

LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN LEGION

JOINT HEARING OF THE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE UNITED STATES SENATE ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

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FEBRUARY 27, 2019
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LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN LEGION

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2019

UNITED STATES SENATE,
AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m., in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny Isakson and Hon. Mark Takano, presiding.

Senators Present: Isakson, Moran, Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Tester, Sanders, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, and Manchin.

Representatives Present: Takano, Brownley, Lamb, Levin, Rose, Brindisi, Cisneros, Lee, Underwood, Cunningham, Pappas, Allred, Roe, Bilirakis, Bost, Bergman, Banks, and Meuser.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TAKANO

Chairman TAKANO. Good morning. The Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of the American Legion is now called to order. I will begin with my opening statement.

Good morning, Commander Reistad, and welcome to everyone in the House and Senate Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of the American Legion. I am honored to be here with Chairman Isakson and Senator Tester and Ranking Member Roe, and all members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

First I would like to thank Commander Reistad for being here today and welcome every Legionnaire here today and those who could not join us in person but are watching from home.

Commander, I want to begin by recognizing the tireless advocates who work every day on behalf of the American Legion. We rely on the American Legion in our districts and

states back home, and here in Washington, D.C., to be the voice for the millions of veterans you represent throughout the country.

I would also like to specifically recognize members from my own home state of California. Are you in the house?

[Cheers.]

All right. All right. California American Legion Boys State right here. Thank you.

[Applause.]

And, by the way, I just like to add, now more than ever we benefit from the civics lessons that are taught through American Legion Boys State and Girls State, and I know that the tremendous

volunteer effort through the auxiliary and your membership, what it takes to stage those Boys State and Girls State events throughout the country. And America certainly benefits from having that civics education and leadership development that you provide.

For 100 years—and I realize that last year was your 100th year anniversary since your founding, and a very poignant founding since the World War I and such a consequential war for the world and our country—members of your organization have been on the front lines as a strong voice on Capitol Hill ensuring Congress fulfills its promise to veterans. We look to you to guide our work and to hold us accountable to the veterans and their families. You make sure the work we undertake is done in the best interest of veterans. And with your help, we have seen a lot of successes over the years, and we will need your continued input as we move through the 116th Congress.

Reading through your testimony I want to say that your concerns are my concerns. This afternoon, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs will have Secretary Wilkie testifying on the state of the VA and what needs to be done to achieve our vision for VA through the year 2030. Our VA 2030 plan is simple. It is a future look at what we envision as the ideal VA, a system worth saving for all veterans, no matter the generation or conflict in which they served. That starts with getting implementation of the Mission Act right so veterans can access care at VA hospitals and clinics and with community providers.

I hold with your similar concerns regarding hiring and retention. We must continue to find constructive ways to bring the best and brightest to VA once they are there, and once they are there we need to keep them.

Keeping pace with the fastest-growing population of veterans is crucial. Women veterans need to know that VA is for them.

We agree with your assessment that no veteran should have to choose between caring for a child and receiving health care, and we are proud to report that the House passed the Veterans Access to Child Care Act just a few weeks ago so that veterans who are parents to young children can see their VA provider without having to worry about finding and affording child care, and thank you, Julia Brownley, for your bill. Thank you.

[Applause.]

And I want just as much acknowledgment for our Republican colleagues because this bill passed with 400 votes in the House, and I do not want to pass over the hard work of my Ranking Member, Phil Roe. Thank you, Phil, for your work on that bill as well.

[Applause.]

And I know and trust that Senator Isakson will burst this through the Senate in no time, in zero seconds flat. Right, Senator?

Chairman ISAKSON. Zero.

Chairman TAKANO. Zero. We know how fast they work over there in the Senate.

And we will continue to work with you to advance benefits to all Vietnam veterans serving on land and sea, especially those exposed to Agent Orange. We will double our efforts to end homelessness and strive to find and care for every veteran who may contemplating suicide.

And while I just touched on a few of the issue areas that are important to you and your membership, know that I am committed to helping advance your priorities in the coming year. I look forward to hearing your testimony today, and thank you again for your tireless advocacy of the veteran community.

And with that I now recognize Chairman Isakson for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much, Chairman Takano, and congratulations to rising to Chair of the House

Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and to Phil Roe, I want to tell you what a great pleasure and privilege it was for me to work with you for four years as your chairmanship in the House. I appreciate the things you did to support us. We have been a great team for the VA for the last four years. Jon Tester, who is my Ranking Member in the Senate, is my partner. We are not adversaries. We are not in different parties. We are Americans, just like our soldiers are on the battlefield. We recognize heroism not by party.

[Applause.]

And we particularly appreciate all you are doing.

I have to tell you, I want to thank you and Mr. Reistad, Commander, and the others for the four corners Fireside Chat that we celebrated two days ago with you at the Washington Hilton.

[Applause.]

That was a great way for us to be able to talk you in a setting that is much better than standing up at a podium and speaking, which ends up being a lecture and that is not any fun for anybody. But to sit there in a nice overly soft chair, I might add for an hour, and stay awake and be cogent, that is a good challenge for old men anytime, so we are glad to do it.

I want to congratulate you on your 100th anniversary. I mean, that is a great milestone. My wife and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary last year. I know what big anniversaries mean. I hope I make 200 on that, but if I do not, I am glad you all made it to 100 in terms of the American Legion. I appreciate very much your organization and what you mean to all of us.

We have a big agenda this year and our agenda in the Senate, from my standpoint—and I think it is shared by all—is to see to it that all the things we did the last three or four years—the new GI Bill, the accountability bill, the appeals bill, the Whistleblower Act—all of the things that we did, now is the time to see to it they are in place and working. You do not want to go pile a whole lot of new stuff on somebody until they swallow what you have just given them, and we just gave them a lot to swallow.

My last conversation before I came in here was with Mr. Wilkie, who is going to see you this afternoon, hobbling in on his bad Achilles' heel, so do not give him too much trouble. He is in agony, in pain. Any of you who have had an Achilles problem know that is not comfortable. But he is a great leader at the VA and we appreciate him very much.

And I have told him we will share the same commitment to all of you. We will do everything we can to make the promises that we made reality, make them reality as fast as possible. We will

make mistakes, but there are a couple of mistakes we will not make. One, we are not going to make the mistake of privatizing the VA. I can guarantee you that. We are not going to do that.

[Applause.]

But we are going to see that we empower the private sector to be a force multiplier for the VA so people can have timely appointments, the best of care that is available in the United States of America goes to our veterans, and we will not stop until we get that done for everybody. It is important that we make sure the VA, all the things we have bragged about for two years, become a reality that you expect every day when you go to the VA.

We appreciate the people who volunteered and fought for this country, risked their life for this country, and stand for this country to support it. When you come to Washington to advocate for the American Legion, there are a lot of things you could do. But you are not just advocating for yourself. You are advocating for all those who went before you, in the military, in service to the country.

So thank you for what you have done, thank you for being here today, and thank you for being part of the greatest country on the face of this Earth, the United States of America.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

[Applause.]

Chairman TAKANO. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Isakson. And I now yield to the Ranking Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator Tester from Montana.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

Senator TESTER. Thank you, Chairman Takano, and thank you for being here.

Commander Reistad, let us see. I saw you on Monday and I saw you on Tuesday. Hell, I see you every day, more than I have got fingers to count with. So it is great to have you hear today.

Look, I have enjoyed working with you and your legislative staff and great Legionnaires like Mike Shepard, Cliff Larson, Bill White in Montana. You guys have been great and I want to thank you for your leadership, Commander Reistad, as the American Legion is here before us, because we have accomplished a lot but we still have a lot to do.

As I have said before, as I said Monday, and I think I said it again yesterday, Congress needs to take its cues from you. You know better than anyone how VA is performing across this country. You know what improvements should be made on behalf veterans and their families. Your members are beneficiaries of the VA health care and utilize VA programs every day. Listening to veterans should not be a courtesy from the VA. It should be mandatory.

Commander, we need to hear your view on gender disparities at the VA, what can be done to provide more equitable treatment for our women veterans; on whether the VA is doing enough to address the unacceptable rate of veteran suicides; on implementation of the Harry Colmery Act, a law which builds upon 75 years of the GI Bill and American Legion history.

But most importantly today, we need to know whether you believe the implementation of the VA Mission Act, the largest overhaul of veterans health care in a generation, is being carried out as Congress intended, and more importantly, as veterans deserve. There is very real concern from the veterans community and Congress that the recently proposed access standards will steer a disproportionate amount of veterans and taxpayer dollars to the private section.

And despite language in the Mission Act, it is clear that the VA does not intend on holding community providers to the same standards as VA providers. We need to make sure that does not happen. So we will end up sending more veterans into the communities for lower-quality care while being unable to ensure they get it done in a timely manner. These are all challenges but challenges that we can fix.

To top it off, nobody can tell us how many veterans will ultimately be impacted by these access or standards, or how much it will cost. All we know is that community care is more expensive than VA care and that billions have been paid to third-party administrators that should have gone directly to improving the lives of veterans across this country.

VA refers to concerns about the hollowing-out of the VA care is false and predictable, but everyone in this room, I believe, knows that they are real. Veterans deserve more than that. They deserve the truth and they deserve a system that will work, a system that is built and improved with the input from the American Legion and others.

Commander Reistad, it is great to have you here today. We need to keep meeting like this, quite frankly. And I want to welcome you and I want to welcome everybody you represent on behalf of the American Legion, their families, and the veterans you serve. Thank you.

