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STATEMENT OF
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DEPARTMENT OF WASHINGTON
ON BEHALF OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
FIELD HEARING – TACOMA, WASHINGTON
ON
“WASHINGTON’S VETERANS: HELPING THE NEWEST GENERATION TRANSITION
HOME”

APRIL 4, 2012

Chairman Murray and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the 2.4 million members of The American Legion, I appreciate this opportunity to offer my insight and understanding of the challenges faced by transitioning veterans.

I have been asked to come before you today to represent the views of my organization, but also to reflect upon, to compare and contrast, the similarities and differences between transitioning service members today and those in my era, when I was a young man returning from our nation’s war in Vietnam.

In many ways, the men and women returning home from war today want the same things they wanted forty years ago returning from Vietnam, or sixty years ago returning from Korea, or indeed at any time in our history. They want to be accepted back into the community. They want treatment and care for the wounds, visible and invisible, which they received in service to this nation. They want to go back to work, back to the business of building and shaping the America they have protected for generations to come. When the time comes to turn their swords into plowshares, they want the tools they need to make that transition fruitful.

This country has admitted past failings in how the Vietnam generation was treated. There is a common groundswell of support to ensure we don’t repeat the mistakes of the past. As a nation we have made some progress towards those ends, but there is still much work to be done.

Returning to the Community

This is perhaps the hardest portion of transition to codify and act to fix. You can’t pass a law to make citizens welcome veterans back home into their communities. From a positive perspective, people seem to want very much to make this part work. There are still concerns however, and much of this can be overcome by community leaders setting an example of how communities perceive those veterans.

At the conclusion of Vietnam, the public narrative of the Vietnam veteran emerged as a group of angry, alienated loners. Vietnam veterans were ticking time bombs living out in the woods, irrevocably damaged by their experiences of war and waiting to explode on an unsuspecting community. Media portrayals over the years were negative, and a clear picture emerged that the war had destroyed a generation of young men sent to fight. This image persisted despite polling from groups such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars which indicated 91 percent of actual Vietnam War veterans and 90 percent of those who saw heavy combat were proud of having served their country. In addition 66 percent of Vietnam veterans stated they would proudly serve again if called upon.

Again we run the risk of creating an image of those suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as bombs waiting to explode, when the vast majority of those who suffer from these hidden wounds lead normal and productive lives, dealing with their scars and adjusting as they would to any other injury. We need our community leaders, those who the public look to for guidance, to help show the positive pictures of how veterans can put their lives back together and move forward. To get our service members to step forward and admit they need help for the stresses of war, they must see the positive images as well. They need to see leaders who champion those who have recognized the impact of these traumatic events, sought treatment, and put their lives back in order to lead rewarding lives with their families, friends and coworkers. We need to actively take away the stigma of wounds such as PTSD.

Treating the Wounds of War in Transition

If veterans are to move on into the civilian world, they must be able to expect just treatment for the wounds they suffer, be they visible or invisible. As we have seen all too tragically here in Washington state at Madigan Army Medical Center, too often there has been a concerted effort to minimize these wounds, and deny veterans the treatment they deserve. Sadly, the occurrences at Madigan are neither isolated, nor uncommon across the country in military bases. This trend cannot continue if we hope to serve the interests of those who have served this nation. Our staff monitoring Madigan reports many of the evaluations of “personality disorders” that have been sent back for reevaluation have been more properly diagnosed as PTSD. This is important, and it is positive to see corrective measures moving towards a better operating model. It is important for any veterans who feel there may have been a misdiagnosis at Madigan to know there is a number to call for the Warrior and Family Hotline 1-800-984-8523 and The American Legion is working hard to ensure the public is aware of this.

The American Legion maintains staff in multiple locations to assist service members engaging in the Medical Evaluation Board/Physical Evaluation Board (MEB/PEB) process. This process, following on the heels of national scandals such as the abject living conditions discovered at Walter Reed, have seen much attention from Congress and the American public. Everyone is working to ensure this process is fixed, and some progress has been made, yet there is still much work that remains.

The disability discharges system is seeing the implementation of the new Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) to replace previous systemic problems with service members navigating the Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability evaluations. While IDES is an improvement on the previous systems, it has yet to correct the

problems previously experienced. In pilot programs of IDES, the process time dropped from approximately 500 days to around 300 days. This was still not the ideal target, but was definitely an improvement and indicative that the pilot program had potential to move things along the right track. However, our field representatives are reporting average process times of around 410 days as the program has been expanded from its initial pilot program. We cannot allow any successes of the pilot to be lost as the program becomes expanded nationally.

