

**LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES OF THE
JEWISH WAR VETERANS
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**



**Presented by COL. Maxwell S. Colón, USA (Ret.)
National Commander, Jewish War Veterans**

**Before a Joint Session of the
Senate and House Veterans Affairs' Committees**

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National Commander Maxwell S. Colón, USA (Ret.)



Colonel Maxwell S. Colón, USA (Ret.), of La Costa, CA, was elected National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA (JWV) at its 119th Annual National Convention in Charleston, SC on August 22, 2014.

National Commander Colón is a retired Army Colonel with 32 years of service who served on active duty, in the Army Reserve, and the Army National Guard. He was called to active duty during Vietnam and also served on the SOCOM staff/J-9 during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He is a graduate of five senior military war universities and was appointed as the first Director of Race Relations/Equal Opportunity for the New York

Army Reserve Command (77th ARCOM). National Commander Colón also served as the Project Director of the 77th ARCOM for 'Operation Liberty,' the largest recruiting drive ever conducted in the New York City area.

National Commander Colón is a penologist with a civilian education that includes a BS from the University of the State of New York, a MPS from Long Island University (C.W. Post Campus), and a Post Graduate Certificate from Long Island University (C.W. Post Campus) with a Security Administration Award. He is a member of Alpha Phi Sigma and Epsilon Beta honor societies.

He worked at Rikers Island, the Bronx House of Detention, and the Manhattan House of Detention as a New York City Corrections Captain. National Commander Colón supervised and coordinated all activities of a large maximum security correctional facility, and was responsible for the operational functions of staff supervisors, numerous officers and civilian personnel, and hundreds of inmates. He retired in 1986 after more than 20 years of service.

In January of 1990, National Commander Colón joined the Jewish War Veterans, North County Post 385 in San Diego, CA. While he was Post Commander, National Commander Colón worked to recruit new affiliates and increased membership from 22 to 118 members. As Council Commander, membership went up 25 percent, and as Department Commander membership rose almost 14 percent. He is a Life member of JWV and his wife, Linda Sue, a Past Auxiliary President, is a Life member of Jewish War Veterans Auxiliary (JWVA).

National Commander Colón has received numerous awards at the Post, Council, Department, and National levels of JWV. In 1995, he was the recipient of the Murray L. Rosen Award, which is bestowed upon a member of JWV who, through his work on behalf of veterans, Jews, and his community, best exemplifies the ideals and aspirations of the organization. In 1996 and 2000, he received awards from the National Museum of American Jewish Military History (NMAJMH) for recruiting over 100 new members. He received the Edward Nappen Award for Outstanding Department Commander in 1998-1999, and Lifestyles Magazine described him as an indefatigable Veteran and life achiever in their 1999 Winter Edition.

National Commander Colón and his wife currently reside in La Costa, CA. They had four children, son, Craig Scott, and daughters, Jodi Dyan, Risa Ixchel who passed away in 2003 at the age of 27, and Karyn Danielle. They have three grandchildren Alexa Sarah, Jake Harrison, and Cooper Reese.

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Isakson, Chairman Miller, and Members of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs, my fellow veterans and friends, I am Colonel Maxwell Colón, the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. (JWV). JWV is Congressionally Chartered and the oldest continuously active veterans' organization in the nation. JWV also provides counseling and assistance to members encountering issues dealing with the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and other government agencies. JWV is an active participant in The Military Coalition, a select group of over 30 military associations and veterans' organizations representing over five million active duty, reserve and retired uniformed service personnel, veterans, families, and survivors on Capitol Hill.

On February 11 and 12 our members were here in Washington to meet with their Senators and Representatives as part of JWV's Capitol Hill Action Day(s). Our members prepared diligently for these important meetings and successfully presented many of JWV's legislative priorities to your colleagues, their members of Congress and congressional staff. On our Capitol Hill Action Day(s) storming of the Hill it was very clear that we do have influence.