[Applause.]

I would now like to—thank you, Ranking Member Tester, and now I would like to recognize my colleague on the House side, the Ranking Member, Dr. Phil Roe. You are now recognized for your opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

Dr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I also want to associate my comments with Senator Isakson. In the last two years we were able to accomplish a lot of great things for our veterans, and it would not have happened without the leadership up here. And I said this yesterday. One of the reasons I do not think this is going to be as long a meeting as some of them are is that Tim Walz, who you all know, who is now Governor of Minnesota, used to bring either one or two 20-ounce Mountain Dew's. So this is not a two-20-ounce Mountain Dew hearing, I hope.

Commander Reistad, to you and all your members of the American Legion and the American Legion Auxiliary and Sons of the American Legion who are with us today—and I want to thank the auxiliary members. And I said this yesterday. You know, I was deployed, and when we get deployed we forget about the responsibilities we leave the family. We have a mission and we go accomplish

that mission. But there is another mission too, and that is to keep your family together, to look after your family, and all the things at home. So thank you, auxiliary members, for being our wingman and our backup. Thank you very much for that.

[Applause.]

It is an honor for me to be here today, and if there are any Legionnaires—I think there are—my fellow Tennesseans, would you please stand up and be recognized, or hold your hand up, either one, if you are here?

Yep, there they are in the back. Thank you, guys.

[Applause.]

I know from personal experience the commitment to country and to service that the American Legion members exemplify in communities, including mine, across this great nation. I also know, from personal experience, that the leadership that the American Legion's top-notch executive and legislative team exemplify are right here in our nation's capital.

Last Congress saw a record number of transformative pieces of legislation signed into law to reform the Department of Veterans Affairs in both large and small ways, and that would not have been possible without the dedication, partnership, and support of the American Legion. And one of the things that I did as I began to work through this was that you all—and we did not always agree, as you well know—but we came in and worked these differences out. It was a model for how legislation could go. You have a different viewpoint than I might have, we got in a room and worked out those differences, and I think we can all be proud of what we did.

I look forward to continuing the collaboration with you, Commander Reistad, to ensure that the legislation we worked so hard to see signed into law is implemented as we intended, and serves to further our common mission to uphold President Lincoln's promise to care for those who have borne the battle.

Last week the Veterans Appeals and Improvement and Modernization Act, or AMA, went live. The AMA completely revamped the way disability claims and appeals are processed at the VA and critically gives the veterans greater choice and control over how their appeal is handled at the VA.

Let me give you just a personal story. About a month ago I was in Nashville. I went to the RO, went to the VA hospital there. On the way out the door I met, I think, an eight-year Marine reservist who served in the '70s. He did not go to Vietnam but he served in the '70s. He had tried for seven years to get his claim done. He had decided to go with the RAMP program. In 90 days he had what took seven years. I mean, this man was grinning from ear to ear. He could be a poster child, and I hope it works that way for many other veterans. I was really pleased when I just bumped into him sort of accidentally there at the VA.

As you know, another thing very near and dear to my heart, and I know to yours as well, is the fight for our Blue Water Navy veterans. I have carried that fight for almost 10 years. I want to get that done, get that off, and treat these veterans the same as very other veteran that has served in Vietnam was. So I would appreciate your help with that.

[Applause.]

And I know Senator Isakson and Senator Tester, they were great partners with this and worked very hard to get that done, and I feel confident that I know Chairman Takano is ready to get it done also, and we both already dropped legislation for that.

Another top priority of mine, as others have said, is effective and ongoing oversight of the VA Mission Act. The Mission Act is a wide-ranging piece of legislation, and when it was enacted it impacted virtually every facet of the VA health care system and increased access to high-quality care in VA medical facilities in the community and via telehealth. It resulted in a VA health care system that is stronger, that are able to care for veterans and their caregivers both today and for generations to come, and this will not privatize the VA.

That said, a law as transformative as the Mission Act does not come with an instruction manual, and I anticipate there will be some stumbling blocks and struggles in the weeks and months ahead that will once again require our effort to overcome.

I remain committed to that process and to keeping my door open to the American Legion throughout the process. I will also continue to hold Secretary Wilkie's feet to the fire with regard to the implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2017, until I am confident that every veteran has received the benefits of which they are entitled and the implementation of the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protect Act of 2017, until I am confident that the VA is appropriately adjudicating allegations of misconduct or poor performance and treating whistleblowers with respect and seriousness that they are entitled.

Last, but certainly not least, I am committed to closing—closely overseeing the electronic health record modernization. Greater information technology support generally, and improved coordination between VA and DoD, particularly, are a key to VA's future on every front.

Also, I know that the Chairman is very much committed to this, is to work on our homeless veterans and suicide. I know that is very near and dear to the Legion. I know that is one of your top priorities. I commend Chairman Takano for attaining the Technology and Modernization Subcommittee that we established last Congress and I look forward to significant work this Congress to address VA's technology needs.

Commander Reistad, we should all be extremely proud of the work that we have accomplished together in the last two years. However, as you can see, we still have a lot of work ahead of us. And I am glad that you and your fellow Legionnaires are steadfast partners in that work, and thank you once again for being with us here in Washington this morning, and all the Legionnaires that are here. I look forward to receiving your testimony and I yield back my time.

Chairman TAKANO. Thank you, Ranking Member Roe.

Let me just say a few words about the Commander before I introduce—before I accord him the time to give his opening statement.

Brett P. Reistad was elected National Commander of the American Legion on August 30, 2018, in Minneapolis, during the organi-

zation's 100th national convention, and I was very honored to actually be able to address that convention myself, in Minneapolis.

He has been a member of the nation's largest veterans' organization since 1981. He is former law enforcement. He retired as a lieutenant with the Fairfax County Police Department after 26 years of service—my goodness; congratulations on that—and began a second career as a law enforcement services coordinator for the Regional Organized Crime Information Center of the Regional Information Sharing Systems Program, a congressionally funded law enforcement investigative assistance program.

The Commander's American Legion membership eligibility is through his honorable Vietnam War-era service, from 1974 to 1978, as an active duty U.S. Army infantryman, where he served with the Presidential Salute Battery of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, the Old Guard, at historic Fort Myer, Virginia. He participated in the inaugural ceremony for President Carter and other high-profile ceremonies, and he has since been honored as a Distinguished Member of The Regiment.

Commander, we are very honored to have you here today, and I now give you time to present your opening statement.

Oh, excuse me. Okay. Commander, we will need just to hold off here. I made that introduction because I was not anticipating that the gentleman from Louisiana would be here to introduce you himself. So I want to make sure that I accord him time.

Mr. Clay Higgins, the gentleman from Louisiana, you are recognized to introduce the commander.

STATEMENT OF HON. CLAY HIGGINS

Mr. HIGGINS. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, thank you for this gathering today. The commander I sit next to is a great and humble servant of his nation, and by extension all our fellow men. I thank him.

And, Mr. Chairman, as a former member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee it is my honor to join you this morning and my great privilege to introduce our guest of honor, the National Commander of the American Legion, Mr. Brett P. Reistad.

I have had the opportunity to get to know Mr. Reistad over the past few years, and as a fellow Army soldier and law enforcement officer I was pleased to hear of his election to the position of National Commander at the American Legion's 100th annual convention last August.

Mr. Reistad is a patriot American of the highest order. As a young man, he served his country with honor, and as an infantryman in our nation was engaged in the Vietnam War, a true servant of the people. Mr. Reistad stayed in uniform after his Army service ended, becoming a police officer in Fairfax County, Virginia, and retiring at the rank of lieutenant after 26 years of service.

Mr. Reistad's service and dedication to our men and women in uniform is evident in his exceptional leadership at the American Legion. Having joined the organization in 1981, he rose to the ranks, serving at every level of the American Legion, becoming commander of Post 270 in McLean, Virginia, and eventually Department Commander for the Commonwealth of Virginia in 2005, where membership reached an all-time high.

He recently completed his second term as gubernatorial appointee to the Commonwealth of Virginia's Joint Leadership Council of Veteran Service Organizations, where he helped coordinate the input of 23 VSOs in crafting legislation on behalf of our veterans.

The American Legion is among the nation's largest wartime veteran service organization, recognized as the nation's largest wartime veteran service organization. With 12,806 posts in communities from sea to shining sea, members advocate patriotism and honor and promote national security and continued devotion to all those who served. As the organization celebrates its centennial and storied past, Mr. Reistad has emphasized the theme of celebrating our legacy and remains committed to carrying out his duties on behalf of our veterans, men and women in uniform, and their families.

I am proud of the job he has done, excited to see what he will continue to do, and proud to call him a friend.

[Applause.]

Chairman TAKANO. Commander, you are now recognized to deliver—to present your opening statement.

STATEMENT OF BRETT P. REISTAD

THE AMERICAN LEGION; ACCOMPANIED BY JOSEPH SHARPE, VINCENT TROIOLA, MATTHEW SHUMAN, CHANIN NUNTAVONG, RALPH BOZELLA, AND RANDALL FISHER

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is great to see all of you here.

Before I begin my opening statement I would first like to introduce a few critical members of the American Legion family. I ask the following people to please stand, if able, and be recognized, the American Legion national officers who were serving with me this year.

[Applause.]

Our distinguished American Legion Past National Commanders.

[Applause.]

Kathy Dugan, president of the nation's largest patriotic women's organization, the American Legion Auxiliary.

[Applause.]

