

EDWARD W. KEMP, AMVETS NATIONAL COMMANDER

STATEMENT OF
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AMVETS NATIONAL COMMANDER
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka and members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am Edward W. Kemp, national commander of AMVETS, and it is my honor to present to you our legislative agenda for 2006. On behalf of AMVETS, the AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary, the Sons of AMVETS and our other subsidiary organizations, thank you for giving us this opportunity.

I am from the great state of Iowa and proudly joined AMVETS in 1982. For more than 60 years, this organization has taken to heart the doctrine of service set forth by its founders. In so doing, we endeavor to provide our fellow veterans with the type of support they truly deserve. This outreach effort takes many forms—from the professional advice of our service officers, to our legislative efforts on Capitol Hill, to the work done by our hospital volunteers. Other AMVETS members involve themselves in a wide range of initiatives aimed at contributing to the quality of life in their local communities. These two areas—veterans service and community service—drive our commitment to make a difference in the lives of others.

Before presenting our agenda for this year, I'd like to speak for a moment about an ambitious project we are working on, and kindly ask for your support. AMVETS is hosting a National Symposium For the Needs of Young Veterans this October in Chicago, Illinois. The Symposium—the first of its kind—is designed to draw attention to the critical challenge of modernizing the VA benefits system. We will bring together a diverse array of veterans and speakers to examine what changes are needed to make the system more responsive to veterans. The Symposium will publish an action plan that will define, describe and prioritize the steps needed to provide a modern benefits program and an effective delivery system. I am very pleased that General Tommy Franks has agreed to keynote the Symposium. Given his distinguished career of military service and recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, General Franks is ideally suited to talk about the need to ensure our nation keeps its promise to those who serve.

We are well underway, but I ask for your help in making the Symposium a successful endeavor. I'd also like to thank our co-chairs, former VA Secretary Anthony Principi and AMVETS Past National Commander Bill Boettcher for keeping our agenda on a straight and true course. Mr. Chairman, the timing of this important forum could not be more relevant, given that we have a new generation of brave American's once again deployed around the world, answering the nation's call to arms. Our soldiers are doing everything right, everything that we ask of them and much more. Our country fights, not for land or fortune, but for freedom. In past conflicts, America has fought to secure liberty, abolish slavery, and crush communism. Our cause today is equally just. We are fighting to conquer those evil forces who would rule by fear and, in the process, are helping to spread freedom and democracy around the world.

In mid-February, I had the unique opportunity to go to Iraq with my colleagues in the veterans community. It is an experience I will never forget. I met and talked with U.S. and British generals, Iraqi officers and dozens of front-line soldiers. The most amazing part of my trip was not one soldier had a negative thing to say about being there. Despite all we hear and read in the news, our soldiers are there to do a job, and are confident they will win and restore order. I am extremely proud of them. Without a doubt they are the most dedicated, courageous and passionate troops in the world, and I want each of them to know that I appreciate all they do to protect the freedoms I enjoy as an American. God bless them all.

Almost half of the military servicemen and women returning from operations overseas will need healthcare services for the physical and psychological traumas of war that may never heal.

Seventeen percent of them, in fact, have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. I encourage you to go and visit these injured soldiers. Talk with them and listen to what they have to say. You will leave with a renewed perspective of your obligations to veterans.

We are spending \$6.8 billion a month for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, yet trying to nickel and dime veterans' health care here at home. This year alone, the president is expected to request an additional \$92.2 billion for the war. We certainly support additional monies to support our troops, but I can't understand why there is never enough to fully fund VA. If Congress can find nearly a hundred billion more for these operations, I believe it should be able to come up with enough money to totally care for those charged with carrying them out.

As things now stand, our veterans are continuing to suffer because the system they depend on has been routinely underfunded and is now ill equipped to handle the large influx of those waiting and wanting to use its services. I ask you to take a look at what the real needs are.

These are real people with real needs. They should not be subject to political accounting games or petty disputes.

