

**JOINT HEARING TO RECEIVE LEGISLATIVE  
PRESENTATION OF THE DISABLED AMERICAN  
VETERANS (DAV)**

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**JOINT HEARING**  
OF THE  
**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
BEFORE THE  
**U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
AND THE  
**U.S. SENATE**  
ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS  
SECOND SESSION

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2012

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**JOINT HEARING TO RECEIVE LEGISLATIVE  
PRESENTATION OF THE DISABLED AMER-  
ICAN VETERANS (DAV)**

**Tuesday, February 28, 2012**

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,  
AND U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, D.C.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:38 p.m., in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jeff Miller, [Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs] presiding.

Present: Representatives Miller, Bilirakis, Roe, Flores, Runyan, Amodel, Turner, Filner, Michaud, Braley, Donnelly, Walz, and Barrow.

Senators Murray and Boozman.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JEFF MILLER**

Mr. MILLER. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for attending today. I know Senator Murray is on the way. She may be held up in the hall somewhere, but we want to go ahead and start.

I want to thank everybody for being here today, your National Commander Samuels to our joint hearing here in the Cannon Caucus Room, and of course, we're here today to hear the DAV legislative priorities for the year.

One bit of housekeeping before we begin. In the interest of time, after hearing from Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Filner, and I believe will be Ranking Member Senator Boozman, I would like to ask the Committee Members to waive their opening statements, and there will be an opportunity for remarks during the question and answer period.

Hearing no objection, so ordered.

Speaking on behalf of all the Members of both Committees, we are honored to be here this afternoon with so many DAV members, each an American hero in their own right. Each of you has sacrificed selflessly in service to our country and continue to give of yourself today through the numerous positive actions made by the membership of the Disabled Veterans.

On behalf of a grateful Nation, I thank you for your service, for your time in coming all the way to Washington to be with us this afternoon. And I want to say a special welcome to your National Commander, Mr. Donald Samuels.

Sir, I thank you for being here and I look forward to hearing your testimony. I appreciated the opportunity of visiting with you a couple of days ago.

I also want to thank Ms. Patrice Rapisand who is the National Commander of the DAV Auxiliary, who is with us as well. Thank you for being with us here today, thanks for all the good work that members of the DAV Auxiliary do for our country as well.

I'd like to take a moment to recognize the members from my home state of Florida, especially those who may be with us from the Florida First Congressional District. But anybody from Florida, if you're able to stand, please do so that we may recognize you at this time.

Mr. MILLER. I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues from across the aisle and across the Capitol including the Ranking Member Filner, Ranking Member Boozman who is on his way as well, Members of both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

In particular, I want to extend a warm welcome to Chairman Patty Murray of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. It was a pleasure working with her last year in constructing and passing the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011. And I look forward to working further with you this year in help of Nation's veterans.

Commander Samuels, as more American soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guard return every day from fighting in the War on Terror, it's a comfort to know that DAV members nationwide stand ready to support them.

In a time of continuing conflict and fiscal constraint here on Capital Hill, the services provided by great organizations like yours have never been more necessary.

Through DAV's National Service Program, veterans are offered professional benefits counseling and claims assistance at no cost to the veteran. DAV members have provided millions of hours each year in service to veterans at medical centers and millions more hours of driving veterans to and from medical appointments.

With thousands of servicemembers and veterans in my district, the First Congressional District of Florida, I know firsthand how invaluable those hours are to the veteran and who needs them. I am personally grateful for the services that you provide and the leadership that you have shown to the veteran community.

As I mentioned at our Full Committee budget hearing two weeks ago, the largest issues facing VA, and all American veterans, is the threat of possible sequestration and the possibility of devastating budget cuts for VA. This issue arises due to an ambiguity in the law and there is, unfortunately forthcoming to this Committee's basic question on whether or not VA should be part of his historic cut.

For months I've been trying to get clarity about this issue to no avail, and that's why I want to thank you Commander, and all members of the DAV, for continuing with other veterans groups to plead with the President, and this administration, and the Secretary to direct the OMB to give us, and the Nation, the Administration's interpretation of the conflicts in law so we can protect veterans health care and your benefits.

I also want to thank you for supporting my legislation, H.R. 3895, it clarifies the issue once and for all so that we won't be with our backs against the wall in a time of fiscal constraint.

I ask that all DAV members here today when you meet with your Senators and your Members of Congress, that you would bring it up to them, just mention sequestration. They know exactly what that is. Sequestration is basically across the board cuts. We believe that VA is exempt from those cuts, and if we have to statutorily, we'll make those changes.

I wanted to touch on few of my priorities for the coming year, as you will bring your priorities to us. I believe in vigorous oversight of VA's Veteran Benefit Management System or VBMS, which is VA's new paperless system for adjudicating disability claims.

And while I am pleased that VA is diligently working towards rolling out this system soon, our Committee will continue our oversight to ensure that all claims are adjudicated accurately and quickly the very first time the claim is filed.

The implementation of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011. This is the bicameral and bipartisan veteran job legislation that I was proud to work with Chairman Murray to pass last year on.

And the cornerstone of that law is a provision that provides one year of Montgomery GI Bill benefits to retrain nearly 100,000 unemployed veterans between the ages of 35 and 60. This is a landmark retraining package for veterans and one of our top priorities is to ensure that it, and all of the VOW to Hire Hero Act provisions, are implemented correctly to help our Nation's unemployed veterans.

Also at the Full Committee budget hearing a couple of weeks ago, it was uncovered that recently VA over-estimated their funding needs by almost \$5 billion for fiscal years 2012 and 2013 combined. We've already started asking the administration tough questions about why the estimate was so far off, and why we, as a Committee didn't know about it until just about two and a half weeks ago, and most importantly, what priorities VA will be using to address this additional money.

And finally, the Committee will continue our oversight of the VA health care system to ensure that the patient safety and acquisition issues that have been uncovered in the last year are addressed, and ensure that veterans are, in fact, receiving the top-quality health care they have earned.

Commander Samuels, I once again thank you, and all of the DAV leadership for being here today. I look forward to hearing your testimony. I now turn to my good friend from the other side of the building, the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veteran's Affairs, Senator Patty Murray for her opening comments.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MILLER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

#### **OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR PATTY MURRAY**

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Chairman Miller, and thank you for your willingness to work across the hall in a bipartisan way on the many issues facing our men and women who served our country so honorably. It's a pleasure to be here.

And I'm pleased to be able to welcome our disabled American veterans here today as well. Last week, I had the opportunity at

home to listen to veterans from across my home state, hearing directly from the veterans about their struggles and their concerns is a clear reminder of our continuing obligation to all of our veterans and their families, and that we have a lot of work to do.

This is an obligation that continues long after the fighting is over, and with the end of the war in Iraq and the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, this is particularly true today.

I heard at home from veterans who still face unacceptably long wait lines for mental health care, and are not still getting the type of mental health care they need. I heard from women veterans who are struggling to receive specialized care, and from veterans who are fed up with the dysfunction of the claims' system.

I also heard from veterans who still find themselves confronted by obstacles to employment, and who are afraid to write the word veteran on their job application.

Last year's passage of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act was a great first step in tackling the high rate of veteran unemployment, but more remains to be done. I will continue, as I always do, to highlight the tremendous value, the skills, and the leadership veterans bring to the table.

And I also look forward to learning more about the VA's involvement with the President's proposed Veterans Job Corps. Each of these challenges serve as a constant reminder of the important work ahead, and each of these challenges is an opportunity for us to fulfill our obligation to America's veterans.

Tomorrow I will Chair a hearing on VA's budget request for fiscal year 2013 and thanks to your strong advocacy, the 2014 advanced appropriation request for VA medical care. We'll have an opportunity to ask tough questions of the VA, and to continue to work to meet our obligation to America's veterans.

It's no secret that we face a very tough fiscal environment. Given that and with all the departments, other departments who are facing budget cuts, President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have done a good job putting together a budget that reflects a very real commitment to provide veterans with the care and benefits they have earned.

Let me also applaud VA's ongoing commitment to end homelessness. This is an area where the VA is making strides, and I'm encouraged to see that they are again requesting an increase for funding for homeless veterans. However, in some areas of the budget, there is room for improvement. I'm very troubled that for the third year in a row, the VA has proposed cuts in spending for major construction and non-recurring maintenance.

Last year was the first time that VA's budget outlined the department's construction needs over a ten year period. But the VA's budget request over the past two years have been only a fraction of the identified need.

I'm troubled that the size of the gap between the infrastructure funding VA needs, and the funding requested of Congress. I am remain troubled by the claims backlog which has gone on, as you all know, far too long.

I've seen firsthand the mounds and piles of paper at the Seattle Regional office and the problems caused by the paper based claim system. There is no question if VA has any hope of overcoming the



claims backlog, it must continue to transform the claim system. There's a lot of work to do. And I will continue to closely monitor transformation efforts and push the VA to eliminate unnecessary practices and fix common claims processing errors. Tomorrow I expect from—to hear from the VA in detail about its continuing effort to fix this broken system.

Another area that I am continued to be concerned about is mental health care. At a hearing last year, VA witnesses acknowledged they may, in fact, need more resources to meet the high demand for mental health care. I want a straight forward answer from the VA about their actual needs and whether the department's proposed five percent increase is adequate.

As many of you know last year, I asked for a survey of mental health providers, which revealed significant shortcomings. The VA responded by proposing a plan to fix those problems, and I will work with the VA to ensure that those steps are completed as scheduled.

I also expect the VA will not stop with what was outlined in that initial plan, but will continue to find ways to make real and substantial improvements. And this year, we will continue to conduct aggressive oversight of the VA's mental health care programs to make sure that happens.

Not every veteran will be affected by invisible wounds, but when a veteran has the courage to stand up and ask for help, the VA must be there every single time. Not only with timely access to care, but with the right type of care.

Finally, like Chairman Miller, Senator Tester and others, I remain concerned about the questions surrounding the effect of sequestration on veterans' health care. Though, I'm confident the veterans' programs including health care will be protected in the event of sequestration, I believe that our veterans deserve clarity on this issue, that I'm working hard to provide. I've expressed my concerns to Secretary Shinseki and Acting Director at the Office of Management and Budget, and the Secretary's going to hear my concerns about this again tomorrow.

I've also asked the GAO to provide a formal legal opinion which will help in providing some resolution to this issue.

As DAV's membership knows too well, the challenges facing our veterans are numerous. But so too are the opportunities to fulfill our obligations to these brave men and women. So I want to thank the DAV for your tremendous leadership and advocacy on behalf of your veterans.

And I want to recognize and thank my fellow Washingtonians who are here in the audience today, Mike Riley, Ryan Nabors and William Watkins for traveling all the way across the country to be with us today and for all the work you do on behalf of Washington's veterans.

And, Commander Samuels, thank you for coming today. I look forward to hearing your testimony. Thank you very much.

Mr. MILLER. Thank you, Senator. Mr. Filner.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. BOB FILNER**

Mr. FILNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Welcome, Commander. We welcome all your members. We, as usual, are looking forward to your testimony and will learn from it.

Your staff, Commander, and your organization has taken the lead in preparing the Independent Budget, and Mr. Jesinoski, Mr. Violante, taking a lead in this and it gives us as we like to say here, a Bible, so we can judge things that we get from our VA.

And I've been waiving this around for as long as I've been a Member of this Committee. When I was Chair of the Committee for four years, those four years, we exceeded the Independent Budget all four of those years, which I'm very proud of. It doesn't look like we're going to be able to get there this year, but I still waive it around. And you've done an incredible service in preparing us to show some of the gaps, too.

You know, as Senator Murray said, we have a long way to go in serving all our veterans. Here we have our young people coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan, they're becoming homeless faster than the group that came back from Vietnam. They're committing suicide at a higher rate. The unemployment rate is double or triple, an unacceptable national rate as it is.

So we've got a long way to go. Any talk of sequestration or even the fact that we haven't met the Independent Budget, says that we could be falling further behind.

So we thank you for all your work, and you know, we hear everybody congratulating the VA and we're very proud of some of the professionalism there. But we've got a long way to go. We've got a long way to go.

I want to hear what you say about the claims process, but the VA and a lot of people here get trapped in this bureaucratic concept that we have to deal with it, as the Secretary says, by brute force. So they hire 10,000 more people and the claims backlog doubles. I don't get it.