Mr. Chairman, on Friday, March 15th we at JWV celebrated our 119th birthday. For all of these 119 years JWV has advocated for a strong national defense, and just and fair recognition and compensation for veterans. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA prides itself in being in the forefront among our nation's civic and veterans groups in supporting the well-earned rights of veterans, in promoting American democratic principles, in defending universal Jewish causes and in vigorously opposing bigotry, anti-Semitism and terrorism both here and abroad. Today, even more than ever before, we stand for these principles. The Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. represents a proud tradition of patriotism and service to the United States of America.

As the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA (JWV), I thank you for the opportunity to present the views of our members and supporters on issues under the jurisdiction of your committees. At the conclusion of JWV's 119th National Convention in Charleston, South Carolina, our convention delegates adopted our resolutions for the 114th Congress. These mandates establish the legislative agenda for JWV during my year as National Commander.

JWV believes Congress has a unique obligation and most compelling opportunity to

ensure that veterans' benefits are regularly reviewed and improved to keep pace with the needs of all veterans in a changing social and economic environment. JWV salutes the Chairs and Members of both the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees for the landmark veterans' legislation enacted over the past several years. Eligibility improvement, patient enrollment, long-term care, access to emergency care, presumptive Agent Orange disability, enhanced VA/DoD sharing, improved preference rights of veterans in the federal government and other actions recognize the debt this great country owes to those who have so faithfully served.

We must improve access to veterans' quality health care, increase timeliness in the benefit claims process, and enhance access to national cemeteries for all veterans.

NO GOVERNMENT FUNDING

For the record, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA, Inc. does not receive any grants or contracts from the federal government. This is as it should be.

THE MILITARY COALITION

JWV continues to be a proud member and active participant of the Military Coalition (TMC). PNC Robert M. Zweiman, JWV's National Chairman, serves on the Board of Directors of the Military Coalition and, again, our National Executive Director, Colonel Herb Rosenbleeth, USA (Ret.), continues to serve his fourth term as the President of the Military Coalition and as Co-Chair of the Coalition's Membership and Nominations Committee.

JWV requests that the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs do everything possible to fulfill the legislative priorities of the Military Coalition which are applicable to your committees. These positions are well thought out and are clearly in the best interests of our military personnel, our veterans and our great nation.

MANDATORY FUNDING

JWV continues to maintain that the Congress has an unbreakable obligation to its veterans. Adequate VA funding must be guaranteed by the Congress. No freeze on domestic spending, no across the board cuts, no budget sleight of hand should result in inadequate funding for the VA.

The Department of Veterans Affairs cannot effectively do long range planning to meet the needs of an aging and growing population without advanced funding. Advanced funding would

allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to avoid the vacillations of Congress as to levels of funding and program priorities based on who pushes the members the most forcefully.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to fully fund the Department of Veterans Affairs with advanced funding for all aspects of that vital Department.

ACCESS TO VA FACILITIES FOR ALL VETERANS

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA has long called upon the Department of Veterans Affairs to promptly and appropriately see and treat all veterans with the utmost respect and optimum service. Recent revelations have clearly demonstrated that the Department has failed miserably at its mandate to serve all those who have served.

TIMELY ACCESS TO QUALITY VA HEALTH CARE

JWV urges Congress to extend the combat theatre vet enrollment window from 5 to 10 years; provide enrollment opportunity to certain 0% service-connected veterans with no private health insurance.

Ensure full implementation of all provisions of the VA Caregivers Law (P.L. 111-163) provisions, including measures supporting women veterans. Extend the VA Caregivers Act to full-time Caregivers of catastrophically disabled veterans of conflicts before Sept. 11, 2001. Align the DoD' VA definitions for caregiver support and services to include qualifying "illnesses."

JWV urges training and cultural awareness in the VA healthcare system of the unique health needs of women veterans. Ensure veterans with catastrophically disabling reproductive organ injuries have access to the same reproductive services as are available in the DoD health system. JWV urges appropriate investment to meet these vital needs.

