

STATEMENT BY
THE ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES
ARMY

SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

United States Senate
United States House of Representatives

114TH CONGRESS

Joint Hearing

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The Association of the United States Army has not received any federal grants or contracts relevant to the subject matter of this testimony during the current or previous two fiscal years.

Messrs. Chairmen and Members of the Committees:

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) concerning veterans' issues. Both in personal testimony and through submissions for the record there exists a long-standing relationship between AUSA and the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs. We are honored to express our views on behalf of our members and America's veterans.

The Association of the United States Army is a diverse organization of committed members – Regular Army, Army Reserve, Army National Guard, and Department of the Army civilians, retirees and family members. An overwhelming number of our members are entitled to veterans' benefits of some type. Additionally, AUSA is unique in that it can claim to be the only organization whose membership reflects every facet of the Army family.

Each year, the AUSA statement before the committees stresses that America's veterans are grateful. Much of the good done for veterans in the past would have been impossible without the commitment of those who

serve on the committees and the tireless efforts of their professional and personal staffs.

The inherently difficult nature of military service has never been more self-evident than during the recent and current conflicts. AUSA considers veterans' benefits to have been duly earned by those who have answered the nation's call and placed themselves at risk – these are not “entitlements”.

AUSA is heartened that Congress has expressed a commitment to support America's veterans. As elected representatives, you must be responsible stewards of the federal purse as each dollar emanates from the American taxpayer. AUSA emphasizes that the federal government must remain true to the promises made to her veterans. We understand that veterans' programs are not above review, but always remember that the nation must be there for the country's veterans who answered the nation's call.

Those who have volunteered to serve their country in uniform deserve educational benefits that support their transition to civilian life. AUSA applauds Congress for enacting the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 and the Post-9/11 Veterans Improvement Act of

2010. These landmark pieces of legislation are helping educate a new generation of veterans by allowing them to enroll as a full-time students and to focus solely on education.

AUSA has long endorsed a 21st century GI Bill that is built on the principles of simplicity, equity and adequate reimbursement of the cost of education / training. As we work to fully realize Congressional intent for such a program, AUSA believes hearings should be held regarding a unified architecture for all GI Bill programs for Regular, Guard and Reserve components under the principle of awarding benefits according to the length and type of duty performed. We applaud the recent elimination of the Reserve Education Assistance Program (REAP) by the National Defense Authorization Act of 2016 and recognize it as one more step towards accomplishing this goal. Unfortunately, the remaining myriad of educational assistance programs that include the MGIB-AD, MGIB-SR, and Post 9/11 GIB, still contain waste and redundancy thereby creating confusion and inequity among service members.

AUSA strongly encourages Congress to raise education benefits for National Guard and Reserve service members under Chapter 1606 of Title

10. For years, these benefits have only been adjusted for inflation.

Currently, Reserve GI Bill benefits have fallen to less than 21 percent of the Regular Army benchmark giving them much less value as a recruiting and retention incentive. This also sends a signal to Reserve Component personnel that their service is undervalued. Further, a transfer of the Reserve MGIB-Select Reserve authority from Title 10 to Title 38 will permit proportional benefit adjustments in the future.

AUSA is concerned about current and future unemployment of veterans. Consequently, we believe additional full time counseling staff is needed for VRE to support the rising number of disabled veterans. Additionally, AUSA supports establishing a cost of living stipend for VRE participants in order to provide them with the resources they need to successfully complete the training program.

AUSA recognizes that progress is being made in reducing the unacceptably high numbers of backlogged disability claims. The key to sustained improvement in claims processing rests on adequate funding to attract and retain a high quality workforce. As such, we applaud the inclusion of an additional \$173 million in the FY16 Omnibus to be used towards the

support of 770 new staff to tackle the claims issue and the extension of rigorous reporting requirements. There is still much work to be done. AUSA supports initiatives to upgrade the claims processing system with much needed investment in software and hardware. And despite the progress in reducing initial claims, there are a substantial number of claims backing up on the appeals side. AUSA understands that there are more than 330,000 appealed claims in queue, and that they take on average about three to four years to adjudicate. This is unacceptable. Additionally, we would like to see unlicensed individuals precluded from taking fees for representing veterans' claims. With these goals in mind, AUSA supports H.R. 2863 (Rooney), S. 1203 (Heller) and urges Congress to move forward with these proposals.

Much more needs to be done to ensure that returning combat veterans, as well as all other service men and women who complete their term of service or retire from service, receive timely access to VA benefits and services. This issue encompasses developing and deploying an interoperable, bi-directional and standards-based electronic medical record; a "one-stop" separation physical supported by an electronic separation document (DD-214); benefits determination before discharge; and sharing of information

on occupational exposures from military operations and related initiatives. AUSA strongly recommends accelerated efforts to realize the goal of “seamless transition” plans and programs as outlined in the 2015 Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC) report.