Past national presidents of the American Legion Auxiliary.

[Applause.]

Greg Gibbs, National Commander of the Sons of the American Legion.

[Applause.]

Past National Commanders of the Sons of the American Legion.

[Applause.]

And for the rest of us, we are—

MULTIPLE SPEAKERS. —Team 100.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. REISTAD. Good morning, Chairman Takano, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Members Tester and Roe, members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, and distinguished others

among us. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the American Legion's legislative priorities with you.

I also would like to thank Congressman Higgins, a former member of this Committee, for his kind introduction, for his military and law enforcement service, and for being a member of the American Legion.

During the last Congress, these two committees played a pivotal role in the passage of the most significant veterans' health care legislation in many years, the VA Mission Act. It was aptly titled. While there is still much work to be done regarding implementation, let me tell you about our mission.

Mission is a word that we take very seriously, something that has been forged into us since our first day of military training. It is an inner fortitude that tells us that no matter what it takes, we will accomplish the task at hand. It is synonymous with being a veteran. We have seen this clearly demonstrated by the men and women of the U.S. Coast Guard, who despite its stoppage of pay continued to deploy more than 2,000 members a day at sea and ashore. Yet they were treated differently than their DoD counterparts. Pay uncertainty is difficult for everyone impacted, but especially those who, by contact, are required to continue working and risking their lives in an occupation that provides, at best, modest pay.

The American Legion did not fall short of our mission in January when, in just a two-week period, we provided more than \$1 million of financial assistance to Coast Guard families with young children.

[Applause.]

It is times like this, Mr. Chairman, when it is not about what we did but rather what we do. This is where we hope Congress and the administration can live up to its constitutionally mandated mission to support our military. Whether it is through the Pay Our Coast Guard Act or advanced appropriations for Coast Guard payroll, we should all abide by the *Semper Paratus* motto, "Always prepared."

Another special population that takes its mission seriously is our nation's law enforcement officers. Last year, 150 of these heroes died in the line of duty, protecting and serving our communities. It is not surprising that many military veterans continue to serve their country through careers in law enforcement. Service before self, even to the point of sacrificing one's life, if necessary, is just one of the many commonalities shared between military members and first responders.

From an epidemic of opioids to criminal gang activity and domestic terrorism the life of a law enforcement officer is fraught with danger. We ask Congress to always consider how legislation impacts members of these special communities.

Further, there are many constituencies that deserve our support but none more so than Gold Star families. I am proud to announce that the American Legion has recently created a full-time staff position dedicated to advocating for the needs of these families whose loss is immeasurable.

Again, Mr. Chairman, it is not about what we did but rather what we do. President Lincoln referred to this loss as, "so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom." And perhaps nothing is more

important than preventing the number of Gold Star families from growing.

That said, not all of America's war casualties come from enemy bullets. In 2017, the VA reported that the suicide rate among 18- to 24-year-old male Iraq or Afghanistan U.S. war veterans had risen fivefold. For 18- to 29-year-old female veterans the suicide rate doubled. We also know that PTSD, TBI, and feelings of a loss of purpose or belonging are frequently found among those who attempt such tragic and permanent endings.

These feelings and conditions are either preventable or treatable. It must be the mission of every Legionnaire, every veteran, every employee of the DoD and VA, and I might add every Member of Congress, to stop such national tragedies. Simply put, access to timely treatment and quality health care saves lives.

In 2017, the American Legion commissioned a report that confirmed what we already suspected. VA performs as well or better than its private sector counterparts in areas such as patient safety, patient satisfaction, care coordination, and innovative medical practices. But we do recognize that geography and specialty care sometimes means the VA is not always the best option for patients. We support the administration's recent announcement that access to veterans' health care providers should be based on actual drive times as opposed to straight-line mileage. Moreover, we agree that veterans should not have to wait more than 20 days for primary care or 28 days for specialty care. The American Legion does not oppose Choice but we adamantly oppose any plan that would gut the best health care system in the country.

The central fact remains that nobody understands the unique health care needs of the veteran population better than the professionals at the VA. Further, the VA Mission Act must live up to its mission of serving veterans as opposed to serving private health care providers.

To varying degrees, anyone who has personally assisted a close family member through sickness or serious medical conditions understands the challenges facing caregivers. I know. I, too, have experienced this. We welcome the recent expansion of the VA Family Caregiver Program to equalize benefits so that family members providing care for Vietnam and other veterans are on par with those who provide it for members of the post-9/11 generation.

However, gaps still exist. Regardless of when a veteran served, even if it was during a period of peace, caregivers still face the same challenges. They sacrifice career, time with others, and often their own health care needs to care for their loved one. The American Legion has always believed that a veteran is a veteran. Our gratitude for their service should not be measured by arbitrary date but rather by the simple fact that they swore an oath to defend our nation. It is time that loved ones who are providing care for their veterans achieve equality.

And there is another area of equality that the American Legion would like to see addressed. A century ago, our organization was chartered by Congress to serve as the leading voice for the veterans of the Great War. The thinking at the time was that World War I was so horrendous, that it was the war to end all wars. As we all know, history proved that it was not. Even so, our charter was

updated during World War II to reflect the service and sacrifice of that era.

Subsequently, our charter and membership eligibility have mirrored the eras officially recognized by the U.S. government to include the wars and conflicts such as Korea, Vietnam, and the global war on terror. However, these recognized periods fail to take into account the hostilities that occur between official eras in which nearly 1,600 U.S. military personnel were either killed or wounded, in places like Cuba, Iran, and El Salvador.

Because of these frequent engagements, the American Legion calls on Congress to declare what has demonstrably already occurred, that the United States has been continually engaged in a state of war from December 7, 1941, until such a date in the future that our government may declare an end to all armed hostilities.

Congress can provide this recognition by supporting and passing Senate Bill 504, or the Legion Act. The Legion Act will authorize the American Legion to expand our membership eligibility requirements. We sincerely thank Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona for making this the first bill she introduced as a member of the United States Senate. We also thank Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina for joining Senator Sinema in introducing this bipartisan legislation. The veterans that the Legion Act will recognize have carried out their missions. Now it is our turn.

In 16 days, the American Legion will officially turn 100 years old. You have heard me discuss mission quite a bit this morning. That is because the founders of our organization had a post-war mission. Their mission, one that continues today, was to care for veterans, provide patriotic youth programs, advocate for a strong national defense, and instill pride about what it means to be American. It is not just what the American Legion did. It is what we do.

It is tempting to say "mission accomplished," but that implies that our work is done. It is not. So I prefer to say "mission still being accomplished" and I invite all Members of Congress to join us in a mission to make a better America.

Chairman Takano, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Members Tester and Roe, and members of the critical committees, thank you for holding this hearing, thank you for all that you do for our nation's veterans and families, and thanks also to your amazing and talented staff.

Mr. Chairman, I would happily answer any questions you may have, but I would like to let you know that I am blessed to have sitting with me some subject matter experts who are available, and in the event that they can answer a question better than I can I will defer to them, with your permission.

Chairman TAKANO. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman TAKANO. Thank you, Commander, for your testimony. We will now begin with questions from the Chairman and then Ranking Members and then members from the Committee in the order of arrival.

I would like to begin by recognizing my colleague from the Senate, Chairman Isakson, for five minutes.

CHAIRMAN JOHNNY ISAKSON

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity and I again want to thank the Legion for the Fireside Chat that we did on Monday, which was so effective of a way for us to communicate and get to talk to so many of your members. Congratulations again on your 100th anniversary. And for my benefit and my humoring, all the Georgia Legionnaires please stand.

[Applause.]

We are all on the same team and we are all in the same rank when it comes to being Americans and to being Legionnaires and to being veterans of the United States military, but we are always glad to have the Georgia veterans here. Congratulations on being here today.

I only have one—I am not going to ask a big question. I am going to kind of make more of a statement because I think it is important that I repeat myself in the remarks I made first of all.

Commander, do you have a successor here? Do you all have a line of succession for commanders?

Mr. REISTAD. Sir, we do have candidates that are following. So there is a leading candidate for National Commander that is behind me.

Chairman ISAKSON. Is there a leading candidate—who is that person?

Mr. REISTAD. That person can stand. It is Bill Oxford of North Carolina.

Chairman ISAKSON. Good.

[Applause.]

I want to tell you why I am doing this. This is really important. Mr. Oxford, and to yourself, Commander, your terms are two years or one?

Mr. REISTAD. One year, sir.

Chairman ISAKSON. Over the next 24 months the future of the VA's health care services and operation depends on our supporting the changes in the Mission Act, the implementation of the Mission Act, and holding everyone accountable, us, in Congress, the physicians and nurses and assistants in the VA, and the VA administration itself.

So I want to tell everybody in a leadership position, either on these committees or in your organization, the Legion, nothing we have done is going to work unless you help us make it work. We are going to have to give the VA some time and some latitude to make a few mistakes. But as long as they are making mistakes of the heart, making mistakes trying to do better, that is fine. But when they make mistakes we want to call them out, have them correct them, and then support them for the changes they made.

I fear sometimes that bureaucracies wait for elected officials' terms to expire. So, in other words, once I am in office, I am in office for six years, as a Senator. When they go to work for the VA, unless they do something really bad, they are there for life. So they can outwait me. I do not want that to happen. We cannot afford to spend a day waiting for the promise of the improved appeals process, accountability process, positions of the numbers sufficient

to have VA health care reach every veteran in the country. We need all these things to become reality and not just promises.