JWV strongly opposes fee hikes for currently enrolled veterans in all enrollment priority groups.

TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

Traumatic brain injury has been the signature wound of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts. Traumatic brain injury, or TBI, can occur when there is an impact to the head.

JWV applauds the VA for implementing an integrated nationwide system of care for

veterans and active duty service members recovering from TBI and polytrauma. This care consists of more than 100 VA medical centers each offering specialized rehabilitation care by an interdisciplinary team. Due to the range in severity and complexity of injuries, veterans and active duty service members with TBI and polytrauma require a specialized model of care coordination and integration of clinical and other support services.

Support programs and funding to expand / improve care, rehabilitation and applications for research for veterans suffering from PTSD / TBI. Increase behavioral health staff and resources including outreach to address rising suicide rate among veterans.

JWV strongly requests the Congress fully fund VA's TBI research and costly care for these patients. They deserve our nation's full support.

PERSIAN GULF ILLNESSES

The Persian Gulf War veterans were exposed to numerous environmental toxins, including smoke from burning oil fields and other petroleum agents, depleted uranium and desert parasites. The Persian Gulf veterans received multiple inoculations. All studies conducted to date apparently fail to satisfactorily explain the causation of the complaints of these veterans. There appears to be commonality of ailments affecting these veterans. The concerns of these veterans as to the causations and treatments and therapies for their illnesses continues to be unresolved.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA requests that the Department of Veterans Affairs continue to monitor the complaints of the Gulf War veterans.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA requests the Departments of Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs and Defense establish scientifically sound protocols to research the causations of Gulf War Syndrome and to continue the research already ongoing that may lead to cures, treatments and therapies.

MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA has long called for fair and complete investigations of allegations of sexual harassment and criminal sexual assault made by members of the military. This goal as highlighted by the Jewish War Veterans of the USA still remains elusive and a priority of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA. Although efforts appear to be moving forward to change the culture within certain areas of the military, still in many instances, "boys will be

boys”. A victim’s prior sexual activity is relevant to the individual’s current allegations.

Military sexual trauma can be absolutely destructive to the victim’s mental and physical wellbeing for the rest of his/her life. America’s military strength and future depend upon young men and women stepping forward to enlist without fear of becoming a victim of military sexual trauma.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress and the Department of Defense to insure that every allegation of harassment and sexual assault is thoroughly investigated and that any findings of wrong doing are prosecuted regardless of the rank, status or position of the perpetrator.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA requests that the victim’s rights to privacy and dignity are fully respected and given their proper deference.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

The issue of military suicide has not abated despite the recent efforts of the Department of Defense. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA has long advocated that the Department of Defense commence its suicide prevention efforts at such time as the enlistee first enters the military and continues almost daily thereafter.

A high percentage of those who attempt suicide are members of either the Reserve or the National Guard rather than the Active component and their needs and issues are not being addressed with the same level of concern as those who are on active duty. The members of the Individual Ready Reserve also appear to be overlooked, or at least, not confronted as directly as others. It is manifestly obvious that more and better programs must be instituted to confront this problem. We are still losing more men and women to suicide than to hostile enemy action.

The Department of Defense for all its good efforts has yet to stem the tide of these suicides. The culture of the military remains that those with psychological difficulties are viewed as weak and unworthy of consideration for leadership positions and promotions.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the Department of Defense to vigorously pursue a course of action to reeducate the members of the military so that issues such as the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Military Sexual Injury and Traumatic Brain Injury be addressed rather than hidden.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA encourages the Department of Defense to obtain the

timely services of psychologists and psychiatrists who will be embedded in military units not only in combat units but in support units as well. Whether these medical professionals are members of the military or contract employees they need to assist in the suicide prevention program at its source rather than after the individual arrives at the next duty station.

