AMVETS will remember those service members who never made it home, including those who died by suicide, were killed in action, or are still listed as POW or MIA. Our Rolling to Remember event, the largest motorcycle rally in the nation, aims to occupy the streets of Washington, DC, raising awareness of veterans' mental health issues and highlighting the plight of our missing. We invite Congress to demonstrate its support for this crucial event and its powerful message to veterans and their families by understanding that the relic approach of more funding for more of the status quo will only result in more deaths by suicide.

Creating Equitable Non-Profit Policies for Congressionally-Chartered VSOs

AMVETS is spearheading efforts to pass legislation enabling 501(c)(19) congressionally chartered veteran nonprofits to accept tax-deductible donations, challenging a long-standing restriction. We thank the members of these Committees who have cosponsored the VSO Equal Tax Treatment Act (H.R.1432/S.677) and encourage the support of those who still need to.

This initiative seeks to amend current tax laws, which limit deductions to donations made to organizations where at least 90 percent of members are war veterans, and include those without the wartime service requirement. The proposed change reflects a modern, long overdue understanding of military service, recognizing the contributions of all veterans, regardless of their service period.

The existing rule needs to be updated, failing to represent the diverse experiences of today's veterans, particularly the 2.4 million who served outside of official wartime periods. This discrepancy has placed a significant financial strain on VSOs like AMVETS, uniquely serving all honorably discharged wartime and non-wartime veterans. Consequently, in 2015, AMVETS lost

its eligibility to receive tax-deductible contributions, impacting its funding and ability to support its 250,000 members, of whom 38% are non-wartime veterans.

AMVETS was proud to observe the House Ways & Means Committee's markup of the VSO Equal Tax Treatment Act in November 2023, a critical step towards fixing the tax code's existing inequity. We remain optimistic about the bill's progress through Congress, aiming to secure equal treatment for all VSOs and ensure they can continue their vital support for America's veterans.

Immediately Passing the Major Richard Star Act

AMVETS joins numerous VSOs in supporting the swift enactment of the Major Richard Star Act, reinforcing nearly two decades of support alongside the Bilirakis family to abolish an outdated and unjust law that hinders veterans from concurrently receiving their deserved retirement pay from the Department of Defense and disability compensation from the VA.

The current policy, which deducts every dollar of disability pay from a veteran's retirement benefits, is fundamentally unfair to those who have sacrificed immensely for our country's safety and freedom. It is a disservice to veterans who have dedicated their lives to national defense, penalizing them for injuries sustained in service. AMVETS believes that correcting this policy is not just a matter of legislative action but a moral imperative to honor and properly support our veterans' sacrifices and contributions.

Supporting the Increase of DIC for Our Survivors

For many years, advocates have been tirelessly working towards securing equity between military surviving spouses and federal surviving spouses through a modest raise in the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) for those who have lost their loved ones. The current disparity in DIC payments highlights an unfulfilled promise to the families of those who have died for our country. It's imperative that we, as a nation, ensure that the families of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice are taken care of and adequately supported. This adjustment is a way to acknowledge our debt of gratitude and to demonstrate our appreciation for their service.

On January 30 of this year, the House Veterans Affairs Committee held a hearing focused on this very topic. They explored the possibility of increasing DIC payments, among other issues pertinent to the surviving spouses and children. AMVETS remains committed to endorsing these initiatives to enhance the welfare of these surviving families, reinforcing our support for those who have endured the loss of their servicemembers. This ongoing work underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the financial and emotional needs of the survivors, ensuring they receive the support and recognition they deserve.

Supporting the Completion of a Successful and Seamless Electronic Healthcare Record

AMVETS wholeheartedly endorses the VA's initiative to develop a unified and efficient electronic health record (EHR) system. For years, the transition of veterans from the Department of Defense to the VA has been hampered by a dysfunctional system characterized by missing

information, misplaced data, and reliance on outdated paper records. With the recognition that VISTA is no longer viable, AMVETS acknowledges the urgent need for a modern solution to serve both current and future veterans effectively.

AMVETS firmly opposes exploiting this critical issue for political advantage and actively opposes efforts to discontinue the EHR project—a stance far removed from reality. The efforts to implement this system align with the best interests of our nation's veterans and should be supported by all members of these Committees.

However, AMVETS advocates for stringent oversight, particularly emphasizing the VA's responsibility to efficiently advance this project. Drawing from the DoD's experience, which saw the successful deployment of similar initiatives under the guidance of skilled technical leaders with decisive authority, AMVETS notes a significant gap in the VA's handling of the EHR rollout. Despite these challenges, AMVETS is determined to resolve this pressing issue, urging the VA to demonstrate greater accountability.