I am pledging my part to support that. I know the members of the Committees will pledge that. And if you, Mr. Oxford, and you, Commander, will see that starts in the chain of command in your organizations, a few years from now we will look back on this being one of the great times of all for the VA and for veterans in America.

Thank you all for your service.

[Applause.]

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you, sir.

Chairman TAKANO. Thank you, Senator Isakson. I will— both Senator Tester and I will take our question time later. But I want to now move to recognize a member of the House Committee, Mr. Cisneros of California, who himself is a Navy veteran.

Mr. Cisneros, you are recognized for five minutes.

REPRESENTATIVE GIL CISNEROS

Mr. CISNEROS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Commander Reistad, thank you, and all of you, thank you for being here today. I especially want to thank the members from California who have made that long cross-country trip, especially I understand I have two members from my district, Martha Huff and Robert Brower, who are here representing California's 39th. So thank you all for being here today.

I am a proud member of the American Legion Post 277 in Placentia. In fact, this hearing today is actually reminding me that I have to pay my dues this year.

[Laughter.]

So thank you for doing that.

But I am also the grandson of veterans, the son of veterans, and as the Chairman said, a Navy veteran myself. And I understand the importance that the VA plays serving veterans. My father is a veteran, a Vietnam veteran, who is suffering from the side effects of Agent Orange, and I hope one day his Navy counterparts will be able to get the same treatment that he is receiving from the VA right now.

[Applause.]

But it is also—the important thing for me that I worry about is the transition of our servicemembers out of the military into the VA. My father also went over 30 years without being diagnosed that he was suffering from PTSD, and I do not want that to happen again to our current veterans that are serving in the service.

So how, Commander Reistad and any of you, how can Congress support the VA as to make sure that we get a smooth transition from those that are leaving the military active duty service, that they are transitioning and making sure that they are getting the medical attention that they need and deserve in the VA, once they leave service?

Mr. REISTAD. Well, Congressman, thank you first for your question and for your service to our country. I believe it is essential that our military services promote transition at the end of a person's service, and I would like to ask our Director of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation to respond to your question please.

Mr. NUNTAVONG. Congressman, thank you for your question. I served 22 years as a Marine, and I saw the great care that our active duty folks get while they are serving in the military. What we hope is that they continue to get that great care through the VA. Nine million servicemembers or veterans are enrolled in VA. We have 20 million veterans out there. We need to get them enrolled in VA.

So what you can do to help us, to help our veterans, is to get them. VA care is the best care. Our members, our veterans prefer VA care over local care, and we believe that if we get them into the VA system that they will get that continued care that they deserve.

Mr. CISNEROS. Thank you. So the other question I have is how we can be supportive. VSOs, veterans' organizations like yourselves, the American Legion, and other organizations are out there. How can Congress be supportive in helping to grow your membership, to make sure that you have advocate that, continuing going on into the future they will be advocating for our veterans into the future?

Mr. REISTAD. I mentioned in my testimony, sir, the bill that we refer to as the Legion Act. It is currently Senate Bill 504. Hopefully we will see the same in the House of Representatives. That will enable us to be able to grow our membership.

I think the American Legion is challenged in the coming years to grow, but we have great programs and great people in our organizations and I am very fortunate to know many younger veterans that are getting involved in our organization and moving up the ranks and promoting our organization to their colleagues, families, and friends. And I believe that we will have another 100 years of strong service to our country ahead of us.

But I would like to ask our legislative director, Matthew Shuman, to elaborate please.

Mr. SHUMAN. Thank you, Commander, and thank you, Congressman, for the question, and thank you for your service, with the time we have left. I would agree, we are certainly looking for a member of the House of Representatives to introduce the House version of the Legion Act, and I am happy to chat with you after this hearing to see if we can make that work.

Mr. CISNEROS. And I would be happy to do that.

I just want to thank you all again for your service to our country and thank you all for being here today.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you for your question, sir.

[Applause.]

Chairman TAKANO. The gentleman yields back. I know recognize Senator Tillis of North Carolina for five minutes.

Mr. TILLIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being here. I guess I have to start—I already heard—did I hear somebody mention somebody from North Carolina is coming up in leadership somewhere? Do we have any other folks from North Carolina here?

[Applause.]

There you go. Well, good morning.

I want to cover a couple of things that I covered yesterday in the DAV meeting, because I think that you all are a very important

part of us getting the Mission Act implementation right. One thing that is very important to me is that you all understand that Ranking Member Tester and I, with the encouragement of the Chair Isakson, have been meeting with the VA, literally, for about every six weeks since I have been here, to try to figure out what they are doing, what they are addressing as they have implemented new programs.

So as we are moving forward we are always looking forward to your input on things that we should cover and progress, any concerns, and then again, conveying information that we get from those meetings to you all is very important. The Director does a good job of staying in touch with our office. In fact, we ran into each other on the sidewalk today. But he is always walking the halls here and doing a good job.

So we just need your feedback, in a very constructive way, because I think—I believe the VA is moving in the right direction. We actually have a Secretary of the VA who I have a little bit of history with, who is also from North Carolina. He is the son of a gravely wounded combat veteran from the Vietnam War, and I think that he gets it. He has got a big organization to run so I am sure constructive feedback from everybody, particularly you guys, would be welcome.

I will tell you a funny story that I had yesterday, because it relates to the implementation and what the VA looks like, say, 20 years from now. Senator Sullivan, who is a Marine, and I are good friends. He is from Alaska. We were, I think, at dinner one night and he told me, he said, "Thom, do you know that Alaska has more veterans per capita than any other state?" And I said, "Dan, do you know that North Carolina has got more veterans than you have got people?"

[Laughter.]

And the reason I tell that story was, one, I was jabbing a buddy of mine, but the other reason was to explain the vast differences and challenges we have from state to state. We need a brick-and-mortar presence and we need, as the Commander said, one of the greatest medical systems to continue to operate, in the mode that it operates today.

But then again, we have also got to look at the unique challenges of a veteran who is in western North Carolina that may be 40, 50 miles away from a health care provider, and there are winding roads up in the mountains, or a veteran who is in Alaska, in the far reaches. So we have got to figure out what fits for those states and have the flexibility to do that. But I do not believe—I always say in these meetings, anybody that says this is the year and this is the Congress where everybody is going to move to privatization, I do not get it. I do not believe anybody in their right mind is going to do that. But what we are going to do is make sure that when you have a need that you get quality health care, and we want to give you every single option that we can to get it as quickly as possible. And I believe that is at the heart of what Secretary Wilkie and the VA are trying to do.

Also, I am glad to hear that Congressman Cisneros is interested in trying to figure out how we increase your legions, because I am kind of interested in that too. That is what Senator Sinema and I

have sponsored, Senate 504, the Legion Act, and we look forward to getting our colleagues in the House to get on board with it. I think it makes sense and we are happy to see that get to the President's desk.

And then, finally, I want to talk about the unique position I am on. I have got a personnel subcommittee later today in Senate Armed Services, and I also agree with Congressman Cisneros. We have got to figure out a better way to connect the dots through transition, and we have got to find out a better way to identify what we consider to be traumatic events, maybe not rising to a level of being recognized, but the cumulative effects of concussions and other sorts of injuries that could ultimately have an effect on someone's behavior who served admirably until something clicked, and now they are discharged with bad paper.

We have got to figure out a way how to actually deal with that in a fair and just manner. And I think that begins by spending a lot more time over the lifecycle of the active duty reservist, National Guard, to make sure that we really understand what may have happened to cause that sad outcome, to give them the care that they deserve, because they also are disproportionately high on the suicide list and we have got to change that.

So I am not going to ask you all any questions but to say I appreciate you all being here today. The Director does a good job. I think the best meetings are the meetings that we have in our office so we can get back and get into the weeds with it, and I welcome you in my office every time. And next year, if you are stuck in a long line out at the sidewalk, trying to get through, if you come to the Dirksen entrance over here on the first floor, I will give you a big pass and make the Capitol police a little bit nervous. We let about 30 or 40 in a day.

[Laughter.]

Kind of shortens the line. Thank you all for being here. God bless you and thank you for your service.

[Applause.]

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you very much, Senator.

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back. I now recognize a new member of Congress, the gentlewoman from Illinois who brings a tremendous background of nursing and public health policy knowledge to this Committee, Ms. Underwood from the state of Illinois. You are recognized for five minutes.

REPRESENTATIVE LAUREN UNDERWOOD

Ms. UNDERWOOD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester and Ranking Member Roe for organizing this important presentation from the American Legion. I also want to thank Commander Reistad and the Legion for being here and your presentation today, because of your invaluable insight and guidance that you provide into solving the challenges that our veterans face, and their families experience across our nation.

So since we are doing some shout-outs, are there some Illinois veterans here today?

[Cheers.]

Ms. UNDERWOOD. Oh yes. Thank you so much. It is so good to see you. And thank you for your continued service. I look forward to learning from all of you today and hope to meet with you in the days and months to come.

I represent a community in northern Illinois outside of Chicago, the Illinois 14th, and in our community we have 36,000 veterans, 2,300 of whom are female veterans. And women veterans now comprise about 10 percent of the total veteran population and those numbers are expected to grow in the coming years.

And so my question, really, is in the Legion's view, what does the VA need to be doing to ensure that female veterans are receiving the care that they need?

Mr. REISTAD. Well, thank you, Congresswoman, for your question and thank you for being so gracious this morning to let me tell you, I thought you were from Michigan.