HOMELESS VETERANS

There are tens of thousands of homeless veterans on any given night scattered throughout the Nation. The Department of Veterans Affairs acknowledges that twice that number will experience homelessness during the course of a year.

The Department of Veterans Affairs reports a decrease in the number of homeless veterans since 2012. However, the number of homeless women veterans often together with their children is increasing. It is clear that progress has been made in reducing the number of homeless veterans, but that there is still much more to do. No one, especially veterans who served this Nation, should wind up on the streets or in the woods due to the inability to afford safe and sanitary housing, or due to a mental disability caused in whole or in part by their military service.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the Department of Veterans Affairs to continue its good efforts to reduce the number of homeless veterans and to improve its programs, particularly those aimed towards at-risk women veterans and their children.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the President and the Congress to adequately fund efforts to end homelessness among the veterans population.

CAREGIVER SUPPORT SERVICES

It is a sad reality that family members or other loved ones often become the full-time caregivers of the most seriously ill or injured service members. Many of these now full-time caregivers must give up their own jobs, their homes, their careers, and even their entire life savings to care for the ill or injured service members. Obviously, this is an incredible burden on both the caregiver and the extended family. These caregivers are not prepared to assume their new roles in terms of training, loss of income and careers, and the everyday burden of caring for the loved one.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to fund and the DoD/DVA to equip the caregiver and the extended family with the tools and training to provide care and

comfort to the ill or injured members.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA requests the DoD/DVA to incorporate the caregiver and the family in the rehabilitation program and recovery team of the member.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls on the DoD/DVA to provide respite care for the caregiver and extended family so that the caregiver and the family may enjoy a period of time away from the duties of caring for the seriously injured or ill family member.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to fund and the DoD/DVA to provide aid and attendance benefits immediately upon application and then audit its provision.

ELIMINATE CLAIMS BACKLOG AND IMPROVE CLAIMS' SYSTEM EFFICIENCY

JWV supports initiatives to upgrade the claims processing system. JWV supports needed investment in software / hardware upgrades for claims management.

JWV will work with VSO partners to develop improved process, procedures and resources to reduce backlog of claims on appeal.

JWV supports dissemination of “brown” and “blue” water Navy ship logs as they become available for all veterans to apply for Agent Orange-related diseases. JWV supports legislation to establish eligibility for presumptive service-connection for “blue water” Navy Vietnam War service members. JWV asks Congress to ensure fair and consistent application of standards and procedures for adjudicating Agent Orange claims.

DOD MISSION IN DANGEROUS TIMES

The Department of Defense is facing large cuts in the near future. JWV remembers the lessons of history and thus believes this nation must maintain adequate force levels and adequate equipment levels. Military readiness does not come cheaply. Our military personnel should all have a reliable benefits package that will never be reduced.

Today's active-duty service members and those who serve in the National Guard and Reserve components have volunteered to stand watch in this nation's defense. Yet few stand watch for them. Basic benefits of their service, from retirement to TRICARE, are under assault. The defenders of the country need to be able to focus on defending this country. They must not worry that their benefits will be pulled out from beneath them while they are focused on more pressing concerns such as terror plots, IEDs, and insurgents seeking to undermine hard-fought

gains. Less than one half of one percent of our population is currently serving in the military. They must not be forgotten!

The Congress must insure that DoD is funded to meet all its missions including possible overseas threats from Iran, North Korea, and even China.

BACK-UP TO DOD HOSPITALS

VA Hospitals must be adequately funded, staffed and equipped to perform their vital role as this nation's only back-up for DoD medical facilities. U.S. military personnel could possibly suffer casualties exceeding the capacity of the combined military medical treatment facilities. In such a case the VA would be vital to the nation. JWV again strongly urges the Congress to fund the VA to fully handle this potential workload.