As members of the United States Senate, you are provided with certain benefits[?]paid for at taxpayer expense[?]that you earn as representatives of the people. I would imagine that you would never vote for any proposal or initiative that would underfund or undermine the integrity of that delivery system. We ask that you do the same for veterans.

For 20 years, AMVETS[?]together with the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars[?]have co-authored The Independent Budget, our blueprint for building the kind of programs veterans deserve. Indeed, we are proud that more than 60 veteran, military and medical service organizations endorse these recommendations. We believe it is a balanced and responsible analysis of VA's funding requirements. In years past, however, budget requests fell woefully short of our recommendations, and we all know about last year's funding shortfall. If that crisis didn't do anything else, at least it validated The Independent Budget recommendations. The IB was right on target, and I ask that you follow our recommendations this fiscal year. We were right then, and we are right now.

Looking at the administration's VA request for fiscal year 2007, I must say it is much better than last year's pitiful recommended increase of \$110 million. This year, thanks in large measure to the leadership and commitment of this Committee, VA fared better. The request, however, still falls short.

We recommend Congress provide \$32.4 billion to fund VA medical care, approximately \$1 billion over the president's request, without collections. We ask that you recognize that the VA healthcare system can only provide quality health care if it receives adequate and timely funding. As the Senate moves forward in the budget process, we ask that you not divert precious monies already scheduled for VA medical centers, construction projects and other purposes. We

understand the total devastation in Louisiana and Mississippi, and we fully support the rebuilding and reconstruction efforts there. But we do not support re-routing funds that have already been approved for VA projects. This policy is taking a step backwards. Fund the emergency with emergency funds, not VA monies.

As you understand, Mr. Chairman, it is very difficult to manage programs as complex as those within VA based solely on current fiscal-year appropriations. It is our hope that we can work with you and the committee to create a process that brings increased consistency to VA's budgetary requirements by recognizing the need for a more efficient fiscal plan. Frankly, the current system of funding veterans' health care is broken. It doesn't work. AMVETS will continue to pursue legislation with eight VSO partners for assured, or mandatory, funding of VA's healthcare system.

Under the current process, VA health care competes with other non-veterans priorities for adequate appropriations. Over the years, this process has proven to be unsatisfactory in adequately providing for the needs of enrolled veterans. Shifting to a mandatory funding system will provide a stable and timely system of funding for VA. Mr. Chairman, we understand your position on this issue, but we ask that you begin a serious dialogue to explore alternative ways to fund VA. Compromise is the cornerstone of this democracy, and we are certainly willing to work with you to find a way to make VA funding more stable.

While assured funding remains our core legislative goal and objective, there are several other areas we believe the committee needs to address this year. Let me briefly discuss them.

AMVETS believes increasing TRICARE premiums and deductibles will have a negative impact on military retirees. While we understand that health care costs are on the rise, DoD health care programs are part of the on-going cost of war. Our nation's military retirees have given so much to this country. They deserve fair treatment.

No veteran leaving military service should fall through the bureaucratic cracks. AMVETS believes DoD and VA have no greater responsibility than to properly care for returning soldiers and provide as many tools as possible to assist them in settling back into civilian life. For some war wounded and their families, navigating between these systems is pure frustration. In order to provide a seamless transition, AMVETS recommends that veterans' basic service information, as contained in the DD-214, be made available electronically?and we ask that you explore ways to make this possible.

I do not think we realize how fortunate we are as a nation to have a highly skilled veteran population able to lend its talents to the workforce. Veterans have the skills that make them assets in a variety of occupations. Leadership, integrity, and teamwork?all of which the military teaches?are universal qualities for every industry.

While the Senate has done a good job in reauthorizing training, education and job programs, I encourage you to take a look at the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and other related programs to ensure all our returning troops get the assistance they need. DoD discharges approximately 25,000 service members annually. Recently separated service personnel are likely to seek immediate employment or continue their formal vocational education. But they need to know all that's available to them.