What I would do—how many of you are Vietnam vets here? The vast majority. I want to thank you because you never did have the welcome home and thank you that you should've had when you got home, but you know we could say thank you in a more concrete way. We have, I don't know, several hundred thousand claims for Agent Orange in our backlog. How long have they been fighting it, 30, 40 years? People get sicker fighting a bureaucracy than they did with Agent Orange.

So you know what we ought to do, aside from greatly expanding eligibility to—from boots on the ground to the blue waters and the blue skies and Thailand and Cambodia and Laos and Guam, we ought to honor those Agent Orange claims today. Let's give people the peace that they deserve.

Let's give them, let's give you finally some sense of closure here. They're telling us that costs too much. I don't know if it's a billion dollars or two billion dollars. I don't care what it is frankly. You don't think we owe it to you? We owe it to you.

Our deficit is something like \$14 trillion. To tell me that we can't afford, that we've got to pay for, as they say around here, the billion or two billion for our Vietnam vets, that means we're going to try to balance the budget on your backs? That's ridiculous. So let's

honor those claims today, let's get this backlog cleared up. Let's really say, welcome home finally to our Vietnam vets, and give a real welcome home to these guys and gals who are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. FILNER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. MILLER. At this time, I want to recognize our colleague from Tennessee, Diane Black, who will introduce Commander Samuels. You are recognized.

Ms. BLACK. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Filner, Senator Murray. It is my honor and my privilege to introduce to you Donald L. Samuels, who is our National Commander of Disabled American Veterans, who not only served our country, but also has had a lifetime of service to our brave men and women who have served and now need our help.

Mr. Samuels, a combat-disabled Marine veteran of Vietnam War, and a retired DAV national service officer, was elected to the National Commander of 1.2 million member Disabled American Veterans at the organization's 2011 convention in New Orleans last year.

He's a native of Louisville, Kentucky, and Mr. Samuels served in the Marine Corps from 1960 to 1969, when he was discharged due to injuries that were sustained in the Battle for the Hill. And while leading his infantry platoon in a ground assault against the North Vietnamese regulars, as the platoon sergeant, he sustained multiple gunshot wounds, resulting in a partial loss or partial use of his right hand.

Following a 2,600 hour VA Vocational Chapter 31 Training Program, Mr. Samuels was assigned as an NSO supervisor at the Nashville DAV National Service office in 1970 where he served in that capacity until his retirement in 1989.

Since 1989, Mr. Samuels has served as the Assistant Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs until he retired from there on April the 30th, 2011, where he was over all claims activities, outreaches, legislation, played an important part in establishing the state veterans' cemeteries and the veteran nursing homes in Tennessee. And that's where I came to know him as a great advocate for our men and women who have served our country, as I serve there in the state legislature.

He is a lifetime member of the Chapter 3 in Nashville. Mr. Samuels has held a wide variety of chapter and department positions including Chapter Commander. He currently serves as the department adjutant, hospital service coordinator and department service officer director, as well as being a past member of the National Legislative Interim Committee and past Chairman of the POW/MIA Interim Committee.

He is a co-chair of the Operations Stand Down Nashville, which is a homeless veterans operation that has received national recognition. He was elected to the national offices, the National 3rd through the National Senior Vice Commander's commencing at the organization's 2007 national convention in New Orleans, as I said.

I know that I have said a lot and read a lot, but I did not want to leave anything at all out in showing you what a great leader and

advocate for veterans that my good friend, Mr. Samuels—he also has a family. His spouse—his wife’s name is Sandra. They both reside in the same town that I do in Gallatin. He is the father of two sons, one a master gunnery sergeant, the other a staff sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. And my husband also served in the Marine Corps, so we have a lot of connections; two daughters and nine grandchildren, and it is my distinct honor and pleasure to give to you my good friend, Samuel—Donald Samuels, excuse me. Let’s give him a round of applause.

Thank you.

Ms. BLACK. And, Mr. Chairman, I do hate to leave this testimony, but Ways and Means are continuing, so I’m going to excuse myself. But thank you so much to you and all of the Members for giving me this opportunity.

Mr. MILLER. Thank you, Ms. Black, and Commander, you’re recognized.

**STATEMENT OF DONALD L. SAMUELS, NATIONAL COMMANDER, DAV, ACCOMPANIED BY GARRY J. AUGUSTINE, NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR; JOSEPH A. VIOLANTE, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR; BARRY A. JESINOSKI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS; ARTHUR H. WILSON, NATIONAL ADJUTANT; RON B. MINTER, NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE; AND PATRICE RAPISAND, NATIONAL COMMANDER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS AUXILIARY.**

Mr. SAMUELS. Thank you, Representative Black, Chairman Murray and Miller, I want to commend you both on your leadership of your respective Committees. First, I want to thank the Members of these Committees on behalf of the 1.4 million members of the DAV and its Auxiliary for the support you have given disabled veterans and their families and survivors.

I also want to wish you Godspeed in your efforts during the second session of the 112th Congress on behalf of America’s service-disabled veterans, their families, and survivors.

Please allow me to introduce those seated here at the table with me, as well as some other distinguished guests. Our National Adjutant, Art Wilson; our Executive Directors Marc Burgess and Barry Jesinoski; our Service Director, Garry Augustine; our Legislative Director, which I’m sure you all know, Joe Violante; our Voluntary Services Director, Ron Minter; our Auxiliary National Commander, Patty Rapisand of Texas; Auxiliary National Adjutant, Judy Hezlep; DAV Senior Vice-Commander Larry Polzin of California; Junior Vice-Commanders, Mary Benavanga of New Jersey, Joseph Johnson of Ohio, Ron Voegeli of South Carolina, and Frank Maughan of Utah; our National Judge Advocate, Mike Dobmeier of North Dakota; Immediate Past National Commander and Board of Directors’ Chairman, Wally Tyson of Florida; our Chaplain, Charles Edwards of Texas; and National Chief of Staff, George Martin from Tennessee.

Let me also introduce you to my wife, Sandra; my daughter, Debra. My grandson, Ethan and granddaughter, Kallyn. And behind them is Patty and Bob Peacock, which is my sister-in-law and brother-in-law.

Would the DAV National Executive Committee please stand and be recognized? Will the members of the National Legislative Interim Committee please stand.

I'd also like to recognize the entire DAV delegation from my home state of Tennessee. Madame and Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees, on behalf of the Disabled American Veterans and its Auxiliary, I'm honored for this opportunity to discuss the major concerns and agenda of the Disabled American Veterans for the coming year.

Since 1920, the DAV has remained faithful to our mission of building better lives for our Nation's wartime service-disabled veterans, their families, and survivors. Part of that mission is advocating for meaningful, reasonable, and responsible public policy for service-disabled veterans.

With the end of combat operations in Iraq, the proposed downsizing of our military forces and the slow recovery in our domestic economic situation, more veterans will be relying upon the Department of Veterans Affairs for services and benefits over the next few years.

We must ensure that the VA is prepared to handle the large influx of new veterans, into its health care or benefits administrations. However, based on my experiences with the VA over the past four decades, I am not yet confident that our government is fully prepared to uphold its promises to the Nation's veterans.

All of my adult life has been spent in service to my fellow veterans. When I was discharged from the Marine Corps in 1969, after almost nine years of active duty service, I came to a crossroads. At that point in my life, a young wounded Vietnam veteran dealing with a permanent disability, my life could've taken many different directions.

However, the DAV was there for me with much-needed help. But the DAV went further, and offered me the privilege of helping my fellow veterans. In 1970, following my completion of a 2,600 hour VA vocational rehabilitation training program, I was assigned as a National Service Officer at the Nashville, DAV National Service Office, and served there as a supervisor of that office until my retirement in 1989.

After my DAV career, I served as the Assistant Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs until my retirement in April of 2011. In that position, I supervised all claims' activity, outreach and legislation and played a part in establishing Tennessee's State veterans' cemeteries and state veterans' homes.

And I continue to be a staunch veterans' advocate. I am also the proud father, which Representative Black mentioned of two sons, who have continued our family commitment to this great Nation. My older son is a U.S. Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant, a combat veteran, and a DAV member.

My younger son is a flight engineer in the United States Marine Corps. He is also a combat veteran and a DAV member. Also I have two son-in-laws who are former marines, one of whom passed away at age 24, due to a service-connected disability.

Madame and Mr. Chairman, it's a well known fact that more than 6,300 military personnel have died from wounds, illnesses, and accidents in Iraq and Afghanistan. And hundreds of thousands

more were wounded or injured, as a result of their service to our Nation. The VA anticipates providing health care to more than 610,000 post 9/11 veterans next year. That is the major reason why our government must keep its promises to those who serve in our Armed Forces and to their families and survivors.

None of these men and women joined the military to make a profit or to become wealthy. Like all generations of veterans, they joined the military for the good of our Nation and its citizens to protect our freedom and our safety. Both they and their families made great sacrifices during military service.

For many, those sacrifices continue throughout their lifetime. They were put in harm's way because of the actions of our government; therefore, Congress and the administration are responsible, morally and legally for the well-being of veterans, their families and survivors.

Therefore, the DAV calls upon the members of these Committees to ensure that our government keep its promise to our Nation's disabled veterans. Madame and Mr. Chairman, the DAV and disabled veterans we represent are grateful for the support that your Committees in Congress have provided for the VA health care system. The VA has received substantial annual funding increases for medical care programs for more than a decade. More importantly, the VA has become one of the highest quality health care systems in the world.

And while the President's FY2013 budget proposal for the VA comes to close to what the DAV and other veterans' groups have recommended, we see the need for additional funding for medical prosthetic research and for construction, as noted in the Independent Budget.

One area of concern is that veterans' medical care still is not sufficiently funded. Although advance appropriations have eliminated many of the uncertainties that plagued VA health care for decades, the Government Accountability Office has noted the use of budget gimmicks, that rob the system of billions of dollars under the cover of management efficiencies, and other clever accounting tricks.

Also disturbing is that under the recent continuing resolutions which Congress passed in the absence of annual appropriations, the VA was forced to devote fewer resources to veterans' medical care than Congress authorized for the current year.

The plain fact is that despite funding increases, demand for veterans' health care has risen faster than resources allocated to the VA. Yet amid widespread reports of hiring freezes, funding shortfalls and deferral of equipment purchases at medical centers, the VA somehow was able to carry over more than a billion dollars that it claims could not spend in 2011.

While the DAV applauds the efforts to eliminate unnecessary and wasteful spending, we are concerned based on what we hear from VA medical facilities around the country, and from our members that medical services were withheld from veterans, due to lack of sufficient funding and unreasonable wait lists.

Madame and Mr. Chairman, as a service-disabled veteran and a retired national service officer, I have taken a great interest in the VA disability evaluation system. Of course, I recognize the importance of having a modern up-to-date disability rating schedule that

reflects advances in medical science. That is a necessary part of ensuring accurate equitable disability ratings.

Yet, I find it very troubling that the VA may be moving toward revising its rating schedule with a greater focus on compensating veterans based on their disability's impact on earning capacity, while ignoring other factors, such as quality of life, and social impairment.

Some argue that if you're able to work, you shouldn't receive disability compensation. But I simply cannot understand such a limited view.

Take for example someone with a master's degree in business, who was highly successful in sales before joining the military after 9/11. Say that person had several deployments and suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, to such a degree that he or she is no longer able to interact with other people. Consequently, the veteran finds work as a low wage earner with minimal interaction with others.

So just because a veteran is able to hold a job, even one that pays a fraction of his or her previous income, disability compensation for PTSD could be reduced.

I can't imagine how could you possibly justify such a travesty. And I promise you the DAV will not stand idly by and allow that to happen. Madame and Mr. Chairman, Secretary of Veterans' Affairs Shinseki has focused a great deal of attention on reducing the claims backlog. He has set an extremely ambitious long-term goal of having no claims pending over 125 days, and that all claims will be completed to a 98 percent accuracy standard.

Certainly eliminating the backlog will be a welcome milestone. However, clearing the backlog is not necessarily the same as reforming the claims processing system. Nor does it guarantee that veterans are better served.

To achieve real success, the VA must focus on creating a veterans' benefits claims processing system designed to get each claim done right the first time. Only when the VA has adopted a culture of quality, accuracy, and accountability will true reform in the claims process succeed.