FORCE STRENGTH

The Department of Defense is now reducing the force strength by 124,000 members of the military. The fiscal year 2015 budget calls for an additional downsizing of 78,000 members. The reality of sequestration requires even deeper cuts in our Nation's military preparedness. Without relief from sequestration our end strength will place our Nation's security at risk.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to protect America's security by waiving the sequester requirements as they relate to the Department of Defense and to adequately fund the Department of Defense so that the military has appropriate personnel strength, is well trained and well equipped to meet their future requirements.

HAZARDOUS WASTE AT MILITARY INSTALLATIONS

There are some 140 State-side military installations on the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list. The very definition of a "Superfund" site is that it is seriously polluted and a danger to be near and has or will shortly contaminate the local ground water.

Additionally, there are numerous locations that have not found their way onto the "Superfund" list but are, nevertheless, contaminated and in need of remediation. Over the many years military installations have been sites of storage, testing and use of known toxins, cancer causing chemicals resulting in reproductive disorders, birth defects and a multitude of other serious side effects.

These same military installations are and were the home to numerous military families and a civilian population that lived near-by. The Department of Defense has rarely admitted culpability nor taken full responsibility to clear up the Superfund sites as well as other contaminated locations.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the Department of Defense to immediately identify all contaminated sites and completely remediate those locations to the standards of the Environmental Protection Agency.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the Departments of Defense and Health and Human Services to immediately establish a protocol to register all individuals possibly exposed to these toxins and dangerous chemicals and to test each for possible side effects and, where appropriate, treat and compensate these same individuals.

RECOGNITION OF MILITARY TRAINING AND EXPERIENCE

Our members of the military acquire a unique set of job skills such as leadership, strength of character and physical well-being. Those who received specialized training such as medics had the opportunity to hone their occupational skill sets under trying conditions and in stressful environments. These skill sets, training and education often meet, and frequently exceed, the requirements of similar civilian occupations. Recognition by state and local governmental licensing and accreditation bodies should facilitate the transition from the military sectors to civilian life for those leaving the military.

The licensing and credentialing of these qualified members of the military would provide the civilian workforce with highly skilled, talented and motivated workers. Members of the all-volunteer military dedicated themselves to defending this great Nation and may have lost the opportunity to enter the civilian workforce at entry level positions but have acquired similar skills in a military/alternative environment.

UPGRADE VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS

JWV urges the extension of the de-limiting date for employer tax incentives under the Veterans Opportunity to Work to Hire Heroes Act. Veterans should be allowed to enroll in the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (VRAP) to complete their requirements for licensure / certification.

JWV recommends that transfer-of-benefits be authorized under the P911 GI Bill from catastrophically disabled veterans to their full-time Caregivers in cases in which a transfer action did not occur prior to the veterans' medical discharge or retirement.

JWV urges proportional upgrades to the Title 10 Montgomery GI Bill (Chap. 1606, 10 USC) program to keep pace with the cost of education.

SUPPORT FOR AND OF MILITARY FAMILIES

Strong military families are absolutely necessary for a strong military. Military support and readiness programs and spouse support groups are essential for a strong national defense. These programs contribute significantly to a high quality of life to the military member and extended military family. These programs are increasingly vital during the periods of stress caused by activation and reintegration as well as the coming years of austere budgets and force drawdowns. These programs must furnish meaningful approaches to issues of mental health, education and career opportunities for the military spouse and the children.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA encourages Congress and the Department of Defense to ensure that there will be appropriate and adequately funded programs designed to assist military members and military families with issues arising out of deployment and reintegration.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the Department of Defense to monitor and furnish service members and families full access to mental health professionals as well as child care and educational and career opportunities for the military, children, and spouses.

SUPPORT OF THE NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVE

It has appeared in the media that the Department of Defense will be continue to rely heavily on the members of the National Guard and Reserve to supplement and complement the active component of the military services. Any diminution in benefits and/or pay may result in the number of men and women volunteers entering and remaining in the National Guard and Reserve.

