

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**



Hearing of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affair

Hearing on Pending Legislation

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Presented by

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Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers, commonly referred to as NACVSO, I extend our gratitude for the opportunity to address this body.

NACVSO is a unique organization in that all our elected or appointed leaders, as well as our majority of our members are currently serving as VA accredited representatives-- working as Government Veteran Service Officers (GVSOs) in the field every day-- to help America's Veterans and their dependents access the benefits they earned with their service.

S. 1590 Justice for ALS Veterans Act

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS is a fast-acting disease which veterans develop at higher rates than the average American* (source below). This disease is not only debilitating for the veteran but also for their spouses who have end up acting as full-time caregivers in most cases. The average life expectancy of someone with ALS is two to five years. This is shorter than the eight years that VA requires a veteran with ALS to survive for their spouse to be entitled to a higher rate of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). Veterans and their spouses already must endure enough in their fight with ALS, we should not penalize them financially for not being able to continue that fight for a total of eight years. For this reason, NACVSO supports the passage of S. 1590.

S. 2181 Keeping Military Families Together Act of 2023

One of the most widely requested benefits that our nation provides to those who have served are those concerning burial. This honor is a final display of our country's appreciation for the service and sacrifice of our veterans. Although there is no sunset of when a service member or veteran may receive this honor, there is, unfortunately, a shelf life for eligibility provided to loved ones for internment with their veteran in a national cemetery. S. 2181 would repeal the October 1, 2024,

sunset for veteran's dependents to ultimately accompany their veteran spouse in national cemeteries along with a marker or headstoned upon their final resting place. NACVSO supports this legislation and believes it is right to provide a continued and unified burial option for not only those who served our country, but also for their eligible dependents.

S. 2718 Medical Disability Exams Improvement Act

NACVSO supports the Medical Disability Exams Improvement Act of 2023 introduced by Senator Jon Tester and Senator Tillis. This bipartisan legislation is crucial in enhancing veterans' access to earned benefits by strengthening the VA's process of evaluating a medical connection and military service. NACVSO recognizes that a veteran's medical disability exam plays a pivotal role in determining their eligibility for VA disability compensation. Therefore, supporting measures that ensure VA has the resources and capabilities to conduct these exams accurately and efficiently aligns with our collective mission of advocating for America's veterans and ensuring they receive all benefits available to them.

The provisions outlined in the Medical Disability Exams Improvement Act seeks to improve upon key areas of concern, such as improving access to disability examinations for rural veterans, strengthening VA's capacity to hire medical disability examiners, streamlining the process to eliminate redundant or unnecessary disability exams, review priority processing of claims when a flawed exam is encountered, and investigate a process in which relevant evidence discovered during the exam can be added to the veteran's claims file. NACVSO believes that these measures would not only enhance the VA's ability to handle the increasing workload of disability exams but will also contribute to delivering veterans timelier access to their earned benefits if implemented.

S. 2888 TAP Promotion Act

GVSOs and VSOs serve as the frontline advocates in their communities, offering support that extends beyond disability claims. All too often, however, our members meet with recently transitioned service members who have never heard of a GVSOs or VSO. For this reason, NACVSO supports the TAP Promotion Act which would allow VA-accredited representatives to participate in the Transition Assistance Program for active-duty personnel *prior* to their separation.

GVSOs and VSOs serve as a valuable resource for active-duty service members who are transitioning to civilian life as they are to separated veterans. GVSOs possess extensive knowledge and expertise in navigating the complex landscape of veterans' benefits and services offered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) as well as local resources specific to a service members home-of-record. This includes but is not limited to healthcare, disability compensation, education and training benefits, employment assistance, and housing support. Their deep understanding of these benefits that can vary from state to state, ensures that transitioning service members receive comprehensive guidance and assistance in accessing the benefits across the scale of federal and local agencies. The further upstream we can educate our transitioning service members, the greater success they will have as veterans.

S. 3126, Mark Our Place Act

NACVSO believes that all Medal of Honor recipients should receive a headstone, marker or medallion regardless of when they served. As this is the nation's highest honor, we believe that every recipient should receive this final honor from their country.

S. 3873, GI Bill Guard Parity Act

Since September 11th, 2001, the duties, responsibilities and mission has significantly changed for those serving in the National Guard and Reserve components. With the increased mission and operational tempos, the Guard and Reserve have filled the gaps in duties that used to be performed by active-duty units. It is only fair that as a country we would reward our Guard and Reserve members with the same benefit entitlements as active-duty members for performing the same services. NACVSO supports S. 3873, not only for the parity it would provide, but also because of the impact it will have on national security and recruiting.

S. 3979 To make permanent and codify the pilot program for the use of contracted physicians

One of the most important pieces in determining the outcome of a veteran's VA disability claim is the Compensation and Pension examination, commonly referred to as a "C&P exam". Historically, C&P exams were conducted by a VHA medical professional. With the expansion of VBA benefits over the past ten-plus years, this model strained VHA's capabilities. Because of this, a pilot program was created to reduce the burden put on VHA by contracting C&P exams with non-VA medical providers. This program helped free up VHA providers to focus on delivering health care to veterans, rather than focusing on non-treatment disability exams. NACVSO supports S. 3979 because it alleviates the burden on VHA providers so they can provide the care that veterans need while increasing access to timely C&P exams through contracted providers.

While NACVSO supports the legislation to make contracted C&P examiners a permanent program, however, we do caution that this does not mean the process for performing contracted C&P exams does not need improvements. There are many areas where we feel the contracted C&P exam could be improved.

Areas, such as making it mandatory for the contracted companies to coordinate with the representative of record to schedule C&P exams, improved oversight controls to ensure contracted companies are receiving relevant evidence in the veteran's claims file, and greater transparency on the training that VA provides to contractors to make them militarily culturally competent.

S. 4047, Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2024

NACVSO supports the Veterans' COLA Act of 2024.

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to answer any questions you or the committee members may have. Thank you.

- Source for S. 1590: <https://news.va.gov/press-room/va-secretary-establishes-als-as-a-presumptive-compensable-illness/>