The DAV looks forward to the roll out of a new electronic veterans benefit management system later this year, the continued development of E-benefits and the other IT improvements that will modernize claims processing. We will continue to work closely with VBA leaders to ensure that DAV and other VSOs who represent veterans seeking earned benefits are fully integrated into these new IT systems.

Madame and Mr. Chairman, the men and women seated behind me are vital to our mission and the well-being of our Nation's hospitalized, sick and disabled veterans. They represent some of the more than 14,000 DAV and Auxiliary members who volunteer their time at VA medical facilities.

Some of them are volunteer drivers with the DAV's national transportation network, which provides free transportation to veterans in every state and nearly every congressional district. Thanks to them, more than 13 million veterans have been transported more than 495 million miles in DAV vans.

Each year our corps of national service officers, all of whom are wartime service-disabled veterans, represent a quarter million individuals in their claims for benefits from the VA. Among all organizations representing veterans, the DAV helps by far the largest number of claimants annually, ensuring that disabled veterans and their families receive all the benefits they deserve.

Our highly trained and dedicated national service officers provide free representation to any veteran or their dependents and survivors. And I would encourage you to put veterans in your district in touch with a DAV national service officer when they need assistance.

Our transition service program also provides benefits counseling and assistance to separating military servicemembers. This program is a huge success in helping military members transition back to civilian life and obtain the benefits and services that they have earned.

Since the 1970's the DAV has placed mobile service offices on the road to provide outreach and claims assistance to veterans who are unable to come into our offices. These offices on wheels are in your states and districts helping veterans—our constituents—with claims.

As you can imagine, I am very proud of the work that this great organization does. There is no other veterans service organization that contributes more to the welfare and well-being of our Nation's disabled veterans, their families and survivors than the DAV.

I can assure you, Madame and Mr. Chairman, that the DAV stands ready to assist you and your Committees in finding ways to improve the services and benefits that veterans have earned from a grateful Nation.

This completes my testimony and my staff and I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have. I want to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the DAV to share our proud record of service to veterans and our country. God bless America's soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast Guardsmen, and Marines who are in harm's way, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. SAMUELS APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

Mr. MILLER. Thank you very much, Commander, we appreciate your comments, your testimony, and your service to your fellow veterans, and your country for your entire career.

Some of you have heard some buzzers going off. Just to let you know, the House has just called a series of votes. Our series will probably last about an hour. We'll have a few minutes still before we have to go. Senator Murray will be able to stay here, and then as I understand, Senator Boozman will be arriving, so we will continue the hearing process.

I will submit all of my questions for the record, in order to allow my colleagues the opportunity to ask questions themselves. So I'd like to yield my time to Dr. Roe.

Mr. ROE. I thank the Chairman for yielding and thank you, Commander. It's great to see you again here today from the great state of Tennessee, the volunteer state. I didn't really join the military,



it sort of joined me. You know how that works, you went to the mailbox, they sent you a dream sheet, and you got to pick where you wanted to go. I thought what a great deal this is. And I picked the southeastern United States, and they got the direction right, they just got the continent wrong. How many times have you seen that happen?

I want to thank you all, each person, I got off the metro this morning coming here, and I saw you guys and gals walking up, and it really made me feel proud to be a citizen of a country and certainly to represent it.

I want to thank you all, the 1.4 million and I can also tell you without the Auxiliary, this would not nearly be the organization that it is, and thank you all for the work that you do every day.

As you see, I know who really does the work, the Auxiliary.

Think about this, 1.4 million of you is only .3 percent of the population of this country, and it's not very many. As we go forward, less and less and less of us have served this country. And I look back and think at the end of Vietnam, Commander, when you got out of the military, and about the time I got out, a couple of three years later, our country sort of forgot about us. And I never really thought about that much until a few years later, and it was absolutely wrong what America did for its veterans at the end of Vietnam. We've never treated veterans from the Civil War through all the wars since the way we did our Vietnam era veterans.

And I think right now, the Vietnam era veterans are the ones who are leading the forefront to welcome our people back home. I see it every day. When I fly on an airplane, I see people give up first class seats, I see them do all kinds of things in airports, it makes me proud. Command Sergeant Major Walz and I, along with three others went to Afghanistan about four months ago. I can tell you this military we have today will make the buttons of your shirt pop off. They really are doing an incredible job, and I could not be prouder.

And I think I speak for everyone here, I will never apologize for spending money on America's heroes. Never. I certainly see enough waste here, and it's certainly not wasted on our veterans. Thank you for the service you've given to our veterans in Tennessee. And as you know, there's a veterans hospital about a mile from my front door, which I frequent all the time.

A couple of things real quickly I want to go through. First, homelessness. I know you're involved in that, and one of the things that's holding up the process are case managers, and this is something that we've got to stick the VA with. We have 10,000 vouchers for our homeless veterans, but they can't get those vouchers unless there's a case manager.

Right now in my own district, we've got vouchers we can't use, because the VA since November hasn't hired a case manager to manage those. That's ridiculous. When you're going through the winter, you've got a veteran sitting outside, and the VA hasn't hired one person because one takes care of 25 veterans. They have to have one person.

So if we're going to have 10,000 more vouchers at 70 something million dollars, it does the veteran no good who's outside unless the

VA simultaneously trains and hires 400 case managers, and you can do that.

So I guess a real quick question I have for you, as a veterans' services officer with obviously decades of experience, what's the single biggest issue that you're running across that we can help you with up here?

Mr. SAMUELS. Well, I would say one, of course, is the backlog. The claims processing backlog, and of course, the Secretary and our staff are working together on trying to resolve that with the new IT programs coming in, programs that the Secretary is going to introduce. But I would say that is one of the biggest problems we hear from veterans is, why does it take two years to get a decision, why does it take nine months to get a decision.

I could ask my staff to respond more on that question, but that is a big issue. If you're a service officer sitting in the bunker in the state, they constantly get calls where veterans are calling to check on the status of their claim. Because they have not got a decision on it.

Mr. ROE. Mr. Chairman, I yield back. But I want to thank each and every one of you in this room whether you're an Auxiliary or you're a disabled veteran. Thank you for the service to our great Nation.

Mr. MILLER. And with that, I would like to yield the Chair to Senator Murray, so that she can continue the hearing while we go to our votes.

Senator MURRAY. All right. Mr. Chairman, I understand that your Members have to go to votes, and I'm willing. If one of your Members has a burning question that they want to ask quickly before they go, I'll let them do that.

Mr. MILLER. Looks like you get to—

Senator MURRAY. And no one wants to miss a vote, so.

Mr. MILLER. —ask the questions.

Senator MURRAY. All right. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Samuels, thank you for your testimony. Really, you did an excellent job and I appreciate your response on the question right now about the claims process. I think it's something we're all hearing and couldn't agree more.

I did want to ask you about health care funding. The VA's budget proposal reflects a very real commitment to provide veterans with the care they need. VA's budget request for medical care is, however, lower than the amount recommended by the Independent Budget. Can you tell us what the DAV's most significant concern with the administration's request for health care is?

Mr. SAMUELS. I think I'm going to refer that question to Mr. Violante.

Mr. VIOLANTE. Chairman Murray, thank you for that question. You know you've been a strong advocate for veterans and our biggest concern is medical care, we believe they're about \$1.5 billion below where they need to be.

I know a GAO report came out yesterday. I have not had the opportunity to review it; however, I understand that once again, they've indicated that the management efficiencies that have been identified by VA over the last several years, they cannot truly say that VA has generated any savings from those. That's a concern.

Last year, the Secretary carried over \$1.1 billion, yet we continue to hear from our members around the country and from VA employees that VA is short of funds, that veterans couldn't get the services that they were eligible for because of the shortfall. So we have concerns. We would certainly love Congress to get VA in here to question them to find out again why they aren't hiring people they need for homeless programs, why veterans aren't able to properly access the care and to get what they deserve.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. I very much appreciate that.

Let me ask you about another issue I brought up in my opening statement, and that is construction funding. The President's request for major and minor construction is significantly less than the Independent Budget recommendation. I'm really disappointed in the size of the gap between what they say they need and what we need really to bring our facilities up to date.

And I wanted to ask you, Mr. Samuels, failing to close that gap, what does that mean for our veterans across the country?

Mr. VIOLANTE. Madame Chairman, I'll go ahead and answer that question also.

You know, it reminds me a lot of what happened in '04 and '05, and you remember very well in '05 when you and Senator Akaka tried to have an amendment past in the Senate to increase funding by \$1.5 billion for VA. And at that time, we were hearing horror stories from around the country about maintenance problems, about Togus, Maine, where bricks were falling off the building and they had to put scaffolding up to protect veterans as they entered, and other facilities where the air conditioning went down and the surgical units had to be closed because there wasn't air conditioning and their inability to get that fixed.

MRI's that couldn't be repaired, and all of these items, as well as building necessary facilities or enhanced use leases to provide the services that are needed in certain areas. So as that gap continues to widen, I think we're going to see many more of those same problems where VA is not going to be able to ensure the safety of the men and women coming for services.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. And this is an area I'm going to continue to follow. I care deeply about this and I've seen exactly what you're talking about. And so this is one that I will follow-up and push very hard.

And finally, Commander, I wanted to ask you and I really want to thank the DAV for working really closely with me on the women's veterans bill, and I look forward to working with you to make sure that all the women coming into the VA system have the kind of quality care that they serve, but need after serving our country.

But I wanted—as the last woman standing up here, I will ask you, what more do you think needs to be done to address the serious shortcomings that women are seeing as they come into our VA facilities?

Mr. SAMUELS. Do you want to do it?

Mr. JESINOSKI. Chairman Murray, I'll take that question. First of all, thank you for your extremely staunch advocacy in this area. The DAV stands with you in your concern and care for our women veterans.

And Secretary Shinseki has stated that women veterans are a priority for VA, and they're going down the right track, we believe, so we're looking for your strong oversight as they continue to train their personnel and to ensure that all the areas of care are open to our women veterans. Whether that be military sexual trauma, homelessness, and post deployment mental health, but there is much to be done for sure, and quite frankly, we're not finished until or unless all of our women veterans can walk down the walls of our VA medical centers with the same ease and comfort and receive the same level of care and breadth of care as their male veteran counterparts.

Senator MURRAY. I appreciate that. And I would add one more challenge to all of us, and it's what I hear from women veterans all the time, is they don't identify themselves as veterans. They don't write it on their resumes when they put it out there, their kids don't call and have their moms come to school and say—and tell their experiences as a veteran, they don't tell their friends and neighbors.

We need to give women the power to say I'm a veteran and be proud of that, and I want to work with all of you to do that.

One last question and I will turn it over to Senator Boozman for his questions.

Last year as we talked about, Chairman Miller and I talked about the VOW to Hire Heroes Act, a very important first step in beginning to make sure that we are employing our veterans nationwide.

I did want to ask you what more can be done to help our service-disabled veterans overcome some of their barriers to employment that I'm hearing about, and wondered if you could respond to that.

Mr. VIOLANTE. There's a lot more that needs to be done, particularly for service-disabled veterans. And if I could, Madame Chairman, I'd like to get back to you in writing on that—

Senator MURRAY. Okay.

Mr. VIOLANTE. —to elaborate as to all the things that need to be looked at in that particular area.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. Very good. I look forward to your response on that.

Senator Boozman has joined us and I will turn it over to you for questions.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you. Thank you, Madame Chair, and we just appreciate you all being here. I want to especially thank those of you from Arkansas that I got to visit with a little earlier. Where are you guys at? Wave your hand. There we are.

I apologize for being late. One thing I'd like to say before I ask just a question or two, but don't ever underestimate the value of you being here. Those of us on the Committee asked to be on the Committee. My dad did 20 years in the Air Force, and I really do understand how important these things are. But your team here does a tremendous job representing you. And like you say, they do outstanding, but there's no substitute for you being up here looking your Members of Congress in the eye and saying, John, you know, this is really, really very important.

So I applaud you. This is a tough trip. It's an expensive trip. But again, I appreciate you being here, because that helps us push these things that are so important forward.

I also want to thank the—while I'm thanking people, the Auxiliary. And we know who does—I've got a wife and three daughters, we know who actually does the work, and we do appreciate your efforts.