Ms. UNDERWOOD. That is okay. I went to Michigan, though.

Mr. REISTAD. But I will say this. I got wrong information, but I did live in Illinois as well. So I appreciate your representation of Illinois.

And to give you a little bit of background, you know, our focus with women veterans is to ensure that they get the equality of services that they deserve. As I mentioned in my testimony, we are of the belief that a veteran is a veteran, and our female veterans deserve only the best quality care. And this would include gender-specific medical resources, mammography, gynecology, private treatment and exam areas, education and enrollment of more women veterans, and improvement of our outreach to them.

And I would like to ask our Director of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, Mr. Nuntavong, to respond further to your question.

Mr. NUNTAVONG. Thank you, Commander. Congresswoman, the largest-growing population of veterans is the women's population and it is important that they receive the gender-specific care, as the Commander mentioned, that they deserve. But we hope that you can encourage VA to provide child care services in VA facilities and help VA find access to privacy needs that women veterans need as they come into medical facilities.

Ms. UNDERWOOD. Thank you. And did you have any non-health care related issues that you wanted to just highlight related to the female veterans and any specific issues that we should be working on here in the Congress?

Mr. SHUMAN. Yes, Congresswoman. Thank you for that. I think we need to do a better job of ensuring all veterans get better access to VA, but, in particular, female veterans. As you stated, this is the fastest-growing demographic and we need to certainly take care of our female veterans.

I also certainly want to thank Congresswoman Brownley and Chairman Takano for creating a new staff position that will take care of this.

Ms. UNDERWOOD. Excellent. And I would also like to commend Congresswoman Brownley for her excellent leadership in passing this important child care bill.

My next question is about the advancement of medical care, particularly related to the traumatic brain injuries and the post-traumatic stress disorder to diagnoses that have become signature inju-

ries from the global war on terror. Your organization has been studying these injuries for nearly a decade, and can you share any key policy recommendations that you have—I know you mentioned it, sir, a little bit, in your opening comments—on TBIs and PTSD that you would hope that the Congress can support your efforts in?

Mr. REISTAD. I would like to ask our Chairman, Ralph Bozella, of our Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission to respond to your question, Congresswoman.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Thank you, Congresswoman. That is a very important issue, certainly, for all veterans, certainly including women veterans. And one of the reasons for the mental health issues deals with the MST, TBI, PTSD, all the pressure that goes with returning from a combat situation.

In the American Legion, we have a TBI PTSD committee. We are studying the issues. We have some publications on the issues, a booklet called "The War Within and the Road Home" and we would be glad to share that information with you as well as a white paper on suicide prevention.

Although suicide prevention is a problem we talk about at the national level, it is a personal level, a family issue, a community issue, and I think all of us—Congress, the American Legion, VA—need to figure out how do we get this national issue down to that community level. That is where the work needs to be done. Thank you.

Ms. UNDERWOOD. Thank you so much, and I yield back my time.

Chairman TAKANO. The gentlewoman yields back. I would now like to recognize, for five minutes, the gentleman from Michigan, a former Marine lieutenant general, helicopter pilot in the Vietnam War, General Bergman, you are recognized for five minutes.

REPRESENTATIVE JACK BERGMAN

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. In Marine terms that introduction is getting a little long.

[Laughter.]

But that is another way of saying the Chairman is acknowledging that I probably, as a young second lieutenant flying infantry around Vietnam, I probably earned every one of these white hairs. So, you know, there was a mutual admiration society between the helicopter pilots and the grunts. They thought we were crazy for flying them. We thought they were crazy for getting out.

So anyway, I would like to ask—this is kind of a generic, you know, question. I am a member of the Legion post in Watersmeet, Michigan, a life member, and I am curious—this is kind of off the subject matter but yet it is very germane when you start talking about veterans and isolation after their service and where they go and reside. It is one thing to be in a big city and another thing to be in a very rural community. How is the Legion doing as far as propagating your membership on your rolls, not necessarily the folks who come to the Legion, you know, the Legion hall or whatever, these days, because the younger generations do differently. What is your plan to make sure those young veterans see the value in the Legion and get involved?

Mr. REISTAD. Well, thank you very much for your question. Mr. Chairman, our efforts to reach out to young veterans involve our

own young veterans reaching out to them directly, and to speaking to them about what the American Legion brings to the table to benefit them in their life and provides them with resources and programs that might benefit them. Camaraderie is very high on the list, but the American Legion has programs in four pillars, which include veterans affairs and rehabilitation, it includes our children and youth and their children.

Mr. BERGMAN. Are you still doing Legion baseball?

Mr. REISTAD. Legion baseball is part of that program, the children and youth, correct.

Mr. BERGMAN. Has there been any talk about expanding, because I know baseball has always been a great sport. But has there been any talk within the Legion of expanding it to things like maybe soccer or lacrosse or anything? Again, I am looking at—we have got eight grandkids, 17 down to 10—

Mr. REISTAD. Understood.

Mr. BERGMAN. —and we look at their involvement. And the beauty of what the Legion and the leadership does with— as a young 16-year-old, I mean, had the—I was the benefactor of some guidance by some Korean War vets and some World War II vets. It was a little direct guidance, but—

Mr. REISTAD. Yes, sir. Mr. Chairman, for the last six months I have had the opportunity to present this organization and travel nationally, and one of the great things that I get to do in my travels is meet with the local American Legion posts. And it allows me to compare from one to the next and from one state to the next the different programs that we have. And it is not unusual at all for me to go an American Legion post that sponsors sports outside of American Legion baseball—little leagues, soccer leagues and such.

But also the beauty of our organization is that the posts are autonomous, which means they are given the breadth to be able to create their own programs.

Mr. BERGMAN. I do not want to cut you off here because I appreciate your answer. And the autonomy of the posts— because what we might do in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan may be different than what someone might do in downtown Dallas.

Mr. REISTAD. Right.

Mr. BERGMAN. Whatever it happens to be.

And I apologize if someone has already asked this question but I want to go—it goes back to the isolation in rural areas, the subject of—I would like to hear your thoughts on telehealth when it comes to delivery of health care, whether it be physical, psychological, whatever it happens to be. Any thoughts from a Legion perspective on where we are in telehealth and where we need to go?

Mr. REISTAD. Yes, sir. I have had the benefit of actually seeing the telehealth program personally out of the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and it is truly a phenomenal program. And I have seen it also from the hospital room and how it functions.

But I would like to ask our Chairman, Ralph Bozella, to respond in more detail to you regarding your question.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Mr. Bergman, I am one of those grunts you used to drop off in Vietnam. Yes, we did get out of those birds.

And the telehealth program we are finding is an excellent tool to be used, obviously, to cut distance for cert examinations, primary care, mental health treatment, actually, in mental health, general examinations, and other more specific things. They are using telehealth centers, much easier to build, much less expensive to run, with a nurse practitioner or a PA and then connected to a provider, you know, hours away. So it works well and we think it is a great program. We want to continue to see the development of that program.

Mr. BERGMAN. Thank you. And, Mr. Chairman, I apologize for going over my time but I yield back.

Chairman TAKANO. The gentleman yields back. I would now like to recognize my fellow Californian and Chair of our Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, Mr. Levin, for five minutes.

Mr. LEVIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am so grateful for the opportunity to be here today and so grateful to all of you for everything you have done for our country. And thank you, Commander, in particular.

I take my new responsibility as Chair of the subcommittee, House Veterans' Affairs Committee on Economic Opportunity extremely seriously, at a time of rancor and partisanship in our country. This subcommittee and the greater work of the Veterans' Affairs Committee provides us the great opportunity to get things done on a bipartisan basis, and I am very grateful to be able to work with you and your team in the months and years ahead.

My district is in Orange and San Diego counties. Right in the middle we have got the amazing Marine Corps base, Camp Pendleton. It is an absolutely essential part of our district, and many who serve at Camp Pendleton really like the weather and decide to come back, so we have one of the largest veteran populations in the entire United States. And there are a lot of our veterans who are instrumental members of our cities, of our communities. There are others who need help as they transition to civilian life after their service.

And my district has a lot of exceptional organizations doing that work. I think in many ways we are a standard for what can be achieved when we see our veterans as part of an integrated whole for our communities and our economy.

I hope that together we can make progress on all sorts of opportunities for veterans—the GI Bill, issues around vocational rehabilitation, homelessness, home loans, and a lot more. And with that in mind I just had a couple of questions for you.

I am concerned, and one of the things I hear a lot from our local veterans is the targeting of servicemembers and their families by for-profit schools, specifically incentivized by the 90/10 loophole that does not count GI Bill payments as federal payments but rather has them count towards the 10 percent of funds that for-profit schools need to receive as non-federal payments. This can and has led to for-profit schools pushing for enrollment of students veterans to the GI Bill but not providing the quality education those student veterans need and deserve to success in their transition from military to civilian life.

So, Commander, has your organization seen these or similar issues and do you support the closing of the 90/10 loophole?

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you for your question. I would like to defer your question to one of our experts here at the table, and that would be Chairman Troiola of our Veterans Employment and Education Commission.

Mr. TROIOLA. Thank you, Congressman Levin, for your question. I am pleased that you asked that question. We, right now at the American Legion, have a resolution in place to close the loophole for the 90/10 discrepancy. The American Legion looks forward to working with you to try and close that loophole.

Mr. LEVIN. Fantastic. And, you know, obviously we are also concerned about some of the issues surrounding the implementation of some of the provisions in the Forever GI Bill last fall, and will be following the implementation this year very closely.

