

RICHARD M. DEAN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, AIR FORCE SERGEANTS
ASSOCIATION

STATEMENT

BY

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FOR THE JOINT HEARING OF THE
SENATE AND HOUSE COMMITTEES
ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Mr. Chairman and committee members, on behalf of the 125,000 members of the Air Force Sergeants Association, I thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the subject of the important programs administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Air Force Sergeants Association represents Active Duty, Guard, Reserve, retired, and veteran enlisted Airmen and their families. We are grateful for this committee's bipartisan efforts. I can't overstate the importance it has with those serving this nation.

Through your oversight, guidance, and hard work this nation honors the commitment military servicemembers make every day for you, me and all Americans. President George Washington said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their Nation." This decisions you make in this committee ensures our first President's thoughts are validated for past, current, and future generations of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines.

We applaud Congress for the recent decisions which translated into Wounded Warrior programs. When America's sons and daughters are sent off to war, we must be prepared for the consequences of that action. We are grateful Congress understands this solemn duty and has increased the Administration's programmed budget in each of the past few years to fulfill that commitment. We believe more work needs to be done.

How a nation fulfills its obligation to those who serve reflects its greatness. How we treat them also influences our ability to recruit future generations of service members. A significant percentage of those wearing the uniform today were once members of military families. They have seen how their parents were treated as they put their lives on the line for America. Simply speaking, if we want to keep good people in the military, it is important our country live up to the commitments made to our veterans--the role models for today and tomorrow's forces.

In this statement, I will list several specific areas we hope this committee will pursue for FY

2009. The content of this statement reflects the views of our members. As always, we are prepared to present more details and to discuss these issues with your staffs.

Mandatory Veterans Health Care Funding

We request Veterans Affairs funding be moved to mandatory annual spending. No citizens sacrifice more than those facing the unlimited liability of death. This nation should hold as its highest obligation the willingness to fully fund VA health care, facilities, and other programs for those who willingly serve it. Analysis performed by those who produce the Independent Budget suggests the President's FY 2009 Budget Plan will fall some \$4 billion short of what is required to adequately fund all programs.

VA Medicare Subvention

Over the last several years, new "categories" of veterans have been created, limiting those who can receive services offered in VA hospitals. Those without service-connected disabilities and those with low disability ratings are either excluded from service or charged additional fees for care. This is especially taxing for older veterans. We have long maintained facilities that can serve veterans ought to do so. For those veterans who are Medicare-eligible, transferring Medicare funding to the servicing VA facility would lighten the financial burden for the VA and provide cost-effective care for the veteran. We believe VA Medicare Subvention would create a win-win-win situation for the veteran, Department of Veterans Affairs, and those administering Medicare.

Seamless Transition

AFSA is pleased Congress has wisely called for the creation of a joint DoD-VA office to oversee development of bi-directional electronic medical records. This initiative is long overdue and promises to simplify an unnecessarily burdensome and inefficient process.

However, we strongly recommend the Subcommittee upgrade the scope of responsibilities and span of authority for the new DoD-VA Interagency Program Office to include top-down planning and execution of all "seamless transition" functions, including the joint electronic health record; joint DoD/VA physical; implementation of best

practices for traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, and special needs care; care access/coordination issues; and joint research. This would be especially helpful improving benefit delivery at discharge for all service members.

AFSA joins its partners in The Military Coalition in maintaining that three years of active-duty-

level care for service-disabled members and their families after separation or retirement is essential to align stated "seamless transition" intentions with the realities faced by disabled members and families.

Seamless Transition for Severely-Injured Guard and Reserve Members

It takes a total team effort to accomplish challenging missions. So too, must the VA be prepared to expand its efforts to ensure severely-injured Guard and Reserve members and their families receive needed transition services to make a successful return and adjustment-to civilian status. Such programs have become critical as members of the Guard and Reserve have increasingly assumed the burden of battle. Needed changes include:

Funding to develop tailored Transition Assistance Program (TAP) services in the hometown area following release from active duty.

Expansion of VA outreach to provide "benefits delivery at discharge" services in the hometown setting.