You've heard me tell in the past that I was with a group and said that the Auxiliary was the backbone of the organization, which you all are. My wife on the way home said, John, they're also the brains of the organization. So I think there's a lot of truth to that also.

Let me just ask a question, Commander, real quick. It's my understanding that DAV has had a staff member detailed to VA as part of their team, that is developing VBMS. Based on the reports of the staff member, do you believe VBMS is on track to improve the claims process and what changes should VA make to ensure proper implementation? Also, do you share my concern about the need for long-term plan to scan claims related documents?

Mr. JESINOSKI. Thank you for the question, Senator Boozman. We believe VBA is definitely on the right track with the Veterans Benefits Management System or VBMS, and we look forward to its deployment beginning in July.

All signs indicate that this system has the potential to revolutionize the way that VA does its claims work, and it will help to greatly improve the efficiency and accuracy of the VA claims process.

And you're right, we do and have had for some time a staff member helping, the VBA folks on the team. And we're absolutely pleased to have been consulted and to be able to provide that meaningful input. That's ongoing, we plan to continue doing that. But we will certainly watch this process very closely, and monitor as they wrap things up here, or get to the deployment, and we will certainly ensure that from our perspective, the end product is as advertised.

Senator BOOZMAN. So you're being really—the staff member being there has been a really positive thing then?

Mr. VIOLANTE. Absolutely. Specifically, the Assistant National Service Director, Jim Marszalek, one of our professional staff members, his input has been invaluable to the VA folks. They've told us as much. And certainly some changes and tweaks have been made here and there, based on our input and the input of other VSOs. But again, we're going to continue to watch it very closely.

We expect probably some bumps in the road, but we are very much behind the VBMS project.

Senator BOOZMAN. Good. Well, I'm glad to hear that. I'd heard, you know, that things were going well in that regard. It's good to hear that officially. And I think these are the kind of—you know, again, people working up here, you guys working so hard, these are the kind of, you know, relationships that we need to have. And, you know, nobody understands this better than you, you know, in the sense of being the recipients.

And like I say, this is the kind of collaboration that we need to further things. So it's a great example and we appreciate it. So thank you, Madame Chair.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Senator. I do ask unanimous consent that all the Members to have five legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks, and include any extraneous material for today's joint hearing. And without objection, so ordered.

With that, I want to thank all of you who are here today for being here to advocate for so many veterans across the country, and I look forward tomorrow to have a Senate Committee's budget hearing in which the DAV will testify.

So, Commander Samuels, thank you very much, thank you all, and with that, this hearing is adjourned.

Mr. SAMUELS. Thank you, Madame Chairman.

[Whereupon, at 3:42 p.m. the Committee was adjourned.]

## A P P E N D I X

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### Prepared Statement of Chairman Jeff Miller

Good afternoon. It is my privilege to welcome DAV members and National Commander Samuels to today's joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. We are here to receive the legislative priorities of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

One bit of housekeeping before we get started - In the interest of time, after hearing from Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Filner, and Ranking Member Burr, I would like to ask Committee Members to waive their opening statements. There will be an opportunity for remarks during the question and answer period following Commander Samuels' testimony.

Hearing no objections, so ordered.

Speaking for the Members of both Committees, we are honored to be here this afternoon with so many DAV members, each an American hero in their own right. Each of you has sacrificed selflessly in service to our country and continue to give of yourself today through the numerous positive actions made by the membership of the DAV.

On behalf of a grateful Nation, I thank you for your service and for your time in coming all the way to Washington to be with us today. I want to say a special welcome to your National Commander, Mr. Donald L. Samuels. Sir, I thank you for being here and I look forward to hearing your testimony.

I also welcome Ms. Patrice Rapisand who is the National Commander of the DAV Auxiliary. Thank you for being here today and for all of the good work that members of the DAV Auxiliary do for our country. I would also like to take a moment to recognize the DAV members from my home state of Florida, especially those who may be with us from the panhandle's first district.

I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues from across the aisle and across the Capitol including Ranking Member Filner, Ranking Member Burr, and Members of both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. In particular, I want to extend a warm welcome to Chairman Patty Murray of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Senator Murray, It was a pleasure to work with you last year in constructing and passing the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2012.

I look forward to working further with you this year to help our Nation's veterans. Commander Samuels, as more American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines return every day from fighting in the War on Terror, it is a comfort to know that DAV members nationwide stand ready to support them. In a time of continuing conflict and fiscal constraint, the services provided by great organizations like yours have never been more necessary.

Through DAV's National Service Program, veterans are offered professional benefits counseling and claims assistance at no cost. DAV volunteers have provided millions of hours each year in service to veterans at VA medical facilities and millions more hours of driving veterans to and from VA medical appointments. With thousands of servicemembers and veterans in my district, I know firsthand how invaluable those hours are to the veterans who need them and I am personally grateful for the services you provide and the leadership you show in the veteran community.

As I mentioned at our Full Committee budget hearing two weeks ago, the largest issues facing VA, and all American veterans, is the threat of sequestration and possibility of devastating budget cuts for VA. This issue arises due to an ambiguity in the law and the Obama Administration's refusal to answer basic questions on whether VA would be part of this historic cut.

For months I've been trying to get clarity about this issue to no avail, and that is why I want to thank you Commander, and all members of the DAV, for joining other veterans groups in pleading with the President to direct OMB to give us, and the Nation, the Administration's interpretation of the conflicts in law so we can protect veterans health care and benefits.

I also want to thank you for supporting my legislation, H.R. 3895, that would clarify this issue once and for all to ensure that future generations of veterans are not held hostage due to the type of political gamesmanship that I believe is holding up the President's decision. I ask that all DAV members bring this issue up with your Member of Congress when you meet with them this week and help us ensure that the President doesn't let these cuts happen.

Commander Samuels, I wanted to touch on few of my priorities for the coming year and I was pleased to see that your testimony touched on many of these as well:

1. Vigorous oversight of VA's Veteran Benefit Management System or VBMS which is VA's new paperless system for adjudicating disability claims.

While I am pleased that VA is diligently working towards rolling out this system soon, our Committee will continue our oversight to ensure that all claims are adjudicated accurately and quickly the first time.

2. Implementation of the Vow to Hire Heroes Act of 2011. This is the bicameral and bipartisan veteran jobs legislation that I was proud to work with Chairman Murry to pass last year.

The cornerstone of the law is a provision that provides one year of Montgomery GI Bill benefits to re-train nearly 100,000 unemployed veterans between ages 35-60. This is a landmark re-training package for veterans and one of my top priorities is to ensure it, and all of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act provisions, are implemented correctly to help our Nation's unemployed veterans.

3. At the Full Committee budget hearing two weeks ago it was uncovered that recently VA overestimated their funding needs by nearly \$5 billion for FY 12 and FY13 combined. We have already started asking the Administration tough questions about why the estimate was so far off, why we didn't know about it till 2 weeks ago, and, most importantly, what priorities VA will be addressing with that money.

4. Finally, the Committee will continue our oversight of the VA health care system to ensure that the patient safety and acquisition issues that have been uncovered in the last year are addressed, and ensure that Veterans are receiving the top-quality health care they deserve.

Commander Samuels, I once again thank you, and all of DAV's leadership, for being here today and I look forward to your testimony this afternoon.

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#### **Prepared Statement of Hon. Bob Filner, Ranking Democratic Member**

Good afternoon! Welcome to Capitol Hill, Commander Samuels and thank you for your service. I and the other Members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, certainly look forward to hearing the legislative priorities of the Disabled American Veterans for 2013.

I want to welcome those of you in the audience who are here from California. It's great to see you all and we all thank you for your selfless service. It is truly appreciated.

Commander, I would like to begin my remarks by extending my compliments to your DAV Washington staff. You should be proud of the continued professionalism and advocacy that they convey to this Committee on very important issues that are critical to veterans, veterans' families and the community as a whole. I would also add that this Committee continues to look to the Independent Budget for solid information concerning all veterans' issues and I want you to know that we recognize your staffs' hard work and dedication to this key document.

As you know, a few weeks ago the Obama Administration released their VA budget proposal for fiscal year 2013 and the Advance Appropriations request for 2014. In discretionary funding VA requested a 4.5 percent increase, and a 16.2 percent increase in mandatory funding, for an overall budget increase of 10.5 percent in 2013. The majority of these discretionary funds have already been provided through advance appropriations.

Rest assured that both the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees are thoroughly reviewing this request for veterans' funding and will work with the President to ensure we continue to provide adequate, timely and predictable funding to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

My support of the President's and Secretary Shinseki's efforts to transform the VA into a 21st Century agency remains steadfast. I have committed to Secretary Shinseki that I will work with my colleagues to ensure he gets the funding that he has requested.



However, I too have reservations about some of the projected savings and share your organizations' concern of "budget gimmickry".

Commander Samuels, I want you to know that this Committee will fight to protect VA's funding from any cuts that may be proposed. I am sure you will agree with me that our veterans deserve no less.

During the recent budget hearing we heard from the Disabled American Veterans about the Veterans' Benefits Administration's ongoing struggle to transform its claims-processing system into a modern, paperless based system. I look forward to hearing from you on this issue and other legislative priorities of the DAV.

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#### **Prepared Statement of Hon. Corrine Brown**

I want to thank Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Filner for holding this hearing to allow the DAV to present its legislative agenda.

I want to begin with acknowledging those in attendance from Florida who have made the trip from the state with one of the largest veteran populations:

Dennis Joyner Past National Commander  
 Al Linden Past National Commander  
 Andy Marshall  
 Guy Diffenbaugh  
 Frank Chicallo  
 Ken Wolfe Past National Service Director  
 Fred Bristol Past National Assistant Adjutant  
 Art Wilson National Adjutant  
 Dave Tannenbaum  
 Phil Condon  
 Richard Tolfia  
 Bobbie Parker  
 Don Ebright

And especially John Markiewicz, Past State Commander, from my district.

It is important we hear from the leaders of the Veteran Service Organizations when they are in town.

With their input, we learn what those living with VA care every day need.

The Independent Budget is the blueprint which the Veterans Affairs budget should be based, not the other way around.

Every year Amvets, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Veterans of Foreign Wars get together to write the bible of the Veterans budget.

It was on your initiative that we were able to get advanced funding for VA health care. To protect our Nations veterans from the politics of governments shutdowns.

I am reminded of the words of the first President of the United States, George Washington, whose words are worth repeating at this time:

"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 country."

Thank you for being here today to remind those of us up here in Washington what is important.

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#### **Prepared Statement of Hon. Bob Turner**

I join the Chairman, Ranking Member, and my other colleagues in welcoming our guests and thanking them for taking the time to appear before this Committee.

I would like to take a moment to recognize our veteran heroes for their service to this Nation. The sacrifices of fellow Americans paid to preserve our freedom should never be forgotten.

Like the rest of my colleagues on the Committee, I anticipate hearing from these distinguished panelists to understand how we can better serve our disabled heroes. I look forward to hearing the legislative priorities of 2012 for the Disabled American Veterans. Once again, I would like to thank our distinguished guests for their service and I yield my time back.

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**Prepared Statement of Donald L. Samuels**

Madame Chairman, Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees:

It is indeed an honor and a privilege to appear before you today to discuss the major concerns and agenda of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) for the coming year.

At the outset, I want to thank the Members of these Committees on behalf of the more than 1.5 million members of DAV and its Auxiliary for the support you have given disabled veterans and their families and survivors and to the programs that have helped improve the quality of their lives. I also want to wish you Godspeed in your efforts during the second session of the 112th Congress on behalf of America's service-disabled veterans, their families and survivors.

With the cessation of combat operations in Iraq in December 2011, the proposed downsizing of our military forces and the slow recovery in our domestic economic situation, more veterans will be relying upon the VA for services and benefits over the next few years. We must ensure that VA is prepared to handle the large influx of new veterans into its health care and benefits administrations. However, based on my experiences with VA over the past four decades, I am not yet confident that our government is fully prepared to uphold its promises to the nation's veterans.