The Department of Defense estimates that 68 percent of separating service members attend the full TAP seminars, but only 35 percent of the Reserve Components attend. Countless numbers of National Guard and Reserve troops return from the war only to encounter difficulties with their federal and civilian employers at home. AMVETS encourages you to explore ways to make TAP participation mandatory for active duty military as well as for those in the Guard and

Reserves.

While speaking about returning troops, we ask that you continue to adequately fund the Department of Labor's Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) and the Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVER) Program. Through the implementation of these programs, DOL-VETS assists, not only veterans, but also helps reservists and Guard members in securing employment and protecting their re-employment rights and benefits.

Furthermore, AMVETS asks you to closely monitor legislative attempts to consolidate and block grant the DVOP and LVER programs. We firmly believe that this type of veteran-oriented program should remain separate and distinct to ensure that these brave men and women are given the assistance their country owes them for their military service. It would be a grave error to downgrade employment services that specifically help troops returning to the country they fought to defend.

For decades, DVOPs and LVERs have been the foundation of employment services for veterans. We believe it is important that states continue to be required to hire veterans for these positions. One example of just how important it is for veterans to advocate for veterans exists within our own organization.

The AMVETS Department of Ohio developed and fully operates a 501(c)(3) career center designed to assist veterans in their career needs. The AMVETS Career Center provides a range of services to help veterans find employment in a substantial career, or assists them in refreshing and/or upgrading their skills. The Center, for instance, can help a veteran learn more about computers, business math, business grammar, business management, word processing or database management. It provides these services to veterans who are homeless, unemployed or underemployed; to those who want to prepare for a new career or better job; and to recently separated veterans making the transition to the civilian workforce. The center also provides services to non-veterans from the community for a small fee of \$50.00. There is no cost to the veteran.

Regarding claims, AMVETS is very concerned about the growing backlog that leaves many veterans without due compensation. Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) budgets have routinely come up short and can't stretch to cover the needs. Many claims processors are retiring and being replaced by those less experienced who require years of training. This is no ordinary job. It requires months of training and years of experience to fully understand and navigate the system. If VBA is going to reduce the claims backlog to zero, VBA needs to hire and train additional fulltime employees. But it can only do this if the Senate does its part. We need your help to get the funds.

AMVETS supports legislation that would award a military service medal to members of the Armed Forces who served honorably during the Cold War Era. We are disappointed that the Cold War Service Medal did not survive the House-Senate conference on the FY06 National Defense Authorization Act. Presidents going back to Truman have recognized the significance of the Cold War. By creating the Cold War Victory Medal, this nation would certainly demonstrate its great respect and appreciation for the men and women who carried the burden of this policy. For veterans, though, one issue transcends all others. It involves the desecration of the United States flag. AMVETS will not waiver in its efforts to protect the flag from being dishonored. As a member of the Citizens Flag Alliance, we continue to strongly support a constitutional amendment to protect our most sacred symbol. But the flag is much more than a piece of cloth that drapes the coffins of those who died so others might live; that covers the bodies of first-responders who gave their lives in the line of duty; and that flies at half mast in recognition of

honorable Americans. Indeed, the flag stands for all that is good about our country and the values on which it was founded.

All 50 state legislatures have passed resolutions asking Congress to submit the flag amendment for ratification. More than 80 percent of the American people support such an amendment. If someone desecrated the Halls of Congress, the Lincoln Memorial, or any other of our national monuments, lawful action would be taken against the offenders. We ask nothing less for our flag. We now ask you, our senators, to stand up and be counted and bring the flag protection bill to the Senate floor as soon as possible.

Additionally, as the committee is aware, there is a growing need for long-term care in VA. Veterans 85 years and older, who are in most need of these services, are expected to total 1.3 million over the next decade. With the sharp increase in the projected number of elderly veterans, AMVETS believes that VA's extended care services are indispensable to its overall mission in providing veteran health care.