I am focused on the underlying problems that created the situation, specifically the aging information technology infrastructure in the Veterans Benefits Administration, the poor communication, at times, between the Office of Information and Technology and the business line customer, which resulted in inaccurate contract requirements that did not accomplish what was needed to implement Sections 107 and 501 of the Forever GI Bill.

My question for you, Commander, is do you have any recommendations on what our subcommittee, the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, should focus on as we ask the VA for its plan to modernize the Veterans Benefits Administration's IT systems?

Mr. REISTAD. Yes, sir. With your permission I would like to ask our Chairman, our Director of Legislation, Matt Shuman, to please respond.

Mr. SHUMAN. Thank you for that question, Congressman. I think it is incredibly important for the Colmery GI Bill, which was named after the American Legion Past National Commander who wrote the original GI Bill, to be implemented correctly. That is certainly the intent of both of these committees.

Focusing on the IT side of things, which is where we believe the errors took place, is absolutely critical. I think we need to focus and make sure that the new IT systems are implemented and that there is one system that works instead of hopping between multiple systems to be able to process the GI Bill benefit.

Mr. LEVIN. Terrific. Well, I am really excited to be working with you and look forward to subsequent discussions and I am very grateful to you all for your service. Thank you so much.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you for your question, sir.

[Applause.]

Chairman TAKANO. The gentleman yields back. I would now like to recognize the gentleman from Alabama, Mr. Sullivan, for five minutes.

SENATOR DAN SULLIVAN

Senator SULLIVAN. Mr. Chairman—

Chairman TAKANO. I am sorry. Alaska.

Senator SULLIVAN. —So, Mr. Chairman, I am going to ask a little bit about—any of my fellow veterans from Alaska here, can you raise your hand? How about a round of applause. Now these guys—I know Senator Tillis, my colleague from North Carolina, was here a little bit earlier, talking about size and numbers. So, look, I will

just be honest. My fellow Senators get a little nervous when I broach the subject of size, being a Senator from Alaska. So my fellow Alaskans flew about 5,000 miles to get here so I appreciate that. And we do have more vets per capita than any state in the country, which I am also very proud of, but I think it makes guys like Senator Tillis nervous so I will not talk about the fact that Alaska is actually 13 times larger than the state of North Carolina.

[Laughter.]

So for you North Carolinians here, I am sorry, but you can send that back to your Senator.

And General, I appreciate your comments. Being a grunt myself in the Marines, not a Vietnam vet, but somebody who has been taken around by a lot of our amazing pilots. I want to thank you for your service, and all of our Vietnam veterans, because they have done such a great job, and so we want to thank you.

[Applause.]

But I wanted to touch, Commander, on this topic that I think we are all—we all care quite a lot about. Actually, it was the first bill I co-sponsored as U.S. Senator four years ago, the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention Act, which was named after a Marine who, unfortunately, took his life.

What, in your view, are we doing in terms of suicide prevention programs that is positive, and then where are we still falling short? Senator Blumenthal and I are introducing the Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act today, which, again, looks at filling some of the gaps as it relates to suicide. But can you expound upon what more we should be doing?

Mr. REISTAD. Yes, sir. Thank you for your question. We are trying to promote the enhancement of outreach and awareness to our veterans, not only externally but also within the VA. We want to promote the education of signs of potential suicide, and to promote the resources that are available so we can refer those at risk to the appropriate places to get health assistance and mental health assistance.

Expanding and promoting mental health care treatment and increasing staffing for the VA's Integrative Health and Wellness Program. And I would like to ask Chairman Bozella if he can add to that list.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Senator Sullivan, this is a problem that everybody has the greatest concern about. This is certainly the top of our list at the American Legion too. And earlier there was a discussion here about the 14 veterans a day out of the 20 that commit suicide, those 14 who are not even connected to VA.

Senator SULLIVAN. Yeah. Yeah.

Mr. BOZELLA. You know that some of those veterans, the reason they are not connected to the VA, they are reserve and guardists. They do not have the benefit, or other veterans that may not be eligible for the benefit of mental health through VA vet centers and so on. So that is one.

We have to look at why do people commit suicide. Mental health issues, certainly, a loss of purpose, a loss of a sense of belonging, and that is where VSOs can certainly help with that. We have to get this, as I said earlier, to that community level. I think one of

the ways we can do that is through American Legion and VSO post homes.

There is the initiative out there right now, the Governor's Challenge, seven pilot states. I know Montana, Colorado, Kansas, and Texas are among those. And that effort is to get VA to train people. How do we recognize someone is at risk? How do we then connect them to a VA service? So we are working closely with that. I personally will be involved with that in Colorado, and I am looking forward to working on an effort that will bring it locally.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great. Well, listen, you know, I like to brag about my state with regard to our veteran population, but we also, like a lot of states, like a lot of big rural states, have a big suicide problem in Alaska. And so I would be honored if all of you gentlemen could take a look at our Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act that we are introducing today and just give us your view and thoughts on what you think is good in it, what you think needs to be improved in it.

But we can always improve on this issue, and it is heartbreaking issue. And no American wants this to happen and I appreciate the VSOs for all your attention to it, and I think you see here a lot of bipartisan support for addressing this challenge, which we have got to do better at.

So thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back, and I wanted to acknowledge the Senator's service to our country, his military service. So thank you, Senator.

I would now like to recognize my fellow Californian and chair of our subcommittee on health and chair of our new Women's Veterans Task Force, Ms. Brownley, of California. You are recognized for five minutes.

REPRESENTATIVE JULIA BROWNLEY

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to add my voice to welcoming all of the California Legionnaires who are here today. And, Commander, I want to thank you for your leadership, all your past commanders, the American Legion Auxiliary, thank you for your leadership and the leadership, really, quite frankly, throughout the country that the American Legion does for serving our veterans across the country.

And I certainly appreciate, Commander, when you talked about your mission that we cannot say "mission accomplished" but perhaps "mission still being accomplished." Because I think we have accomplished a lot but we still have a lot of work to do, and I think it is important that we need to do more than simply thank you for your service. We need to ensure that we are servicing every single veteran appropriately and positively across our country.

And I am very excited, and I am grateful to Chairman Takano for allowing me the opportunity to led this Women's Task Force, and I think we are going to do some very good work and I look forward to working with the American Legion on this, and I know you are going to be very helpful in our mission to make sure that we are meeting the needs of our women veterans and their unique needs.

I know Congresswoman Underwood talked and asked some questions, and I know that women veterans are a high priority for the American Legion. And, as I said, I am looking forward to doing that work.

I think there are, when we are talking about women veterans and meeting their needs, I think there are probably challenges that cannot necessarily be fixed by legislation, but perhaps can be improved upon in terms of, you know, cultural changes. And I think one of the bigger challenges that I see, other than, you know, gender-specific health care and other issues is how do we make sure, how do we reach out, how do we make sure that our women veterans are actually identifying as veterans and coming to the VA for services?

And I do not know if anyone can really speak to that but I think about—we just talked about the suicide rate amongst our veterans, both men and women. Commander, you talked about the women's suicide rate being twice what it is in terms of civilian suicide. The Chairman talked about the amount of veterans who are not using the VA who are committing suicide, and we obviously know what that gap means. I am wondering if you have a similar statistic with the women veteran population in terms of their suicide rate. I am assuming that the population is even greater in terms of the women committing suicide that have not reached out to utilize services from the VA, but I am just wondering if you actually have that statistic.

Mr. REISTAD. Senator and Chairman, I am afraid we do not have that information available to us right now but we would be more than happy to obtain that and get it to your office as quickly as possible.

Ms. BROWNLEY. Thank you. Thank you very much. And I just think that—I am really looking forward to this work on the task force and we hope to culminate that work by having a large piece of legislation articulating to better meet the needs of women veterans. But I think women suicide is of particular concern and a very, very high priority.

Can you speak a little bit to some of the barriers that you see in terms of women reaching out to the VA for their benefits?

Mr. REISTAD. With your permission I am going to ask Chairman Bozella to answer your question. He has more expertise in that area.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Representative Brownley, you have taken care of one of the barriers with the Child Care Act. In 2013, our American Legion system, we are saving program—dedicated the whole year of visiting VA hospitals for the purpose of assessing the women veterans' health care situation at the time. Even though that was six years ago, some of those barriers still exist—the privacy issues, the lack of gender-specific care, the entrances, the three levels of women's health care, which we are not going to go into right now, and how those are set up in a VA.

But VA did authorize a mandate, a women's veterans coordinator in every VA medical center. That was a key component to getting things moving. Things are absolutely improving. Are they were they need to be? No. But that process has to continue.

I think your task force is a great idea, and we still do System Worth Saving visits, of course. We do not dedicate it to one subject. But on every visit we do we have a women's veterans coordinator interview and we check their program out. And I would like to invite you or a task force member to accompany us on some of our System Worth Saving visits, or more, and you can see firsthand how we conduct that and how we can interact with women veterans. That will provide you with a great deal of insight.

Ms. BROWNLEY. That is excellent. And, Mr. Chairman, I know I am over my time but I would be remiss—I want to make sure that the Commander knows how well Director Shuman and his colleagues represent the American Legion here on Capitol Hill every single day. So thank you for that and thank you. I yield back.

[Applause.]

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you.

Chairman TAKANO. The gentlewoman yields back. I would now like to recognize the Senator from Arkansas, Mr. Boozman.