All of my adult life has been spent in service to my fellow veterans. When I was discharged from the Marine Corps in 1969, after almost nine years of active duty service, I came to a crossroads. At that point in my life – a young, wounded Vietnam veteran dealing with a permanent disability – my life could have taken many different directions. However, the DAV was there for me with much-needed help. But DAV went further: DAV offered me the privilege of helping my fellow veterans. In 1970, following my completion of a 2,600-hour VA Vocational Rehabilitation Chapter 31 Training Program, I was assigned as a National Service Officer (NSO) at the Nashville DAV National Service Office, and served there as Supervisor of the office until my retirement in 1989.

Since 1989, I served as the Assistant Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Veterans Affairs until my retirement in April 2011, where I supervised all claims activity, outreach, legislation, and played a part in establishing state veterans cemeteries and state veterans homes in Tennessee.

I am the co-chair of Operation Stand Down, the only homeless assistance program in Tennessee that gets a VA grant. It's a full-service operation, providing transitional housing for both men and women. It also has an employment program, with an 82 percent retention rate, and the program is currently addressing the needs of 72 veterans per day, eight percent of whom are women.

I am also the proud father of two sons who have continued our family's commitment to this great nation. My older son is a U.S. Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant and a combat veteran of Desert Storm and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a DAV member. My younger son is a flight engineer in the U.S. Marine Corps and was recently deployed to Italy and Africa in support of operations in those regions. He is a veteran of combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and a DAV member.

Additionally, I had two sons-in-law who are former Marines, one of whom passed away at age 24 due to a service-connected disability.

Although a well-known fact, a DAV life member recently noted in a letter to me and I want to repeat it here because it is a major reason why our government must keep its promises to those who serve in our armed forces and to their families and survivors. None of them joined the military to make a profit or to become wealthy. These wartime service members, like all generations of veterans, joined the military for the good of our nation and its citizens, to protect our freedom and our safety. Both the service member and his or her family made great sacrifices during military service and, for many, those sacrifices continue throughout their lifetimes. They were put in harm's way because of the actions of our government; therefore, Congress and the Administration are responsible, morally and legally, for the well-being of veterans, their families and survivors. More than 6,300 military personnel have died from wounds, illnesses and accidents in Iraq and Afghanistan deployments, and hundreds of thousands of service members were wounded in action, became disabled or made ill as a result of their service to our nation. The men and women of the DAV will continue to fight to ensure that our government fulfills its promises to them.

Since the establishment of our nation more than 235 years ago, its leaders of all political parties and persuasions have ever more recognized the Federal government's responsibility to provide disability compensation, health care, vocational re-

habilitation and other vital benefits and services to America's veterans. In 1989, Congress passed and President Reagan signed legislation elevating the VA to a cabinet-level department in acknowledgment of the prominence our nation places on caring for veterans who have served and sacrificed in her defense.

History tells us, however, that too many occasions are marked by promises made then broken to the individuals who have fought our wars and protected our freedoms. For example, following the Revolutionary War, a rebellion broke out when the Continental Congress was unable to fulfill its promises to the patriots who fought for American independence. In fact, the very establishment of your Committees can be traced to the creation of the Committee on Claims to settle that rebellion. Following World War I, veterans marched on Washington in the 1930s to obtain the pension bonuses they had been promised to fight and win that war. Those veterans received their bonuses.

More recently, military members were promised free health care for themselves and their dependents if they made the military their professional careers; however, they are now required to pay for part of their earned health care benefits. Many of these same individuals who retired from full military careers are also required to forego one dollar of their longevity retired pay for each dollar of disability compensation they receive. About eight years ago, Congress did acknowledge this inequity and corrected it for those whose disability rating was 50 percent or greater, and offered relief that is being phased in over a ten-year period. However, this inequity still remains for those veterans rated 40 percent or less disabled. A similar inequity exists for surviving spouses of military retirees, who are not allowed to receive both the annuity their deceased spouses bought for them under the Survivor Benefit Plan and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Disability and Indemnity Compensation, which is an earned benefit.

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, DAV and the disabled veterans we represent are grateful for the support that your Committees and Congress have provided for the VA health care system. VA has received substantial annual funding increases for medical care programs for more than a decade, and more importantly, has become one of the highest quality health care systems in the world. Yet, despite VA's successes, significant problems related to access confront veterans seeking care for certain services and at certain locations.

Too often over the last several decades, health care to our nation's sick and disabled veterans has been rationed, and in many ways it is still rationed today. Despite funding increases, demand for VA health care services by veterans has risen faster than resources allocated to VA. More disturbing, however, is the increasing use of budget gimmicks that rob the VA health care system of billions of dollars under the cover of "management efficiencies" and other clever accounting tricks. Despite widespread reports last year of hiring freezes, funding shortfalls and deferral of equipment purchases at medical centers, VA somehow was able to carry over more than a billion dollars that it claims it could not spend in fiscal year (FY) 2011. While DAV appreciates efforts by VA to eliminate unnecessary and wasteful spending, we are concerned, based on what we hear from VA medical facilities around the country and from DAV members, that medical services are being withheld from veterans due to lack of sufficient funding.

The DAV calls upon the members of these Committees to ensure that our government fulfills its promises to our nation's disabled veterans. We also call upon these Committees to vigorously provide oversight of VA to ensure that it is properly carrying out its mission to our nation's sick and disabled veterans and their families and survivors. I will discuss this need further in my testimony today.

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, I believe it is the obligation of every citizen of our country to preserve and protect the freedoms each of us and our nation hold so dear. America's veterans, more so than any other group, have lived up to their responsibilities by literally putting their lives on the line in defense of our country and its cherished ideals. Not surprisingly, we are willing to continue to sacrifice for the good of our nation, as long as that sacrifice is shared by all. And no one knows more about sacrifice than those who became disabled serving in our nation's military forces and their loved ones who care for them thereafter—the men and women seated before you today. Disabled veterans will forever carry the physical and emotional scars inflicted while performing their responsibility to America and our fellow citizens.

Just as America's citizens have responsibilities to the nation, America's leaders and policy makers have responsibilities to our nation's citizens.

Today, this concept of shared, mutual responsibility lies at the very heart of the ongoing debate about the size and scope of the federal government. As an organization that provides services at no cost to veterans and their families, DAV understands that government cannot be all things for all people. But regardless of any-

thing else, there can be no question that it is, and must always remain, the primary responsibility of the federal government to care for our nation's veterans and their families. And that responsibility begins with the members of these Committees.

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, over the past year there have surfaced some disturbing proposals that would call into question the government's commitment to that responsibility. Last year, we saw proposals that, among other things, would have offset VA disability compensation against Social Security benefits, vouchered out VA health care and undercut VA health care services through the use of budget gimmicks. Let me take a minute to explain the dangers of these proposals.

The underlying principles of entitlement to disability compensation and Social Security benefits are separate and distinct. Disability compensation is intended to be a measure of government restitution for the effects of illness or injury incurred or aggravated during an individual's service in our nation's armed forces. Social Security benefits, on the other hand, are not linked to military service and are in no way a duplicate benefit. Therefore, the federal government provides VA disability compensation and Social Security payments on the basis of their separate entitlement criteria. Not only would a policy of offsetting these benefits be patently unfair, it would disrespect the fundamental nature and purpose of disability compensation.

DAV strongly opposes any attempts to diminish disability compensation by offsetting it against any other government benefit.

In response to access problems experienced by veterans in some locations and for some services, we have seen an increase in the number of people who believe that vouchering out VA health care is the preferred solution. On the surface, providing veterans with a voucher or card to obtain their health care in the private sector might, in some cases, sound like an appealing alternative to the current VA health care system. However, on closer scrutiny, allowing veterans to receive their health care in the private sector is not a viable or preferable option. First, the high costs of care in the private, for-profit health care sector, compared to VA costs, would take more out of VA medical facilities and, in turn, would force VA to ration health care for those veterans remaining in the system, unless the Administration and Congress were willing to significantly increase VA's budget for contract and fee services.

Second, VA already has the authority to provide care to veterans through private sector providers when no VA facility is available to provide such care in reasonable proximity. VA's authority to provide contract care includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- For a service-connected disability or an adjunct condition
- For a service-connected disabled veteran whose disability rating is 50 percent or more, for any condition
- Under certain circumstances, for a veteran who is eligible to participate in a rehabilitation program under chapter 31, title 38, United States Code
- In instances in which a VA facility is incapable of providing necessary in-house care
- When a VA facility is geographically inaccessible to a veteran for necessary care
- When a medical emergency prevents a veteran from receiving care at a VA facility.

DAV believes that VA contract care for eligible veterans should be used judiciously and in authorized circumstances, so long as it does not endanger a VA facility's ability to maintain a full range of specialized inpatient and outpatient services for all enrolled veterans. VA must maintain a "critical mass" of capital, human and technical resources to promote effective, high quality care for veterans, especially those with complex health problems, such as blindness, amputation, spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, or chronic mental health problems.

Allowing veterans to go outside of the VA for medical care, either through use of a voucher or card, could jeopardize VA's ability to provide a full continuum of care to all enrolled veterans. Accordingly, DAV would oppose any proposals similar to vouchering or cards, because they could undermine the VA health care system and jeopardize a veteran's ability to receive a full continuum of health care.

Perhaps most concerning is the return of budget gimmickry that previously led to a VA health care funding crisis about ten years ago, and that could threaten the gains made through enactment of advance appropriations legislation. Beginning in 2002, VA proposed several successive budgets, each of which purported to make substantial "management efficiencies" and thereby reduce the need for billions of dollars in direct appropriations; however, no efficiencies were ever documented or savings achieved to offset those funding needs, whereas the demand and need for resources continued to rise steadily. Ultimately the VA Secretary at that time was forced to report to Capitol Hill just weeks after presenting the FY 2006 budget and admitted VA was seriously underfunded by more than a billion dollars. In the end,

Congress provided the requested supplemental appropriations to cover the unmet demand, but not before hundreds of thousands of veterans were turned away or forced to wait for vital VA health care services.

In order to avoid such budget gimmickry, as well as the negative consequences of partisan, political fighting that led to late, unpredictable and insufficient VA health care budgets, DAV and the other members of the Partnership for Veterans Health Care Budget Reform began a multi-year effort to reform the VA health care funding process. Working side-by-side with these Committees, we were able to enact historic legislation that provided VA health care with advance appropriations and promoted increased transparency in the VA budget process. Signed into law on October 22, 2009, this legislation has helped shield VA's medical care programs from the annual threats of government shutdowns and continuing resolutions.

Unfortunately, however, over the past year, both Congress and the Administration have taken actions that threaten the gains made through advance appropriations. For example, the FY 2012 budget proposed by VA projected \$1.2 billion in savings from "operational improvements," \$500 million in carryover funding from FY 2011, an unexplained and unjustified reduction in non-recurring facility maintenance, and a billion-dollar contingency fund for medical care that might or might not have been released to VA. All of these assumptions were built into VA's FY 2012 budget, and as a result significantly lowered the direct appropriations approved by Congress in response.

Our fears were confirmed in a report released last June when GAO pointed out that the inclusion of "operational improvements" were similar to the "management efficiencies" proposed by VA in prior years that had never materialized and led to a funding crisis in 2005. In addition, GAO reported that in VA's FY 2012 medical care budget submission, funding for non-recurring maintenance of health care facilities had been reduced by \$900 million below the level that VA's own Enrollee Health Care Projection Model had already projected was needed to maintain its health care facilities. Coming at a time when appropriations for major and minor construction have fallen dramatically, we are concerned about the short- and long-term safety of VA's health care infrastructure.

#### **FISCAL YEAR 2013 BUDGET PROPOSAL**

Two weeks ago, the Administration released its latest VA budget request for FY 2013 and advance appropriations for FY 2014; and while there are some positive aspects, it also contains many of the same troubling components found in last year's budget. In the context of today's overall fiscal environment, we are pleased that VA's discretionary spending would increase by \$2.8 billion next year, even as other federal agencies are facing serious cuts. This budget proposes to increase spending on many critical programs, including benefits claims processing, homeless veterans, women veterans and vocational rehabilitation and employment.