We urge you to explore the challenge ahead for providing long-term assistance to veterans. And we seek action that will provide enrolled veterans with affordable access to a continuum of extended care services that include nursing home care and domiciliary care, as well as home and community-based extended care services. This way we can assure improved healthcare delivery and enhance the measure of care for elderly veteran patients.

I would be remiss if I did not mention and acknowledge the fine work VA nurses provide to wounded veterans. VA nurses care for more than 5 million American veterans nationwide. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has the largest nursing workforce in the country with nearly 59,000 registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and other nursing personnel. But VA staffing levels are so precarious that even the loss of a single nurse can result in a critical staffing shortage. Veterans are much more comfortable receiving treatment from nurses who understand their service; who speak the same language; and who know what they went through. AMVETS encourages this committee and VA to actively address the factors known to affect recruitment and retention of VA nurses.

We also want the fullest possible accounting of our missing service personnel and ask for your support in finding and identifying their remains. This is important. It is a duty we owe the families of those still missing and an endeavor that honors the value of an American's service to the nation.

AMVETS understands many Gulf War and younger veterans are reporting illnesses stemming from weapons containing depleted uranium (DU). This material can remain in the human body for decades, if not life, causing cancers and other unknown illnesses. AMVETS encourages Congress to pass H.R. 4183 and H.R. 4184, which would locate, assist, and compensate veterans affected by exposure to DU, and help them file a claim.

Lastly, just as we care for veterans when they are alive, we must not forget them when they die. We need to ensure that our national cemeteries remain dignified and respectful settings for honoring deceased veterans. We are encouraged that the administration earmarked \$28 million for the National Shrine Commitment, and we are thankful for the recommended increases above that figure.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) has done a tremendous job of improving the character and condition of our nation's cemeteries, but we have a long way to go to get us where we need to be. AMVETS also feels it is time to review a series of burial benefits that seriously eroded in value over time. With a few modest adjustments, these benefits will make a more meaningful contribution to the burial costs for our veterans.

Our commitment to make a difference in the lives of others, though, doesn't stop there. Since its inception in the 1950s, for example, the AMVETS National Scholarship Program has awarded more than \$2 million in scholarships to graduating high school students. And for the past 17 years, AMVETS has sponsored a youth leadership program in cooperation with Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, that has served more than 700 youth to date. At VA, AMVETS is proud to serve on the National Advisory Committee of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service Program. Last year, more than 3,000 AMVETS, Ladies Auxiliary and Sons volunteers tallied over 200,000 hours of voluntary service at 146 VA Medical Centers. In addition, some 10,000 AMVETS from across the country invested more than 700,000 hours in helping veterans and providing an array of community services to enhance the quality of life for our nation's citizens. I am pleased to report that based on The Independent Sector statistics, AMVETS provided in excess of \$23 million in voluntary service to the local community.

One last point I'll mention, Mr. Chairman, concerns the Joint Session of the Committees on Veterans' Affairs. First, we thank you for extending us the opportunity to appear before you today and we thank the members of the House who are present here. We feel, however, that the long-standing tradition of the Joint Session should continue. We believe it is a more efficient and valuable way of presenting our agenda to Congress. A Joint Session provides you the opportunity to address the many constituents who are present from your respective States, and it provides AMVETS members with the opportunity to see their elected officials respond to issues important to them. We encourage you to talk with your counterpart in the House and ask him to reconsider his decision.

Great decisions and challenges await us in the months ahead. The membership of AMVETS looks forward to working with you to establish a clear policy of national recognition for those who serve. We have much to do, but we are encouraged in knowing that our work will help the heroes who have borne the battle and lived to tell about it.

This concludes my testimony. Again, thank you for extending me the opportunity to appear before you today, and thank you for your support of veterans. I hope all of you will be able to join us tonight for our annual congressional reception and Silver Helmet presentation to The Honorable Bob Filner of California, to be held in room B-369 of the Rayburn House Office Building from 5:30 to 7:00 p.m.

Thank you.