SENATOR JOHN BOOZMAN

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being here. As I said, with the Disabled Veterans, we work hard in a very bipartisan way to push things forward. Nothing helps more than having a full room. And so thank you all for being here. Thank you for taking the time, traipsing these halls, getting lots of steps in, you know, in the last few days. But there is simply no substitute for that.

And we appreciate you so much, Commander Reistad, and then also your team. Not only your team that is assembled here today but the team that has been assembled for many, many years, year after year, you know, doing the great work. And we can be very, very proud of the fact that we have been able to keep more and more promises that are being made. We always have to remember that these are not give-mes. These are earned benefits. And so, again, we appreciate your service.

Nobody does a better job than those from Arkansas, and we appreciate their efforts. Wave to me if you are—I will not make you call the hogs, but we do appreciate you being here, so thank you so much.

[Applause.]

Senator BOOZMAN. I would like to talk about just a couple of things real quickly, and, you know, the themes are here. One of them is suicide. We have been talking about that all day. It is so, so very important. One of the things that I would really like to concentrate on, this Committee and then on the Appropriations Committee, we are spending lots of money on suicide. That is a good thing. But we do not seem to be moving the needle, you know, a whole bunch. Every year the statistic seems to be the same.

So one thing that we would really like to concentrate on is evidence-based, you know, things that are actually making a difference, you know, putting the metrics in place. So I really do not have a question about that. What I would like is a commitment just that you can help us in that regard, again, to insist that we make sure that the dollars that we are spend—and we are spending lots of dollars in this area—making sure that we have the evi-

dence and this and that that are backing that up so that we can move the needle in the future. Suicide is such a difficult problem. You know, it is just a—it is a hard nut to crack. But I do think that that would be helpful.

The other thing I would like to talk a little bit about is homelessness, and in your testimony you talked about, you know, PTSD, people that, you know, felt like they were not a part, you know, all of the different things that contribute to that, not only with suicide but also with homelessness too.

And so I guess my question in that regard is, as I said, we are spending a lot of money in that area. Can you talk to us a little bit about any ideas you have got as to how we can do a better job in that regard?

Mr. REISTAD. Yes, sir. There are several things that we can do. As far as homelessness is concerned we can invest in affordable housing, supportive services for our veteran families, and transitional resources to help our homeless veterans get back on their feet in their communities.

But I would like, with your permission, Mr. Chairman, to ask Chairman Troiola of our Veterans Education and Employment Commission to respond to that question as well.

Mr. TROIOLA. Thank you for your question, Senator. The American Legion focuses more on prevention than the actual homelessness itself. We feel that if we get them before they hit the streets that we have a better success rate. We offer support for at-risk veterans during the transition process and also homeless veterans that have been out there for a while. What we ask—what we try to do is we try to get them help with health care, help with veterans' benefits, counseling, advice that they may need.

We recommend that Congress continue to fund the homeless veterans transitional housing program at the level of needed demonstration in their local communities.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Commander, we have got the access standards, you know, the proposed access standards regarding the Mission Act, and it seems like, you know, that that is being something that, you know, is accepted, you know, moving in the right direction.

One of the promises that was made in regard to—as we went forward with these things is having the ability from input, you know, from you and others. Have you all been pleased with that? Have been able to give any input in regard to the standards? I do think—you know, this—you all are the ones—the answers need to come from the bottom up, and I have had a little bit of concern in that regard. Can you address that very quickly?

Mr. REISTAD. Yes. Mr. Chairman, if I can defer to one of our resident experts here at the front table I would like to ask Director Shuman of our Legislative Division to respond to that question.

Mr. SHUMAN. Thank you for the question, Senator. We have been engaged. Secretary Wilkie himself has come over and met with our executive director and our Veteran Affairs and Rehabilitation team to be involved. We very much look forward—you will find no greater friend to the American Legion to vigilantly be aware and watch how these access standards are being implemented, and the first

second we see veterans not being treated and receiving the care they need we will be knocking on your door.

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back. I would now like to recognize the Senate Ranking Member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the Senate, the gentleman from Montana, Senator Tester.

SENATOR JON TESTER

Senator TESTER. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and once again thank you all for being here.

We have talked about suicides and there was a point brought up earlier, I think, by you, Chairman Bozella, that guardsmen and reservists are not eligible for mental health care or vet centers. I have got a bill that will take care of that, and it applies to both reservists and guardsmen.

[Applause.]

And it applies to them even if they have not been deployed, which I think is also critically important. We have not introduced it in the 116th yet. I need a partner on the Republican side before we are going to drop this bill in because it needs to be bipartisan. So I just want to bring that out and hopefully we can get some folks to jump on board, because one suicide is too many and we have got far more than that.

Commander Reistad, I just kind of want to get your general views on VA health care. Would I be correct in saying that a majority of your members prefer care directly from the VA? Would that be a correct statement?

Mr. REISTAD. Yes, that would be a correct statement.

Senator TESTER. Okay. Do they believe that—do you believe or they believe that community providers should be held to the same standard as VA providers?

Mr. REISTAD. Absolutely, they should.

Senator TESTER. And when it comes to expansion of care, would the American Legion be alarmed if access in the community meant a reduction in quality or timeliness of care for your membership?

Mr. REISTAD. Well, with all due respect, sir, whether you know it or not, today is National No-Brainer Day.

[Laughter.]

And I would have to say that that is a no-brainer.

Senator TESTER. Perfect. That is what I was hoping for. Well, I mean, those are things we have got to be aware of, because the truth is that the VA does get a lot of criticism but they do a lot of stuff really well.

Mr. REISTAD. Absolutely.

Senator TESTER. And the fact is that when we go into the private sector, if we are increasing—if we are making wait times better but decreasing quality of care we did not win. If we are making wait times longer we did not win. So those are important things moving forward, because I think the VA, we need to—my personal opinion, I think most people's opinion, and I think certainly the American Legion is build capacity within the VA, make it all it can be, and then if it cannot meet the needs put them out in the community.

I want to talk about the budget for a second. Normally we have the budget by now. We do not have it quite yet. But I would like to give the American Legion an opportunity to talk about what their priorities should be in this fiscal year's budget.

Mr. REISTAD. Well, thank you for the question, and, Mr. Chairman, I think this question would be better answered by our Legislative Director, Mr. Shuman.

Mr. SHUMAN. Well, thank you for the question, Mr. Ranking Member. I think all of our priorities are right here. I think when it comes to the VA budget there was—it was shared several months ago that the President's administration asked for a 5 percent cut to all federal agencies and instantly the American Legion began engaging senior leadership at VA and, of course, the White House to say this is not a time to be cutting any budget from the Department of Veterans Affairs. This is a time to ensuring that we keep the promises made to the men and women who have selflessly raised their right hands.

[Applause.]

Senator TESTER. Well, thank you, and thank you all of what you do, representing the fighting men and women in this country. I appreciate your testimony. Thank you, Commander Reistad.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you.

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back. I now would like to recognize the gentleman from Louisiana, Senator Cassidy, for five minutes.

SENATOR BILL CASSIDY

Senator CASSIDY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Any of my folks from Louisiana still here? I think I saw—oh yeah. Thank you.

So if Sullivan was still here I would tell him every Sunday I teach Sunday School. I actually teach first-graders so it is more riot control. But one of the fellows goes up to Alaska regularly, and we always look at the weather in Nome and Anchorage and compare it to Louisiana. I can tell you, folks in Alaska, come down to Mardi Gras this time of year, you know, and I think you will be less likely to die from cold exposure.

I am a doctor, and so as we have spoken of suicide and mental health it matters a heck of a lot to me. But I am going to take it from a little bit of a different approach. Chairman Bozella, you said something earlier. You spoke of that sense of purpose that some folks leave. Now the literature shows that the greatest risk for suicide is within the first year or so after separation from the service, and one thing that is great to see is some young folks in your audience, because obviously you need that connection with those who are just leaving the service.

But I remember seeing a video of one man who had attempted to commit suicide and his wife found him. And he was hanging himself and she picks him up and somehow gets him off. Incredibly moving. And they are interviewing him afterwards and he said, "I did not quite know what I was doing. All I know is that a year ago I was a Marine and now I was fill-in-the-blank." There was not that sense of purpose.

Now then, go to another conversation I had this past week with a major employer in my hometown of Baton Rouge, and I think

they tell me that they are the leading employer of veterans. They do construction work, pipelines, and civil engineering, and they find it is a team, it is a goal, it is responsibility, it is a mission, it is authority. And so everything that gives that sense of purpose.

Now why do I go into this? One, it is important, but secondly, the way they have achieved this is they have hired someone who was experienced with the bureaucracy that knows how to get a veteran about—excuse me, a serviceperson about to be released and put them through the training program they may need in order to have the skill set in order to then join their company. And I thought to myself, I am so glad you are doing it, performance contracting, but why do you have to hire somebody specifically to make it happen? What can we do to streamline it so that that veteran—excuse me—the person who is about to be a veteran does not need someone to guide them through any more than as you check out, this is what you can do? Do you follow what I am saying there? Any comments on that? Commander?

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander, and thank you, Senator Cassidy. You know, with the sense of purpose also comes a sense of belonging.

Senator CASSIDY. Yes.

Mr. BOZELLA. There were two issues there, and they go hand in hand. And that Marine, a year later, is wondering "Who am I? What am I doing?" One of the ways you gain that sense of purpose is to continue to serve, and people who have joined our military, they serve. And when you get involved in the veteran service organization, the American Legion, believe me, we will put you to work. You will find a way to serve. That is one way. That is a streamlined, one of the ways that I see it.