To meet the health care needs of current and returning veterans, the FY 2013 budget request would increase funding for veterans medical care programs by \$2.2 billion, approximately 4.3 percent over FY 2012. However, we are greatly concerned that this increase, which is already \$1.5 billion less than our *Independent Budget* (IB) estimate, is built on budgetary gimmicks and under-funding of VA's health care infrastructure. The FY 2013 medical care budget request was reduced by \$1.3 billion based on an assumption that VA would achieve \$1.3 billion in savings from "operational improvements," similar to the projected \$1.2 billion in savings projected for FY 2012. GAO has pointed out in the past that VA often fails to achieve or document such savings, which leads to shortfalls in the medical budget.

Perhaps most troubling is the budget's failure to properly support VA's health care infrastructure. GAO reported last June that the FY 2013 advance appropriation would cut VA's non-recurring maintenance by \$1.3 billion and equipment purchases by \$400 million. In addition, VA's FY 2013 budget request for major and minor construction was just \$1.1 billion, which is \$2.6 billion less than the IB recommends, which is based directly on VA's own analysis and estimates of its capital infrastructure needs. Although Congress has funded a significant number of new facilities in recent years, the vast majority of existing VA medical centers and other associated buildings are, on average, more than 60 years old. Aging facilities create an increased burden on VA's overall maintenance requirements. Unless Congress effectively responds, we fear that VA's capital programs and the significant effects on the system as a whole, risks a diminution of the care and services provided by VA to sick and disabled veterans.

For all of the above reasons, we urge these Committees to closely monitor VA's medical care programs to ensure they have sufficient funding for the remainder of this year, and carefully examine the latest VA budget proposal for next fiscal year

to ensure that it continues to provide sufficient, timely and predictable funding for VA health care.

For FY 2013, the IB is calling for \$57.2 billion in Medical Care discretionary funding. The Administration has asked for \$55.8 billion, including almost \$3.3 billion in collections, which is almost \$1.4 billion less than recommended by the IB.

For Medical and Prosthetic Research, the IB requested a funding level of \$611 million.

The IB recommends approximately \$2.5 billion for VA's General Operating Expenses.

For total construction programs, the IB recommends almost \$4 billion, \$2.7 billion for major construction programs and slightly more than \$1 billion for minor construction.

DAV and its IB co-authors recommend a total discretionary funding level of slightly less than \$68 billion.

### **REFORM OF THE VA CLAIMS PROCESSING SYSTEM**

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, a sacred obligation of our government and core mission of the VA is the provision of benefits to relieve the ill effects of disability upon veterans and their families. For those benefits to effectively fulfill their intended purpose they must be adequate and they must be decided in a timely manner. The ability of disabled veterans to maintain themselves and their families often depends on the timely delivery of these benefits. The need for benefits among disabled veterans is usually urgent. While awaiting action by VA, they and their families may suffer hardships; protracted delays can lead to deprivation, bankruptcies, home foreclosures, and even homelessness. Tragically, innumerable veterans have died from their service-related disabilities while their claims languished at VA, in some cases for years. This sad fact alone proves disability benefits are critical; providing for disabled veterans should always be a top priority of the government.

As the House and Senate address the major challenges facing our nation, we urge you to continue focusing on the unfinished work of reforming the veterans' benefits claims processing system. For the DAV and many other veterans organizations, ensuring that disabled veterans and their dependents and survivors receive all the benefits they have earned, without undue delay, remains one of our highest legislative priorities for 2012.

The VA has struggled for decades to reform its system for processing claims for benefits, and yet, despite much activity, little real progress has occurred. In fact, looking at the number of veterans awaiting rating decisions on claims for disability compensation, the problem is larger today than it has ever been.

For decades, the DAV and other veterans and military service organizations have argued that a permanent solution to the problems with the claims processing system will only be achieved if VA first makes major structural changes in how it approaches this challenge. First, staffing levels must be commensurate with the increasing workload. VA has significantly increased personnel assigned to claims process during the last several budget cycles, so this need has at least partially been addressed. Second, proper training of all employees involved in the claims process is paramount to deciding cases correctly the first time. Third, quality review at all levels of the claims and appellate processes is a necessary requirement. Finally, there must be accountability throughout the VA to ensure that all claims and appellate decisions are accurate. Over the past several years, the DAV and others have also emphasized the importance of VA's using advances in information technology (IT) to provide for a paperless process that uses rules-based decision support. We believe IT could be a key to success, as indicated later in this statement.

Despite the hiring of thousands of new employees over the past few years, the number of pending claims for benefits, often referred to as the backlog, continues to grow. Although VBA processed more than a million claims last year—its highest annual total ever—the volume of new and reopened claims still grew. As a result, in the Monday Morning Workload Report from February 4, 2012, there were 891,402 claims for disability compensation and pensions pending, an increase of more than 115,000 from one year ago. Overall, there are 591,243 claims that have been pending greater than VA's target of 125 days, or more than 66 percent of the cases pending, which is a more than 75 percent increase in one year.

But more important than the number of claims processed is the number of claims processed correctly. The VBA quality assurance program is known as the Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR) and is now available publicly on VA's ASPIRE Dashboard. The most recent STAR measure for rating claims accuracy for the one-year period ending September 2011 is 84 percent, about the same level as one year prior, and slightly lower than several years earlier. However, the VA Office of Inspector General reported in May 2011 that based on inspections of 45,000 claims

at 16 of the VA's 57 regional offices, claims for disability compensation were correctly processed only 77 percent of the time. This error rate would equate to almost 250,000 incorrect claims decisions in just the past year.

To address these problems, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has been focused over the past several years on "breaking the back of the backlog" of pending claims. However, it is important for the Committees to understand that the backlog is not the core problem, it is a symptom. If VA focuses only on reducing the backlog number, it will not sufficiently address the underlying problems that created the backlog, nor prevent it from growing again. Once again, to achieve real and lasting progress leading to success, VA must focus on creating a modern, paperless veterans' benefits claims-processing system designed to decide each claim right the first time.

Unfortunately, VA's current performance measurements, both for the organization as a whole and for VA regional offices and their employees, look primarily at volume of work completed and pending, rather than on the quality of work achieved. From Monday Morning Workload Reports to individual employee performance standards, the tools used to measure VBA's success are primarily based on production, not accuracy. It is not surprising, therefore, that employees and managers remain concerned first and foremost with meeting quotas and production goals before turning their attention to how they might improve the quality of that work. VA needs to undergo a cultural change to redefine success away from reducing the backlog toward getting it right the first time. If VA cannot afford to spend the resources to get it right the first time, why should we believe that VA can spend the resources to rework a claim a second or even third time?

Making such a significant cultural change will require a fully engaged and strong congressional influence. It also requires committed, consistent, and stable leadership from VA. We applaud Secretary Shinseki for taking on this challenge, and we thank him for setting ambitious goals and providing personal leadership. Over the past several years, there has been a new openness to change at the VBA, because VBA has worked closely with DAV and other VSOs in seeking innovative solutions. Building on this new partnership, we are pleased with the continued engagement Under Secretary for Benefits Allison Hickey has promoted, and we look forward to working with her to finally and permanently reform this system.

The DAV looks forward to the rollout of a new electronic Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) later this year, the continued development of e-Benefits and the other IT improvements that will modernize claims processing. We will continue to work closely with VBA leaders to ensure that DAV and other VSOs who represent veterans seeking earned benefits are fully integrated into these new IT systems.

VBA has pilot-tested dozens of business process improvements to reduce waiting times and increase production of claims decisions. Over the past year at the I-Lab in Indianapolis, VBA has sought to integrate the most promising of these new processes into a new operating model that would create a more efficient, accurate claims process. As VBA finalizes this new model, we would urge VA to keep the focus on IT and process reforms that increase quality and accuracy, the essential cornerstones for reforming the claims processing system. Your Committees can and must use your oversight authority to ensure that the reforms currently underway at VBA are directed toward the ultimate goal of creating a claims processing system that will decide claims right the first time.

Better training and quality control are not only essential, they are interrelated and must be part of a continuous quality improvement program, both for VBA employees and for the claims process itself. Quality control programs should identify areas and subjects that require new or additional training for employees; better training should improve the overall quality of work. Testing and certification can help both the training programs themselves as well as measure each individual's knowledge and understanding of job functions. It is important, however, that testing and certification be applied equally to employees and to those who supervise them and manage their work, including all coaches and managers in VBA.

DAV has testified to this challenge in the past, but it needs repeating today. To aid in reforming the veterans' benefits claims processing system, Congress should:

- Shift VA's approach so that the primary goal is deciding claims right the first time, not simply reducing the backlog;
- Provide aggressive oversight of VBA as it finalizes its new operating model to ensure that best practices are adopted and integrated into a new claims process focused on improving quality and accuracy of claims decisions;
- Ensure that the new VBMS is provided sufficient time and resources to develop into a comprehensive, paperless, and rules-based platform for processing veterans' claims for benefits;

- Ensure employee performance standards and work credit system create adequate incentives to increase quality and accuracy, not only speed or production; and
- Ensure sufficient training is given to employees throughout their careers, along with tests of all employees, including coaches and managers, on the skills, competencies, and knowledge required to do their jobs successfully.

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, DAV and other veterans service organizations can play a critical role in the reform of the claims processing system. VSOs bring vast experience and expertise about the claims process gained from representing millions of veterans and their families in making claims for earned benefits. We make the VBA's job easier by helping veterans prepare and submit better claims, thereby requiring less of VBA's time and resources to develop and adjudicate them. DAV and other VSOs have been pleased with the increased cooperation and collaboration with VBA and we hope VA and Congress will continue to engage us throughout this important period of transformation and modernization of the benefit claims processing system.

#### **ADDITIONAL OVERSIGHT**

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, as we have pledged to you previously, we will continue to work with you, your colleagues and your staffs to identify areas within VA that may be duplicative, ineffective, inefficient or wasteful. Every dollar that is misspent is one that cannot be used to help a veteran in need, and we are committed to working with your Committees and others to ensure that VA continues to deliver the services and benefits that our nation's veterans have earned through their service. Last year we offered a number of suggestions for areas that these Committees might wish to investigate, and I will highlight a few of them that we believe still require attention.

##### *Organizational Structure and Size of Veterans Integrated Service Networks*

DAV and other veterans service organizations supported VA's decision to restructure the VA health care system with the adoption of Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) as a regional health care organization in the 1990s. Two decades later, however, both the delivery of health care and the demographics and needs of veterans have changed. Accordingly, we would recommend these Committees commission an independent, outside review of the VA network concept, subsequent implementations, and current status, with recommended changes that may be warranted. The time has come for a critical review of the organization, functions, operation, and budgeting process at the VISN and VA medical center levels. DAV would recommend the review be conducted by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Science.

Another area in particular we are concerned about is the growth in size of the VISN bureaucracies within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). When this new organizational model was developed, the plan called for each VISN to employ a small number of managers and support staff, perhaps a dozen or so, and any additional expertise needed would come from assigned personnel at medical centers and other existing facilities. Today, however, some VISNs employ hundreds of administrative personnel and have occupied enormous buildings to serve as their permanent headquarters. We urge the Committees to carefully examine the growth of VISNs and the increasing share of the budget that they currently consume, versus the value they add to the delivery of VA health care.

##### *Growth of General Administration*

Similarly, DAV has serious concerns that rising VA Central Office (VACO) management budgets and expanding personnel comprised a significant portion of FY 2012 budget growth. These increases have nearly doubled staff in the Office of Policy and Planning, expanded the Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, as well as continued increases for the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs, and do not seem justified. The scale of these increases does not appear reasonable, and we have concerns about whether such bureaucratic growth is necessary during a time when veterans face delays in accessing medical care and resolving their disability claims. When budgets are limited, it is essential that every penny be used to meet the needs of the veteran.

Another area that needs scrutiny is VA travel and conference expenditures. We urge Congress to scrutinize the General Administration account, including travel and meeting costs, to permit funding increases only when necessary, and to redirect savings to the VA services and programs veterans need.

##### *Care Coordination for VA Fee-Basis Care*



Another area we urge the Committee to address is the lack of coordination of non-VA purchased care and the process of referring veterans to local providers. A veteran who is approved for fee-basis care is not currently provided a list of private providers who are certified, licensed, or accredited to practice. Nor does VA identify local providers in the veteran patient's community who accept VA's payment rate. This lack of coordination can lead VA to pay higher rates than necessary because savings could have been achieved if VA would identify and contract with local networks or providers at lower rates. We urge Congress to conduct oversight of non-VA purchased care activities and policies to ensure improved coordination of care and to avoid excess payments made to private providers.