AMVETS is keenly anticipating the forthcoming implementation of the EHR system at the Lovell Federal Health Care Center in Chicago, Illinois, this weekend, viewing it as a critical step towards rectifying a longstanding problem and vastly improving healthcare management for veterans. We are also confident that Oracle's acquisition of Cerner will be a positive outcome for this overall project, and we are grateful that such a large and impressive IT company will be at the helm to again bring VA healthcare into the forefront of healthcare and technology. Our veterans deserve nothing less.

Increasing Women Veterans' Voices in Policy and Government to Address Issues Disproportionately Affecting Them

AMVETS considers the mental health challenges faced by female veterans as a critical concern. According to the VA's 2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, the suicide rate among female veterans is alarmingly 166 percent higher than that of their non-veteran female counterparts. In contrast, male veterans have a 43 percent higher likelihood of suicide compared to men who have never served in the military. Notably, the pandemic has seen a surge in suicides among female veterans, four times the rate of increase observed in male veterans, with a strong link identified between such tragedies and experiences of military sexual trauma (MST).

AMVETS has been at the forefront of influential legislation aimed at curtailing military sexual trauma and enhancing the provision of healthcare and benefits. This commitment to advocacy remains steadfast, with ongoing efforts to raise awareness and drive policy changes on Capitol Hill concerning women in the military, female veterans, and their unique challenges.

Moreover, AMVETS has highlighted the disproportionately low representation of veterans, particularly women and minorities, in policy-making roles on Capitol Hill. In response, we continue collaborating with the HillVets Foundation to increase the presence and impact of these underrepresented groups in such critical positions, aiming to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences informs veteran-related legislation and policy initiatives.

VA Must Prioritize and Properly Compensate Optometrists to Ensure Quality Eye Care for Veterans

VA must immediately address the issue of optometrists at the VA being among the most undervalued practitioners within the system. Despite their integral role in providing essential eye care services to Veterans, VA optometrists are the only independently licensed practitioners not included on the VA Physician pay scale. This oversight has led to a significant and troubling trend: a mass exodus of highly qualified optometrists from the VA and considerable challenges in recruiting top-tier talent. The disparity in recognition and compensation not only undermines the quality of care available to our nation's Veterans but also fails to acknowledge the critical, specialized services that optometrists provide. Addressing this disparity is essential for maintaining the standard of care that Veterans need and deserve, ensuring they have access to the best possible eye and vision healthcare services.

Adding insult to injury, recent inner VA politics have led to certain VA leaders suggesting that VA optometrists cannot practice at the top of their licensing and training. This double whammy will result in even more optometry recruitment and retention issues. Ultimately, this will leave the VA critically short on optometrists and force the VA to pay increased costs to send veterans to optometrist in community care instead of at their preferred provider: the VA.

AMVETS strongly supports the position that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) must ensure Veterans have access to the full range of eye and vision care services that doctors of optometry are trained and licensed to provide under state laws. The urgency for this action is underscored by the significant demand for eye and vision care among Veterans, making it the third-most requested healthcare service. VA optometrists play a pivotal role, delivering care in over 70% of all Veteran eye care visits and practicing at 95% of VA sites offering eye care. However, the forthcoming Optometry National Standard of Practice and VA policies must not restrict Veterans' access to comprehensive care, including medical eye care services, injections, and surgical procedures that optometrists can perform in many states. Ensuring that Veterans have access to such comprehensive care aligns with practices in other federal health programs and acknowledges the established capability and safety of optometrists providing these services.

Creating a National Veterans Strategy to Align Care and Benefits to Focus on Outcomes and Success

AMVETS recognizes the complexity of modernizing a VA system that is indispensable to many veterans. Regrettably, the existing shortcomings have left many veterans worse off, highlighting the need for a more forward-thinking approach that was absent in the past. A new direction is necessary, as the current approach is not only misaligned but also fosters negative incentives and results in poorer outcomes.

To address this, we advocate for the establishment of a new office, backed by substantial funding, tasked with developing a National Veterans' Strategy. This would lay out the future objectives and vision for a VA centered on promoting veterans' holistic wellness. This strategy should emphasize proactive outreach, training, and the provision of benefits and services, all

aimed at enabling veterans to lead fulfilling lives, achieve physical wellness, and understand the essentials of a mentally healthy lifestyle.

Promoting the Display of the POW/MIA Flag

AMVETS is proud of former President Trump's signing of Senator Elizabeth Warren's legislation, the National POW/MIA Flag Act, into law in November 2019. This bi-partisan legislation requires the display of the POW/MIA flag outside of high-profile federal buildings and national war memorials throughout the year. Previous law only required the POW/MIA flag to be displayed on Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, National POW/MIA Recognition Day, and Veterans Day.

AMVETS continues to encourage members of Congress to display the flag outside their offices, as is protocol. This legislation requires the Architect of the Capitol (AOC) to display the National League of Families POW/MIA flag outside of the entrance of the office of each Member of Congress, unless the Member directs the AOC to not display the flag. This requirement applies only to a Member's office in a House or Senate office building within the U.S. Capitol Grounds.