The National Guard and Reserve must be as prepared as the active component on the latest equipment in the military so as to enable the men and women in the National Guard and Reserve to move from their role as citizen-soldier to war fighter without the necessity of up-training after

activation but prior to taking their place in the field.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to resist and defeat any efforts placed before it by the Department of Defense to decrease the pay and benefits now received by members of the National Guard and Reserve and to ensure that the members of the National Guard and Reserve are trained and equipped with the same tools of war that the members of the active component rely upon as warfighters.

TRANSITIONING FROM THE MILITARY TO THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

When an individual completes his/her military service the individual must seek out and enroll in the Department of Veterans Affairs benefits programs for any benefit whether it be for education benefits, VA backed housing loans or medical treatment. Many veterans too often suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury Disorder, or Military Sexual Trauma either do not trust the VA or cannot navigate the paperwork required to obtain treatment. These veterans are among that population most in need of assistance.

This situation could be remedied by enrolling all veterans in the VA system before they separate from the active component with all their records being transferred seamlessly between the two departments within the Executive Branch of the government. The simple act of enrolling the service member into the VA system without some form of follow-up would be a hollow and meaningless gesture.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to adequately fund, regardless of cost, a system that would enroll all men and women into the VA with their military records following them.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA requests that the DoD ensure that each person leaving active service be included in an appropriate transition program.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to provide the necessary funds for the VA to hire a sufficient number of personnel to call each of these veterans at regular intervals to insure that they are actively seeking any treatment they may require rather than simply waiting for someone to call them.

SUPPORT FOR THE YELLOW RIBBON PROGRAM

Congress has provided increased resources to support the transition of the warrior citizen back into the community (the Yellow Ribbon Program). The program execution remains spotty from state to state and falls very short for those members of the Reserve in widely dispersed regional commands. The Yellow Ribbon Program should provide a high level of support for the returning member of the military and the military family, regardless of the state. Military and local civilian leaders must improve the coordination of services to the military member and the military family. Many communities are eager to provide support.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the local civilian leadership to ensure a sustainable agenda in support of the Yellow Ribbon Program and to assess and fill the gaps in their current programs of support for the operational Reserve and the extended military families.

POW-MIA

JWV continues to strongly support the need for this country to account for all the missing POW-MIA individuals. There are still 1,636 personnel listed by the Department of Defense as missing and unaccounted for from the Vietnam War.

On December 11, 2014, JWV was one of the signers of a letter sent to then Secretary of Defense Hagel spelling out serious concerns over lost momentum and lack of confidence in the ongoing reorganization effort. Transparency was sorely needed.

Since that time, senior DoD officials have pledged that the reign of secrecy is over, full transparency would prevail and a working partnership with the National League of Families and Military Service Organizations (VSO's) will be formed.

JWV remains committed to supporting the National League of POW-MIA Families in general and our dear friend, Ann Mills Griffiths, Chairwoman of the National League of POW-MIA Families, in particular, to gain a full accounting of those still missing.

MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENTS

The Jewish War Veterans commends all of those selected to receive this award. They are receiving the recognition that they deserve for their heroic efforts on behalf of our great nation.

NAMING OF VA HOSPITAL FOR TIBOR RUBIN

JWV advocates naming the Long Beach, California, VA Medical Center in honor of Medal of Honor recipient Tibor Rubin. Rubin has been both a patient and a volunteer at that facility.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Isakson and Chairman Miller our great nation must care for its veterans. Our country must, therefore, pay the costs involved.

JWV believes that veterans' benefits are earned through service and sacrifice in defense of the nation and are not "entitlement" or "social welfare" programs. Oppose deficit-driven political decisions that would lump earned veterans' benefits with un-related civilian entitlement programs

At our annual national convention our members work assiduously to develop our legislative priorities. Our dedicated resolutions chairman, Past National Commander Michael Berman, works diligently to develop our resolutions and to bring them before our convention delegates. Following further fine-tuning by our convention delegates our resolutions are finalized, and become our legislative priorities for the coming year. We thank you for the opportunity to present them to you today.