*Duplicative Surveys of State Veterans Homes*

Currently, State Veteran Homes must undergo regular evaluation by VA inspection teams. Many of the same veterans' homes are also inspected by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. Such overlap in inspection regimes appears unwarranted and we urge Congress to examine any duplicative surveys, including those of State Veterans Homes, to determine if they should be continued.

*The Costs of Brokering VBA Claims Work*

An area of the VBA claims process that needs further scrutiny is the growing practice of brokering claims among VBA regional offices, and particularly the significant costs of transporting such brokered claims files. While VBA is still awaiting a paperless solution to its claims processing problems, it must maintain and process all claims using paper files, many of which contain hundreds of pages. It is our understanding that claims are transported using FedEx shipping services. The costs of transporting these claims using express delivery services are substantial. We recommend that these Committees examine the entire brokering system, particularly the paper-centric logistical demands of current practices. We would recommend that the Committees examine if it may be possible to begin digitizing files that are to be brokered, thus saving VA significant shipping costs.

On behalf of DAV, I urge your Committees to examine the areas we have highlighted above that seem to us to call out for close oversight by Congress, and I pledge that we will work with you to find other areas of waste and inefficiency in VA.

**DAV'S MISSION**

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, our largest endeavor in fulfilling DAV's mission—*Building better lives for our nation's service-disabled wartime veterans and their families and survivors*—is our National Service Program. Our unparalleled program is the backbone of the DAV, extending from the local chapter level through the 50 state departments to the national level.

After almost 20 years as a DAV National Service Officer (NSO), I am personally familiar with the dedication it takes to properly provide the level of service that we, as an organization, pledge to deliver to sick and disabled veterans, their families and survivors.

Our Chapter Service Officers, Department Service Officers, Transition Service Officers and NSOs have never wavered in their commitment to serve our nation's service-connected disabled veterans, their families and survivors, or any veteran for that matter. No one has more impact on our organization's ability to meet our primary mission. No one has more impact on our organization's stellar reputation. No one has more impact on empowering disabled veterans to become productive members of society again. And I believe no one has a tougher task than those DAV service officers representing veterans and their families and survivors in their claims for benefits from the government. In addition to the long hours, often frustrating circumstances and tedious tasks, DAV service officers must have a solid understanding of the claims process in its complex entirety, intense training for which they receive from the national organization.

*Service Programs*

In keeping with the core values of the DAV, the National Service Program is our highest priority. In order to fulfill our mandate of service to America's service-disabled veterans and their families, DAV employs a corps of about 244 National Service Officers, all of whom are wartime service-connected disabled veterans. The experience of DAV NSOs, both military experience and their personal claims experiences with VA, not only provides a significant knowledge base but also provides a passion for helping veterans like themselves. DAV NSOs are located in VA regional offices as well as in other VA facilities throughout the nation.

DAV NSOs undergo a rigorous 16-month on-the-job training program as well as Structured and Continued Training throughout their DAV careers. During the course of the on-the-job training program, NSOs learn applicable laws and regulations pertaining to VA benefits and complete a series of academic courses to include courses in anatomy and physiology, medical terminology, English composition, legal writing, and public speaking. These dedicated NSOs, many of whom are veterans of Operations Enduring or Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF), sustain DAV's legacy of providing the best and most professional benefits counseling and claims assistance available anywhere. With the generous support from a grateful American public and public-spirited businesses, DAV is proud to provide these services without cost to any veteran in need.

During 2011, DAV NSOs interviewed over 182,654 veterans and their families; reviewed more than 300,600 VA claims files; filed 238,709 new claims for benefits, and obtained \$6.5 billion in new and retroactive benefits for the disabled veterans whom we represented. Our NSOs also participated in 261,835 VA Rating Board appearances.

Given the significant number of severely disabled military service members under care at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) at Bethesda, Maryland, DAV continues to provide assistance to personnel under care at this facility. The number of severe casualties with amputations who have been treated at WRNMMC and elsewhere continues to grow significantly. As of December 2011, there were 1,200 individuals with traumatic amputations, many of these personnel have lost multiple extremities, and in at least four cases, the loss included all four limbs. The total number of OEF/OIF veterans wounded in action is more than 47,400.

However, although much current public attention is focused on those newly wounded from OEF/OIF, thankfully these casualties of war remain relatively small compared to other combat eras. To put this in perspective, the VA reports that Vietnam veterans are its single largest veteran cohort, with an enrolled population of over 300,000 who were wounded in Vietnam, of whom 5,283 lost limbs and 1,081 sustained multiple amputations.

In addition to our work at VA facilities, DAV employs nine National Appeals Officers (NAOs) whose duty is to represent veterans in their appeals before the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). In 2011, DAV NAOs provided representation in 29 percent of appeals decided before the BVA, a caseload of 14,112 appeals. Almost 45 percent of the cases represented by the DAV resulted in remands. These remands resulted in additional consideration or development for 6,290 veterans who had cases that were not adequately considered by the Regional Offices that initially decided them. In almost 30 percent of the cases, involving 4,212 veterans represented by DAV, the claimants' appeals were allowed and the denial of benefits overturned. This means that nearly 75 percent of the appeals represented by DAV resulted in original decisions being overturned or remanded to Regional Office rating boards for additional development and re-adjudication. Both DAV remand and allowance rates were above the average of 44.2 percent and 28.5 percent, respectively.

Additionally, DAV works closely with two private law firms that have agreed to provide *pro bono* services to veterans pursuing their appeals from adverse decisions of the BVA. In 2011, these *pro bono* attorneys offered free representation in 1,100 appeals at the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims, and provided representation in almost 700 of those cases. Since the inception of DAV's *pro bono* program before the federal courts, these attorneys made offers of free representation in more than 2,500 cases, providing free representation in over 1,500 cases.

The DAV's Transition Service Program (TSP) was initiated 12 years ago, shortly after the formation of the joint VA–Department of Defense (DoD) Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program, an initiative to provide transition assistance to separating military service members who incurred disabilities related to their military service. The BDD program was developed to provide a smooth transition from the military to civilian society. The BDD program helps service members within 60 to 180 days prior to military discharge to file their claims for disability compensation (when approved, payments for these disabilities are generated shortly following discharge), and for transitioning into the VA health care system when needed. DAV NSOs and TSOs provide free counsel and claims representation to service members who are eligible to participate in the BDD program. This program helps ensure that service members do not find themselves in a situation where the military benefits are discontinued and VA benefits have not yet begun. We support this program and any program that ensures new veterans and their families are not under-served in the transition process.

For benefits counseling and assistance to separating service members in filing initial claims in the BDD program, the DAV has assigned 30 TSOs. These TSOs pro-

vide these services at military separation centers under the direct supervision of DAV NSO Supervisors. Our TSOs have been trained specifically to perform transition presentations, military service medical record reviews, and claims-initiating activities at military separation centers at 80 military installations within the continental United States.

The success of the BDD program stems from the fact that claims are rated based on current medical evidence as documented in the military treatment record and current cooperative examinations that are conducted at the BDD intake site. The BDD program is a win-win situation for both transitioning service members and for the federal government.

The DAV's TSP contributes to our goal of maintaining our preeminent position as a provider of professional services to veterans. In 2011, our TSOs conducted 3,974 briefing presentations to groups of separating service members, with 74,858 total participants in those sessions. Our TSOs counseled 30,735 persons in individual interviews, reviewed the military service treatment records of 24,918 individuals, and filed benefits applications for 21,947 personnel.

DAV continues to work toward ensuring access to service members within the now revised Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES). IDES is the result of a DES pilot project premised on the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors recommendation, and was launched by DoD and VA in 2007. Based on service members' high satisfaction rates with the revised program, the DoD and VA have designed IDES, with the goal of expediting the delivery of VA benefits to all out-processing service members. The IDES has three features: a single, comprehensive medical examination; a single-source VA disability rating; and enhanced case management methods. This program aims to help injured and ill service members gain faster access to TRICARE and VA benefits by developing a single medical examination used by both DoD and VA, with a single-source disability evaluation done by VA and accepted by DoD.

In 2010, DAV replaced an aging fleet of a previous generation of Mobile Service Offices (MSOs), with 10 new units. By putting DAV NSOs on the road, assisting veterans where they live, the DAV is increasing accessibility to the earned benefits our nation provides to its veterans. The specially equipped MSOs, staffed with NSOs, visit communities across the country. This outreach effort generates a considerable amount of claims work from veterans who may not otherwise have the opportunity to seek assistance at DAV National Service Offices.

To support the MSO effort, in August 2010, the Harley-Davidson Foundation pledged a second \$1 million grant to continue the Harley's Heroes program for another four years, extending its original commitment to a total of eight years. The mission of this project, Harley's Heroes, is to help DAV reach out to millions of veterans of all war generations and show the respect DAV and Harley-Davidson share for them as a result of veterans' service and sacrifice. It also ensures they gain access to benefits counseling and claims assistance when and where needed.

DAV also uses its MSOs for outreach to veterans in other public awareness programs, such as air shows, Native American reservation events, NASCAR races, military retiree conventions, the Vietnam Moving Wall appearances, homeless veteran "stand-downs," community fairs and parades, Veterans Day and Memorial Day activities, veterans job fairs, and information seminars of many types.

During 2011, our MSOs traveled nearly 124,000 miles while visiting 810 cities and towns, including 197 Harley-Davidson dealerships across the country. DAV NSOs interviewed 16,799 veterans and other potential claimants during these efforts.

These specially equipped MSOs, along with our disaster relief teams, are also used to deploy into areas devastated by disasters allowing DAV to provide much-needed assistance directly to displaced service-disabled veterans and their families. They have been used at ground-zero following the attacks on the World Trade Center, around the Gulf Coast following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, after a destructive tornado in Greensville, Kansas, and most recently, in North Carolina following a hurricane.

When a DAV MSO comes to your state or district, I would encourage the members of these Committees and their staffs to stop by and see first-hand the services that DAV is providing to your constituents. I would also highly recommend that you refer any of your constituents who may need assistance with their VA claims to stop by our MSO when it is in your area.

#### *Voluntary Services*

Equally vital to the success of our mission to rebuild the lives of our nation's wartime service-disabled veterans are the activities of 14,067 DAV and Auxiliary members who selflessly volunteer their time to assist America's sick and disabled vet-

erans. Our Voluntary Services Program is as strong as ever, making sure sick and disabled veterans are able to attend their medical appointments, providing them comfort and companionship and getting them the care they need and earned. Our volunteers are in the VA medical centers and clinics in large numbers, and they visit disabled veterans at home, going where the government cannot or will not go. The DAV is leading the way in volunteer services, a fact that makes all of us proud to be a part of this organization, and makes me even prouder to have been chosen to lead this great organization.

Last year, these valuable members of the DAV and its Auxiliary served our nation by providing more than 2.1 million volunteer hours of essential services to hospitalized veterans in VA facilities, saving taxpayers over \$45.2 million in costs if federal employees had been required to provide them. Many DAV members volunteer at VA hospitals, clinics and nursing homes and serve as Hospital Service Coordinators and drivers in DAV's nationwide Transportation Network, about which I will provide more detail later in this testimony.

In an effort to meaningfully touch the lives of more veterans in need of assistance, DAV created the Local Veterans Assistance Program (LVAP). Opportunities have always existed for individuals to assist veterans and their dependents—and DAV and our Auxiliary members have answered that call in full measure. We see examples of this each and every day aimed at meeting the principal objective of our organization—to build better lives for America's disabled veterans and their families.

The DAV LVAP volunteers contribute time for a variety of activities which include, but are not limited to:

1. Chapter and Department Service Officer work.
2. DAV specific outreach efforts, such as DAV's air show outreach programs, Harley's Heroes, and National Guard mobilizations and demobilizations.
3. Fundraising efforts to assist disabled veterans.
4. Direct assistance to veterans, families and survivors, including our volunteers engaged in home repairs and maintenance, and grocery shopping, among many other supportive activities.

Since its inception four years ago, 2,008 volunteers participated in the DAV's LVAP for a total of almost 602,300 hours of volunteer service. The DAV is constantly seeking new ways to recruit and engage DAV members and volunteers, and we believe this new program will work to the advantage of all whom we serve.