Authority for mobilized Guard and Reserve members to file "Flexible Spending Account" claims for a prior reporting year after return from active duty.

Authority for employers and employees to contribute to 401k and 403b accounts during mobilization.

Enactment of academic protections for mobilized Guard and Reserve students including: academic standing and refund guarantees; and, exemption of Federal student loan payments during activation.

- Automatic waivers on scheduled licensing / certification / promotion exams scheduled during a mobilization.
- Authority for reemployment rights for Guard and Reserve spouses who must suspend employment to care for children during mobilization.

We urge this committee to commit to providing full care for its Citizen Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines.

Disability Retirement Reform

We urge this Committee to ensure any legislative changes to the military disability evaluation and retirement systems do not reduce compensation and benefit levels for disabled service members.

If the intent of recent studies and commissions has truly been to refine the processes and provide proper, equitable compensation for those harmed while serving, the end result of those

deliberations should certainly not be the reduction in compensation and benefit levels.

We do not believe military disability retirement system should go away-nor should all disability compensation matters be transferred to the VA.

We urge an expanded review of all administrative and disciplinary separations since October 7, 2001, for members with recent combat experience to assess whether the behavior that led to separation may have been due to service-caused conditions. Based on that review, the Department of Veterans' Affairs should be prepared to assist these warriors.

Care for Women Veterans

We applaud the actions of these committees in recent years to directly address the issue of the unique health challenges faced by women veterans. Between 1990 and 2000, the women veteran population increased by 33.3 percent from 1.2 million to 1.6 million, and women now represent approximately 7 percent of the total veteran population. By the year 2010, the VA estimates that women veterans will comprise well over 10 percent of the veteran population. Currently women make up more than 15 percent of the active duty force and approximately 25 percent of the reserve force with thousands serving, or having already returned from serving, in Iraq and Afghanistan. As the number of women veterans increases, the VA must be funded to increasingly provide the resources and legal authority to care for female-specific healthcare needs.

VA Facilities Construction and Renovation

There is an estimated \$1 billion backlog in construction and renovation funding. The need to upgrade, maintain aging and construct new facilities to provide adequate coverage has never been greater.

Congress supplemented the Administration's VA construction/renovation budget last year. We applaud you for that and ask for your action again to supplement the President's FY 2009 VA budget for construction and renovation by \$100 million.

This is a critical matter and must be dealt with decisively. Technological advances in body armor has been done much to save lives, but has had an equally dramatic effect by increasing the number of patients (many very young and facing long-term care) as we continue to wage this lengthy war on terrorism. In addition to the obvious physical injuries, we believe there is an urgent and growing need for care capacity to address post traumatic stress disorders.

Funding for State Veterans Homes

State Home construction appropriations have been cut by over \$40 million in the past two years. The backlog for State Home construction grant projects is now nearly \$1 billion. One year ago,

there were 92 pending projects, but funding sufficient for only 22.

AFSA urges this committee to earmark at least \$200 million in FY 2009--for the construction and renovation of State Veteran Homes.

Investment in these homes is a wise one. VA Per Diem payments support care for over 28,000 veterans in nursing homes and domiciliaries. State Homes provide nursing home care at less than 30 percent of the cost of care provided by the VA itself. We urge adequate support and funding for these important veterans' facilities.

Montgomery G.I. Bill (MGIB)

We were extremely pleased the President mentioned transferability of Montgomery G.I. Bill benefits during his State of the Union. Shortly after that, both houses of Congress introduced legislation that would allow such transferability. Several changes need to be made to the MGIB in order to make it a more viable benefit. MGIB offers a return on investment that is not just good for the military member and his family, it is good for America.

Beyond transferability, limitations need to be removed on the amount of the benefit that may be "withdrawn" to pay for a particular class. Too often, by-semester limitations do not provide adequate funding for accelerated courses, those with laboratory studies, and higher-level classes. We suggest members ought to be able to withdraw enough to fully pay for a course. They should be able to spend their benefit in a way that advances their educational goals.