Promoting Readiness and Recruitment Efforts for the Next Generation of Veterans

AMVETS holds the view that the bedrock of a nation's defense lies in its military readiness, ensuring the armed forces are consistently primed to counter various threats. We understand that effective recruitment is essential for sustaining a capable and skilled military force poised to tackle any challenges and protect national interests.

In alignment with this belief, AMVETS has actively participated in initiatives with the Military Coalition (TMC), supporting letters and endorsing legislation focused on enhancing recruitment efforts. Furthermore, AMVETS is engaged in forging partnerships with entities dedicated to boosting the health and operational readiness of military personnel. We wish to see recruitment strategies that prioritize physical well-being and promote healthy living, joined with military programs aimed at elevating the overall physical condition and fitness levels of its members.

Conclusion

As AMVETS continues to lead and support a wide range of initiatives aimed at enhancing the lives and well-being of our nation's veterans, it is imperative that Congress recognizes and supports these critical efforts. From the pressing need to address and reduce veteran suicides, to ensuring equitable treatment and support for all veterans through legislative reforms such as the Major Richard Star Act and the VSO Equal Tax Treatment Act, the urgency of these matters cannot be overstated.

We call upon Congress to actively support and expedite the overarching initiatives championed by AMVETS this year. This support is not just a reflection of our nation's gratitude for the service and sacrifices of our veterans but also a critical investment in the future of our armed forces and the health and prosperity of our nation. By working together, we can ensure that our veterans receive the care, recognition, and opportunities they deserve, laying a strong foundation for a more resilient and supportive society for all who have served.

National Commander, Bill Clark

William (Bill) Clark has been an integral part of AMVETS since he joined Post 906 in Southport North Carolina in 1998. He was one of the first founding officers of that post. Throughout his long-standing involvement with AMVETS, Bill has taken on various leadership roles, including serving as First, Second, and Third Vice Commander at the post, department, and national levels. His commitment and dedication led him to hold the highest-ranking position of National Commander of AMVETS since last year.

Bill Clark's journey of service to his country began with 14 years of dedicated service in the Marine Corps, encompassing both active duty and reserve duty. He was deployed to the Western Pacific and Korea during his service but not during wartime, and he had the honor of serving aboard the USS Blue Ridge Marine helicopter, the flagship of the 7th Fleet, with a Marine detachment onboard. His military career culminated with an honorable discharge as a 1st Sergeant in 1986.

Following his military service, Bill ventured into the world of federal service contracts as a consultant. Three years later, he founded his own successful business, which continues to thrive today.

As the current National Commander of AMVETS, Bill Clark's top priorities include raising awareness and prevention of veteran suicides, increasing the visibility of AMVETS to become a household name, embracing the digital age for the organization, and addressing current challenges to ensure a brighter future for AMVETS.

About AMVETS

Today, AMVETS is America's most inclusive congressionally-chartered veterans service organization. Our membership is open to all active-duty, reservists, guardsmen, and honorably discharged veterans. Accordingly, members of AMVETS have contributed to the defense of our nation in every conflict since World War II.

Our commitment to these men and women can also be traced to the aftermath of the last World War, when waves of former service members began returning stateside in search of the health, education, and employment benefits they earned. Because obtaining these benefits proved difficult for many, veterans savvy at navigating the government bureaucracy began forming local groups to help their peers. As the ranks of our nation's veterans swelled into the millions, it became clear a national organization would be needed. Groups established to serve the veterans of previous wars wouldn't do either; the leaders of this new generation wanted an organization of their own.

With that in mind, 18 delegates, representing nine veterans' clubs, gathered in Kansas City, Missouri, and founded The American Veterans of World War II on Dec. 10, 1944. Less than three years later, on July 23, 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed Public Law 216, making AMVETS the first post-World War II organization to be chartered by Congress.

Since then, our congressional charter has been amended to admit members from subsequent eras of service. Our organization has also changed over the years, evolving to better serve these more recent generations of veterans and their families. In furtherance of this goal, AMVETS maintains partnerships with other Congressionally chartered veterans' service organizations that round out what's called the "Big Six" coalition. We're also working with newer groups, including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and The Independence Fund. Moreover, AMVETS recently teamed up with the VA's Office of Suicide Prevention and Mental Health to help stem the epidemic of veterans' suicide. As our organization looks to the future, we do so hand in hand with those who share our commitment to serving the defenders of this nation. We hope the 118th Session of Congress will join in our conviction by casting votes and making policy decisions that protect our veterans.

Information Required by Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts:

Fiscal Year 2023 - None

Fiscal Year 2022 - None

Fiscal Year 2021 - None

Fiscal Year 2020 - None

Fiscal Year 2019 - None

Disclosure of Foreign Payments – None