Unfortunately, we are experiencing the loss of our volunteers from the Greatest Generation. The DAV has sought to reward and develop a new generation of younger VA volunteers. A decade ago, we created a youth volunteer scholarship program to ensure the future of a viable DAV volunteer effort. In remembrance of former VA Secretary and former DAV Executive Director, the late Jesse Brown, we named the scholarship program in his honor. Annually, the DAV Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program honors outstanding young volunteers who participate in the VA Voluntary Service Program and donate their time and compassion to sick and disabled veterans. Since its inception, the DAV has awarded 131 scholarships totaling about \$893,000 to enable these exceptional young people to pursue their passions in higher education.

In 2011, Ford Motor Company donated another \$25,000 to the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program to enable us to continue awarding these scholarships.

Another corporation that has come forward to help disabled veterans is Golden Corral Corporation, which, for the 11th year in a row, opened its doors this past November to all veterans on Military Appreciation Monday, serving 373,000 free meals to patrons who have served in the armed forces. The nationwide events yielded more than \$1 million in donations to DAV chapters and departments. Since 2001, the restaurant has served more than three million "thank you" meals to our nation's veterans, and raised in excess of \$6 million in donations for DAV. These generous fundraising efforts help support DAV initiatives and programs throughout the year and provide a chance for chapters and departments to reach local veterans.

#### *National Transportation Network*

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, the DAV is extremely proud of the service provided by our volunteers, many of whom are disabled veterans themselves or the family members of disabled veterans. These volunteers, some of whom are seated before you today in this hearing, continue to serve the needs of our disabled veterans on a daily basis. Many of our nation's sick and disabled veterans are aided because of

the time these volunteers donate. Everyone at DAV applauds their efforts and their dedication.

The DAV utilizes 192 Hospital Service Coordinators at 199 VA health care facilities across the nationwide system to oversee DAV's National Transportation Network. The DAV's program provides free transportation to and from VA health care facilities to veterans who otherwise could not access needed VA medical care.

From January through November 2011, DAV's National Transportation Network logged more than 22 million miles and transported 636,116 veterans to VA health care facilities. More than 9,249 volunteer drivers spent nearly 1.9 million hours transporting veterans. Since our national transportation program began in 1987, over 14 million veterans have been transported almost 526 million miles, for a total of 29 million volunteer hours by our drivers.

In 2011, DAV donated 101 vans to VA facilities at a cost of \$2.5 million. In 2012, we plan on donating 118 vans at a cost of about \$3 million. Since 1987 thru 2011, we have donated 2,469 vans at a cost to DAV of \$53.7 million.

DAV's efforts were aided by the support of the Ford Motor Company with the presentation of eight new vehicles from Ford in August 2011 for the DAV's Transportation Network. Since 1996 Ford has donated 156 vehicles to the DAV National Transportation Network. The DAV is proud that Ford Motor Company continues to honor its commitment through its generous donations through DAV to the men and women who have served our nation and who have preserved our freedoms.

DAV's commitment to our National Transportation Network is as strong as ever. We have deployed DAV vans in every state and nearly every Congressional district serving our veterans—your constituents.

#### *National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic*

DAV is a collaborator in another outstanding program that directly impacts the lives and well-being of seriously disabled veterans. Working in cooperation with VA, DAV co-sponsors the annual National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. For a quarter century, this exceptional physical rehabilitation program, held in the mountains of Colorado, has transformed the lives of America's most severely injured veterans. This unique program—often referred to as Miracles on a Mountainside—helps veterans re-build confidence in their abilities, overcome their severe injuries and regain their lives. This event promotes rehabilitation by instructing veterans with severe disabilities in adaptive skiing, and introducing them to a number of other adaptive recreational activities and sports. Veterans from all eras attend the clinic, including many injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. This unique event offers many of them their first experience in winter sports and gives them the motivation to take their rehabilitation to a higher level. Participants include veterans with amputations, traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord injuries, neurological challenges, and visual impairments.

For anyone who has attended this event and observed first-time participants, I can assure you, miracles still occur. These severely disabled veterans indeed experience a life-changing event at our Winter Sports Clinic, and so do all the inspired observers and volunteers who participate. I invite all members of these Committees to come and experience the Miracles on a Mountainside with me. Our next clinic is scheduled for March 25–30, 2012 in Snowmass Village, Colorado.

#### *Charitable Service Trust*

The DAV established the DAV Charitable Service Trust in 1986 to advance initiatives, programs or services that might not fit easily into the scheme of what is traditionally offered through VA, state veterans programs, or in the veterans service organization community. The Trust plays an essential and decisive role in making sure America meets its obligations to our nation's disabled veterans, their dependents and survivors.

Each year, the Trust seeks new and innovative ways to make a positive difference in the lives of disabled veterans through:

- Advancing training and employment opportunities for disabled veterans and their families; and
- Assisting and supporting homeless veterans;
- Providing programs of care that fall outside the “medical model” but are of benefit to disabled veterans, such as service dog programs, therapeutic art and writing workshops, and therapeutic equestrian activities;
- Making efforts that ensure quality health care for veterans in VA and other facilities;
- Assisting veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress and brain injuries;

- Creating programs to enhance research in, and mobility for, veterans with amputations and spinal cord injuries;
- Improving outreach benefiting aging disabled veterans, including those with mental illness;
- Funding programs that evaluate and address the needs of veterans disabled in recent wars and conflicts;

Each year brings dramatic new changes in the lives of disabled veterans that present greater challenges to our mission of service to them and their families. Our Charitable Service Trust will continue to do all it can to meet the real needs of sick and disabled veterans.

As my testimony demonstrates, the DAV remains committed to its focused mission. The DAV is proud that it can direct its resources to the most needed and meaningful services for America's service-disabled veterans and their families. There is no nonprofit organization that does more for disabled veterans, their families and survivors than the DAV.

Since by national policy DAV neither seeks nor accepts government grants or contracts of any kind, the DAV is able to carry out these good works only with the continuing support of our members, our dedicated corporate partners, and a generous American public that remain faithful to our work and grateful for all that our veterans have done. They collectively express that gratitude through us, and this is a very humbling role for DAV.

#### *National Legislative Program*

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, DAV was founded in 1920 as a nonpartisan, nonprofit veterans service organization. Since then, promotion of *meaningful, reasonable, and responsible* public policy for wartime service-disabled veterans has been at the heart of who we are and what we do. Our will and commitment to building better lives for our nation's wartime service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors emanate from our history, our own personal sacrifices in the armed forces, and they are strengthened by the vitality of our membership and the sustained support of the American people.

Major policy positions of the DAV are derived from resolutions adopted by the delegates to our annual National Conventions. Since our first National Convention in 1921, the DAV's annual legislative program has served to guide our advocacy for disabled veterans in conformance with the collective will of our members. Our 2011–2012 mandates cover a broad spectrum of VA programs and services, and they are available on DAV's website, at <http://www.dav.org/voters/documents/Resolutions.pdf>. I invite your professional staffs to consider the content of these resolutions in crafting legislation for the second session of the 112th Congress.

DAV thanks these Committees and Congress for their past support of legislative issues that have benefited service-disabled veterans, their families and survivors. In the first session of the 112th Congress, we appreciate enactment of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act to enhance veterans' jobs programs and legislation to provide a cost-of-living adjustment for disability compensation, the first increase in disability compensation in two years. We especially want to recognize Chairman Murray for your advocacy on jobs for veterans, women veterans and post-deployment mental health care. Chairman Miller, we thank you for your leadership on jobs for veterans, and for your intention to pursue strong oversight of VA's myriad programs.

As DAV has testified in the past, we are concerned that some of the benefits Congress enacted are exclusive to veterans of OEF/OIF. While we understand that these are special circumstances that may require legislative consideration to ease transition challenges from military to civilian life, DAV represents disabled wartime veterans of any age and of any period of service. We remain dismayed that previous generations cannot take advantage of a number of these new improvements, and we ask your Committees to reconsider the trend to exclude older veterans from the new and expanded benefits you have awarded to younger ones, especially the stipend and extensive health care benefits for veterans' caregivers.

With the realization that we will have ample opportunity to more fully address other DAV legislative resolutions during hearings before your Committees and personally with your staffs in the new session, I shall only highlight crucial ones in this statement.

#### **Medical and Health Care Services**

- Congress and the Administration must assure full implementation of legislation to guarantee sufficient, timely, and predictable funding for VA health care programs.
- Ensure:

- that priority access and timely, quality health care services are provided to service-connected disabled veterans.
- proper screening and treatment for traumatic brain injury and post-deployment mental health issues.

- Support:

- comprehensive quality medical services and benefits for women veterans.
- repeal of VA and Department of Defense co-payments for medical care and prescription medications.
- legislation to provide comprehensive support services for caregivers of all severely wounded, injured, and ill veterans.
- repeal of beneficiary travel pay deductibles for service-connected disabled veterans and support increased beneficiary travel reimbursement rates.

**Disability Compensation and Other Benefits**

- Support:

- legislation to provide a realistic increase in VA compensation rates to address loss of quality of life.
- reform in the Veterans Benefits Administration's disability claims process.
- legislation to remove the prohibition against concurrent receipt of military retired pay and VA disability compensation.
- legislation to remove the offset of Survivor Benefit Plan payments and VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.
- interest payments for VA retroactive awards of one year or more.

- Oppose:

- any proposal that would offset payments of Social Security Disability Insurance benefits or any other federal benefits by the amount of VA compensation.
- any scheme to means test disability and death compensation.
- any change that would redefine service-connected disability or restrict the conditions or circumstances under which it may be established.
- any recommendations by any commission to reduce or eliminate benefits for disabled veterans.

**General Issues**

- Extend:

- military commissary and exchange privileges to service-connected disabled veterans.
- space-available air travel aboard military aircraft to 100 percent service-connected disabled veterans.

- Provide educational benefits for dependents of service-connected veterans rated 80 percent or more disabled.

- Support:

- legislation that would exempt the benefits paid to wartime service-connected disabled veterans from the "Pay-Go" and "Cut-Go" provisions of the Budget Enforcement Act.
- legislation to reduce premiums for Service Disabled Veterans' Insurance consistent with current life expectancy.
- legislative measures assisting disabled veteran-owned businesses.
- fullest possible accounting of POW/MIAs from all wars and conflicts.
- legislation to provide families of veterans who are service-disabled veteran-owned business owners but rated less than 100 percent service-connected conditions a reasonable transition period to restructure their businesses.

- Eliminate the current 12-year eligibility limit for veterans to take advantage of their vocational rehabilitation benefits.

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, your Committees' support of these matters would be deeply appreciated by DAV and all our members who have sacrificed so much for our nation—our service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors. We ask that DAV resolutions be among the policies to be considered by Congress in 2012.

Madame and Mr. Chairmen, as our statistics show, DAV not only advocates on behalf of our nation's disabled veterans, but we also continue to give back to our nation and our fellow veterans through the programs that I have described in this testimony. I hope that I have been able to demonstrate for you and your colleagues that DAV devotes its resources to the most needed and meaningful services for our

disabled veterans. These services aid disabled veterans directly and support and augment VA programs. I trust you can see why the men and women of the DAV and its Auxiliary are so proud of this great organization and all that it does for disabled veterans, their families and survivors each year.

I trust that my testimony has assisted you to understand that America's disabled veterans rather than being satisfied to rest on their laurels, continue to stand ready to actively and unselfishly stand up for veterans, their families and survivors across this great land of ours.

In closing, let me again say that it has been an honor to appear before you today to present the major issues and concerns of the Disabled American Veterans. I know that all of us present in this room and all DAV and DAV Auxiliary members share a deep and abiding respect for the brave men and women who serve our country so selflessly, especially those still in harm's way overseas.

As these Committees deliberate during the second session of the 112th Congress, please keep in mind that disabled veterans, their loved ones and survivors, have paid a high price for the freedoms we all cherish as Americans. The only thing that we ask in return for our sacrifices and our service to our country is for our government to honor its sacred obligation and keep its promises to America's disabled veterans, their families and survivors. The defenders of our nation deserve nothing less.

My colleagues and I are prepared to further discuss any matters relevant to DAV, this testimony, or to respond to your questions. Thank you very much for your time.

May God bless America.

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