There's no escaping the fact college cost continue to rise. As the gap between the cost of an education and value of the MGIB widens, the significance of the benefit becomes less apparent. Without an overhaul to reinvigorate the MGIB, this benefit will lose its effectiveness when it comes to recruiting this nation's finest young men and women into service. We believe this program should be transformed into something similar to the post-WW II G.I. Bill. We ask this Committee to fund a program that pays for all books, tuition, and fees. In addition, this benefit should be indexed annually to reflect the actual costs of education, especially for enlisted members.

We believe it is long overdue to afford an opportunity to all serving enlisted members who declined enrollment in the Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP) to enroll in the MGIB. VEAP was intended to be a transitional benefit which enabled departing service members to secure necessary skills as they transition back into the civilian workforce. One of the greatest needs cited by our members is to provide a second chance for those who turned down their initial opportunity to enroll in VEAP. Many enlisted member during the late 70's and early 80s were advised not to enroll in VEAP because a better program was coming along. Unfortunately, when the MGIB program began, those who turned down the VEAP program were not allowed to enroll in the MGIB program. Very few of these Airmen remain on active duty today, but wouldn't it be a travesty to leave those who have devoted so many years of their lives to service

be left without an educational benefit, because of a choice made so early in their career? Time is running out to make this right.

The \$1,200 user fee required to qualify for MGIB should be eliminated. We believe members earn this benefit by virtue of their service. If Congress discarded this fee, it would also resolve the non-enrollment issue and solidify promises made concerning educational benefits during recruiting. Another option would be to allow enlisted members to enroll at any time during their first or subsequent enlistments. AFSA would strongly encourage the committee to incorporate this legislation as they look to revamp this benefit.

When the service member separates or retires, they have ten years to use their benefit or they lose any unused portion. Transitioning from a military to civilian life, whether after one tour of duty or a much longer career, requires a period of readjustment and satisfying survival needs--especially for enlisted members. These include relocation, job and house hunting, and family arrangements, just to name a few. For many, using their "earned" educational benefit (for which they paid \$1,200), must be delayed a few years--or their education must be pursued piecemeal (e.g., a class at a time) due to conflicting work and family obligations. However, the benefit self-destruct clock is ticking as the government prepares to take the benefit away. We urge you to extend that ten-year clock or repeal the "benefit-loss" provision altogether.

Members of the Guard and Reserve contribute to missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and here defending the homeland. Although more than 500,000 of these brave men and women have been called up since September 11, 2001, and more than 70,000 have pulled two or more tours of duty, they are denied educational benefits that are commensurate with their service. Despite our nation's increased reliance upon our Selected Reserve, the value of their standard MGIB benefits has fallen over the last 20 years from 47 percent to 29 percent of Active Duty benefits. In addition, they continue to be the only benefits that members of the Selected Reserve who serve activated duty in the Global War on Terror cannot access once they separate from service.

The Total Force MGIB has two broad concepts--to consolidate active duty and reserve MGIB programs under Title 38 and restructure MGIB benefit levels according to the level of military service performed. DoD and the Services would retain responsibility for the cash bonuses, MGIB "kickers", and other enlistment / reenlistment incentives that they offer. Reservists mobilized for at least 90 days under federal contingency operation orders would be able to use remaining REAP benefits under Chapter 1607 after separation.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, I want to thank you again for this opportunity to express the views of our members on these important issues as you consider the FY 2009 budget. We realize those charged as caretakers of the taxpayers' money must budget wisely and make decisions based on many factors. As tax revenue dwindles, the degree of difficulty deciding what can, and what cannot, be addressed grows significantly. However, AFSA contends that it is of paramount importance for a nation to provide quality health care and top-notch benefits in exchange for the devotion, sacrifice, and service of military members, particularly while this nation remains at war.

Every day young Americans continue to step forward to insure freedom and liberty, so too must the nation be fully committed to their care. This committee is the instrument that can ensure we take the requisite steps to accomplish that goal.

Again, Mr. Chairman, we are pleased by the hard work of this committee and its commitment to America's veterans. On behalf of all Air Force Sergeants Association members, we appreciate your efforts and, as always, are ready to support you in matters of mutual concern.