Furthermore, problems continue to exist with the joint evaluation process. As our field personnel have discovered, Army medical records in particular create unnecessary delays. There is still confusion in some locations over disparities between DOD and VA evaluations, despite the use of a common model, and the overall complexity of dual adjudication continues to represent a challenge.

One of the most glaring areas for concern currently relates to how soon a transitioning veteran will see money from VA compensation payments. Despite being recognized as service connected and rated during the discharge process, veterans have to wait three to four months after discharge before seeing the first of their disability checks from VA. In the normal disability process, a veteran who receives their notification letter from VA informing them of service connection for a disability will see payments beginning in less than 30 days. There needs to be a way to close the gap for these transitioning veterans. Given the uncertain job market they will face upon discharge, maintaining some level of continuity of pay is vitally important.

Returning to the Workforce

Much has been said about the problems veterans are currently facing in the job market. Despite some recent improvements, veterans are still facing unemployment in numbers higher than the national average. The American Legion is grateful to you Chairman Murray for your efforts and leadership in passing the VOW to Hire Heroes Act last year. That landmark legislation will bring many improvements to the jobs battle for America's veterans, although as we all learned during the fight to properly implement the Caregivers Act, close attention will be necessary to ensure the implementation matches the good intent of the lawmakers who passed the bill.

An improved and mandatory Transition Assistance Program (TAP) will be a great help to our service members preparing to enter the civilian job market. It is too early to tell how effective the new TAP will be, however early indications from stakeholders involved in the revision process point towards a great improvement in providing useful information. When the military puts its mind towards training, it can be one of the most powerful teachers in the world. We are hopeful that they can translate their outstanding instructional abilities enabling them to transform civilians into fighting men and women into the tools to turn fighting men and women into the civilian leaders in the workplaces of tomorrow.

Translation of military skills to the civilian world has been an unfortunately thorny issue. The American Legion has long been at the forefront of advocating better systems of licensure and certification to translate military occupational skills to the civilian world. This is a complicated issue, as the boundaries between state and federal certification can be confusing and it is far more complicated to equalize across the states than it would appear on the surface.

However, in a positive sense, Washington state is leading the way for state governments in terms of certification. Washington HB 1418 (2011) is the template for many states in terms of dealing with military credentialing in the civilian workforce. Utilizing key language such as:

“An applicant with military training or experience satisfies the training or experience requirements of this chapter unless the secretary determines that the military training or experience is not substantially equivalent to the standards of the state.”

I am proud to be a citizen of the state taking such an active leadership role in this arena. If we're going to solve the problem of licensure and certification for our veterans nationwide, it will take leadership and work at both the state and federal level.

That's why on the federal level The American Legion is supporting legislation such as S. 2239 The Veterans Skills to Jobs Act of 2012. This legislation would enable the head of government agencies to deem military veterans to have satisfied training or certification requirements in the government provided they had the appropriate training in the military. It's a simple fix, and long overdue. As has been said many times before, if our veterans can patch up people on the battlefields of Iraq, they should be able to serve as an EMT right here in Tacoma, if they can drive a truck full of supplies in a convoy through the mountains of Afghanistan, they should be certified to drive a truck full of groceries through the Cascades in our backyard; it doesn't take a genius to figure this out. The American Legion is confident we can work with you and the rest of Congress, as well as the state governments to recognize the vital skills our veterans learned in the military are translated to the civilian world. It's the right thing to do.

Conclusion

The best thing our veterans have going for them today they didn't have when I returned from Vietnam is a country that has agreed to the notion that regardless of what you think about war, you respect the sacrifices of those who fight on behalf of our nation. Even if people do not know how to thank our soldiers and sailors, they have expressed a strong feeling that this is something they want to do. We can harness that and say never again will the returning war veterans of this nation be treated as shamefully as portions of our country treated the returning warriors from Vietnam.

The American Legion believes if we focus on the basic things – help welcome veterans into the community without fear, help veterans receive treatment and compensation for their wounds of war, help veterans translate their military successes into success in the civilian job market – we will be winning the fight to ensure just treatment for the brave men and women who serve us in war. There is still a long road to go towards achieving these aims, but we are working, and Congress is working, and the people are working to see that we don't fail these warriors. We cannot let up or lose focus, but we can and will prevail on their behalf. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony and God bless the United States of America.