

Mr. Charles Susino, National Commander, AMPOW

Messrs. Chairmen and Members of the House & Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees

My name is Charles Susino, National Commander of the American Ex- Prisoners of War. I am honored to testify before you and deeply appreciate your time in receiving the input from veteran organizations.

House Chairman Jeff Miller and Ranking Member Michael Michaud, Senate Chairman Bernie Sanders and Ranking Member Richard Burr, I applaud your efforts as you navigate your committees through the

113th Congress during these challenging times. Over the years our organization has watched closely your committees grapple with hard decisions aiming to provide the needs for America's veterans, their families and survivors. Thank you for your tireless work, but, further work lies ahead.

1. We need your commitment to hold a hard line as Washington looks to solve its budget problems. The solution does not lie with the men and women who have defended our country. Since the overall military budget is large, the White House may be tempted to reduce veteran benefits. That would be unconscionable.
2. Timely processing of disability benefits - We have previously discussed constructive ideas at this meeting. However, despite best efforts from VA staff, the processing continues to take an extended period of time. We recognize there has been an increase in filings with soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan however an ever increasing wait is not fair. Is the problem our approach to processing or limited resources of the VA administration? It needs to be a priority to examine the problem, establish a solution, and implement.
3. Health benefits for veterans. With the ongoing conflict in the Iraq and Afghanistan we need to stay ahead of the demand for health services for our returning soldiers. Health care professionals must be provided to maintain the high level of service. Critical to that objective is those incremental resources must be there in a timely manner.
4. Health care: A significant change was made in health-care eligibility in 1986. Congress mandated VA health care for veterans with service-connected disabilities as well as other special groups of veterans, such as former prisoners of war, veterans exposed to herbicides and ionizing radiation and veterans of World War I. We believe it is timely to expand the special groups to include the WWII, Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf War veterans. While we recognize this is a complex issue since it would add 10's of thousands of new veterans to the existing VA facilities and potentially overwhelm a system whose primary requirement is treating service related injuries, we believe Congress should examine ways to accomplish this objective in an effective manner. In addition, please remember those warriors serving our country with tours in the Middle East as well.
5. The American Ex-Prisoners of War are proud supporters of The Independent Budget. The FY2013 edition represents the 26th consecutive year that our partnership of veterans service organizations has joined together to produce a comprehensive budget document that highlights the needs of every generation of veterans. During that time, The Independent Budget has improved significantly while gaining much more respect and recognition.
6. I want to thank the 112th Congress for passing the National Defense Authorization Act and the Veterans Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act. We appreciate your efforts on behalf of veterans and our military.
7. Although we were very disappointed the previous Congress could not agree on the Stolen Valor Act HR 258, we thank this new Congress for reintroducing this Bill to protect the honor and value of the hard earned military medals. We do, however, question the omission of the United States Army Air Corps Air Medal from the listing of "combat medals".

8. We are also appreciative of your efforts on behalf of veterans with the introductions of new Bills in 2013:

- HR 153: The Veterans Outreach Improvement Act
- HR 241: Veterans Timely Access to Health Care Act
- S 49/HR 257: The Veterans Health Equity Act
- HR 369: Amend Title 38 to establish a presumption of service connection for tinnitus or hearing loss.

We ask for your special attention to HR 241.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the American Ex-Prisoners of War to share our input to the 113th Congress.

God Bless Our Troops

God Bless America

—Remember—