We encourage other positive steps toward mutual cooperation taken by the Department of Defense (DOD) and the VA. The closer we can come to a seamless flow of a service member's personnel and health files from service entry to burial, the more likely it will be that former service members receive all the benefits they have earned. The Army and the VA have made great progress in linking medical records and evaluations together. While the system in place is improving, there is still more work to be done, especially for the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve Soldiers. AUSA supports closer DOD-VA collaboration and planning including billing, accounting, IT systems, and patient records, but does not support total integration of facilities nor of VA/DOD healthcare systems.

AUSA strongly supports preservation of dual eligibility of uniformed service retirees for VA and DOD healthcare systems. We applaud Congress'

opposition to "forced choice" in the past and encourage you to hold the line in the future.

Veterans' medical facilities must remain expert in the specialties which most benefit our veterans. These specialties relate directly to the ravages of war and are without peer in the civilian community. We are grateful for the significant increase in resources and appropriations, as well as the advanced appropriations process, provided by the Congress to veterans' health care. Further, AUSA urges members of Congress to sustain the current levels of appropriation funding. After 15 years of war, cuts to veterans' appropriations would be unconscionable.

AUSA remains opposed to the imposition of an annual deductible on veterans already enrolled in VA health care and any increase in the co-payment charged to many veterans for prescription drugs. AUSA urges Congress to continue to oppose such fees.

While AUSA is grateful for the \$1.5 billion provided for Hepatitis C (HCV) treatment, we encourage Congress to enact legislation that establishes a presumption of service connection for veterans with Hepatitis C.

AUSA urges Congress to expand Concurrent Retirement and Disability Payments (CRDP) to disabled retirees not eligible under the current statute, to include vesting of earned retirement credit for Chapter 61 retirees with less than 20 years of service. We cannot forget about the thousands of disabled retirees left out by the current statute which eliminates the disability offset for those with disabilities over 50 percent. The reasoning behind current law is just as valid for those 49 percent and below. AUSA urges that the thousands of disabled veterans left out of previous legislation be given equal treatment and that the disability offset be eliminated completely.

Another critical area needs to be addressed. For chapter 61 (disability) retirees who have more than 20 years of service, the government recognizes that part of that retired pay is earned by service, and part of it is extra compensation for the service-incurred disability. The added amount for disability is still subject to offset by any VA disability compensation, but the service-earned portion (at 2.5 percent of pay times years of service) is protected against such offset.

AUSA believes that a member who is forced to retire short of 20 years of service because of a combat disability must be “vested” in the service-earned share of retired pay at the same 2.5 percent per year of service rate as members with 20+ years of service. This would avoid the “all or nothing” inequity of the current 20-year threshold, while recognizing that retired pay for those with few years of service is almost all for disability rather than for service and therefore still subject to the VA offset.

AUSA supports legislation provided in previous defense bills that extends Combat Related Special Compensation (CRSC) to retirees with less than 20 years of service with combat or operations-related disabilities.

Unfortunately, retirees with non-combat disabilities forced to retire short of 20 years of service still have to fund their VA compensation dollar-for-dollar from their disability retirement from DOD, and funding of concurrent receipt for these Chapter 61 medical retirees is not included in the administration’s budget. AUSA strongly believes that there should be no distinction between members disabled in combat and those with non-combat, service-caused disabilities.

Above all, AUSA asks Congress to ensure that any restructuring of the DOD and VA disability and compensation systems does not inadvertently reduce compensation levels for disabled service members.

AUSA supports continued congressional efforts to reduce and eliminate veteran homelessness. The overall number of homeless veterans has dropped by 35% since 2009, thanks in no small part, to the \$7.2 billion appropriated over that time period for homeless program activities. There is still much work to be done. In particular, concern remains over efforts to combat homelessness among female veterans and their children.

AUSA is pleased that current legislation has passed both houses of Congress, H.R. 1384 (Walz) and S. 743 (Boozman), which allows Guard and Reserve members to attain veterans' status without bestowing upon them veterans' benefits. Members of the National Guard called to active duty under Title 32 in support of the current crisis do not receive veteran's status for their active duty military time. Those called to active duty under Title 10 do receive veteran's status. Similarly, Army Reserve personnel who are not called to active duty can complete a full reserve career and still not be entitled to be called veterans. This inequity must be addressed. Allowing

Guard and Reserve members to earn veterans' status on equal footing with their Regular Army counterparts will send the message that Reserve Component personnel are just as integral to the Total Force. AUSA supports a negotiated settlement of differences between the House and Senate concerning this important issue in order to recognize the service of all components of our military.

The committees safeguard the treatment of America's veterans on behalf of the nation. AUSA knows that you take this responsibility seriously and treat this privilege with the gratitude and respect it deserves. Although your tenure is temporary, the impact of your actions lasts as long as this country survives and affects directly the lives of a precious American resource - her military veterans. As you make your decisions, please do not forget the commitment made to America's veterans when they accepted the challenges and answered the nation's call to serve.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the members of the Association of the United States Army, their families, and today's soldiers who are tomorrow's veterans.