I am a combat veteran to Vietnam. When I came home I went through that. I know what it is to live it and it took a while to find myself through that. And one of the greatest ways I found myself was through being able to serve other veterans. That became my sense of purpose, even though I was employed in a different field, and I was able to develop that. And I see that with a lot of younger veterans when we are able to talk to them.

So how do we connect them to those kind of employment opportunities? I believe that probably would be something that our employment people at this table could answer that better.

Mr. REISTAD. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I am going to ask Chairman Troiola to respond to that.

Mr. SHUMAN. So, Senator, we spend quite a bit of time with our Small Business Task Force in terms of engaging and certainly credentialing as well. We meet with and work with the Department of Defense, really. We just had a meeting with the Sergeant Major of the Army Dailey who is doing a wonderful job in transitioning and finding credentialing programs. We want to be able to make sure and really in partnership with small businesses and our credentialing roundtables that we find the best practical ways to transition so when these servicemembers leave they have a certificate and really a means to be able to find that purpose that you were mentioning.

Senator CASSIDY. Well, thank you for that. One bill I sponsored and passed when I was in the House was to allow those folks

trained as EMTs in the military to get credentialed, whichever state they went to, with minimal hassle, figuring this great training they have had would help address a shortage that we have in our person power, if you will.

So if you have those paradigms, Director Shuman, or Commander, please share them with me.

Again, I thank you for all you do. Our country would not be what it is without you. I appreciate it.

I yield back. Thank you.

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back. I now would like to recognize the Member of Congress from the state of New Hampshire, Mr. Pappas, for five minutes.

REPRESENTATIVE CHRIS PAPPAS

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to Ranking Member Roe and Commander Reistad, it is a pleasure and an honor to be with you. As the grandson of three World War II veterans I honor the service of our men and women who have worn the uniform of this country and it is an honor to be a part of this Committee and to be working with you, your leadership, your members, and veterans' advocates across this country to ensure that we get implementation right of so many of the key strategies that have been put into law in the recent past. And I think that is a common theme you are hearing here. This is where the rubber hits the road in this term.

As the Chair of the Oversight Subcommittee of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee I want to ensure that we are doing that in a responsive way for the veterans of this country, that we are honoring their service and ensuring that we are providing the best care possible.

One of my concerns, as, you know, someone from the Granite State, which is not as big as Alaska but is mighty in terms of its veteran population—we have 14,126 members of the Legion in my state—is that we are meeting their needs in terms of pain management and ensuring that we are not seeing the type of over-prescribing and linkages to the opioid crisis that have been unfolding in tragic ways across this country. We lost 72,000 individuals in this country last year to overdose deaths because of opioids, and many of those are veterans.

So I am wondering how you can assess the response of the VA to this crisis and what potentially community partners can learn from the VA's experiences.

Mr. REISTAD. Well, Congressman, thank you first for your question, and with the consent of the Chairman I am going to ask Chairman Bozella to respond to your question.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Congressman, the pain management issue is a major issue across our country. Obviously opioids, some people think, is the number one problem in this country because of the addiction that comes along with that. Also, the psychotropic drugs that are used for PTSD—and, by the way, there is not a magic PTSD pill, and most of those drugs have adverse effects on people too. So we need to do a better job of finding the treatments that will work for people.

One of the aspects that we are looking at, that we investigate in the American Legion through the VA, are the complementary and alternative medicines—the yoga, music, equine therapy, fly-fishing. I mean, it may sound trivial. It is not. That is one of the ways that people can manage their pain. Pain management clinics, VA has those kind of clinics.

So the advocacy is to move in that direction and away from the kind of drugs that are causing a lot of problems with people these days.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you. I appreciate the response.

One of the issues that the Legion members from New Hampshire raised with me is a problem that they have seen with arbitration clauses that prevent reservists who are returning to their jobs after serving on active duty from getting back into the role that they once had. And I am wondering if you have seen this on a national scale.

Mr. REISTAD. Congressman, I would like to ask Director Shuman to please respond to your question.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you.

Mr. SHUMAN. Thank you for that, Congressman. We really appreciate the Granite State as well.

I will say this. Yes, we have seen it as an issue and we need to find a way to create a partnership between you and us in terms of finding a way to prevent USERRA rights from being thrown away. If we do not have the ability, and private companies do not have the ability to take away our First Amendment rights they should not be able to take away our USERRA rights either. These people and these members of the Armed Forces serve honorably and we promise them that we will protect their jobs. Finding a way to—federal legislation to prevent arbitration clauses is probably the step in the right direction.

Mr. PAPPAS. Thank you. One final question. In my state we have a 2.5 percent unemployment rate, which is great, but it makes it hard to recruit and retain medical professionals. And a recent GAO report found that over 10 percent of full-time and authorized budget positions are vacant, and that means about 45,000 vacancies across this country.

I am wondering if you know of some ways that the VA can continue to work to attract highly qualified medical professionals to fill positions and offer the care that veterans need?

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you for the question, sir. I am going to ask our Director of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, Mr. Nuntavong, to please respond to your question. Thank you.

Mr. NUNTAVONG. Thank you for your question, Congressman. The pay disparities between VA physicians and physicians in private care is drastic. We need to find a way to fund the VA physicians and health care providers better. That is the bottom line.

Mr. PAPPAS. Dollars and cents. Thanks so much.

Chairman TAKANO. The gentleman yields back. I now would like to recognize the gentleman from Kansas, Senator Moran.

SENATOR JERRY MORAN

Mr. MORAN. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Commander, for your presence here and for your colleagues with

you. I had the opportunity to meet with members of the Kansas American Legion yesterday in my office—Dan Wylie [phonetic], Dave Wornkin [phonetic], and Gaylord Sandeman [phonetic]. We previewed the conversation we might have today, and I appreciate every year that you and the members of the American Legion come see me.

I also know, Commander, I know former National Commander Mike Helm very well, a Kansan, and I recognize the tremendous amount of work that goes into the job that you have, and we welcome you when you visit our state.

You have more credibility, Commander, than I do, but I think the American Legion and I are on a mission together. You have been—American Legion has been an ally in everything that I can think of we worked on in regard to veterans for as long as I have been in Congress. But I want to give you the chance to help me get a piece of legislation passed.

Today I introduced, with a number of my colleagues, legislation called the Fairness For Korean DMZ Veterans Act. What we have learned is that there are veterans who had exposure to chemicals, to Agent Orange, in the Korean DMZ prior to the current preemptive—I am sorry—the presumptive date of April 1968. Evidence from the Department of Defense shows that testing and spray of Agent Orange and other herbicides was being conducted prior to that April 1968 date, and yet the VA has not changed its current dates for that presumptive eligibility to reflect those instances of earlier exposure.

So this legislation corrects that mistake, that error. It requires the VA to recognize the facts as we now know them, and in the process take care of many veterans, many military men and women who were exposed to something that is very dangerous to them, and I might add something that can be very dangerous to their children and grandchildren. It is—I have every expectation that every man and woman who served in our military knew that they were risking themselves, their own lives, and their own futures. What a tremendous burden it must be to know that your actions in serving our country could have caused harm to your children and grandchildren, something that no one would ever want.

So we have worked on a number of instances to try to deal with Agent Orange and other chemicals. Commander, I believe that the American Legion supports this legislation. If you say yes I am going to ask you to explain to me and to my colleagues why.

Mr. Reistad. Well, Senator Moran, absolutely yes, and let me just go back about a week in time to my travels in Mississippi. I had the occasion to sit with a veteran at a function that we were at, who began a conversation with me regarding this very issue. He served in the United States Army in 1967 along the DMZ, and he informed me that while he was there he observed the defoliant Agent Orange being sprayed along the areas that he was situated at the DMZ.

And he inquired about the status of the legislation, the prior legislation that you had introduced into Congress, and I did some quick searches on my smart phone and came up with the legislation and the information he requested, and noticed that there was no traction on that. I guess it never got out of committee for a vote.

And he was very disappointed to hear that. And the man obviously had obvious Parkinson's. He was shaking and he expressed great concern over that.

And that, I think, is where the wheels went in motion, and I made it a point to convey those concerns to our legislative director sitting beside me. And it was through his efforts that your office was contacted and this legislation will again be introduced. And I am so thankful for that and I assure you he will be as well.

Mr. MORAN. Thank you for relaying that story. I would tell you our previous efforts, our continuing efforts in regard to Agent Orange and other toxic chemicals. We have had some success, and portions of that legislation have become law, pulled out of that legislation and passed with other pieces of legislation, including the declassification, more declassification of Department of Defense records, so that a veteran can better access and prove his case, or her case, of where they were stationed and what their chances of exposure to those toxic substances were. And the medical research has now been conducted that further demonstrates the connection between generations and exposure to Agent Orange.

So we are setting the stage for additional opportunities for Congress and for the American people to support those who served our country and served it in a way that caused them to be exposed to chemicals very dangerous to their health, and perhaps to their families' health.

So, Commander, thanks for being an ally in this regard and thank you for your endorsement of that legislation.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you, sir.

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back. Senator, I want you to know that the Korean War veterans exposed to Agent Orange are covered under Section 3 of my bill, H.R. 299, so I look forward to working with you.

I now would like to recognize the gentlewoman from Hawaii, Senator Hirono, for five minutes.

SENATOR MAZIE HIRONO

Mr. HIRONO. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I join all my colleagues in thanking all of you for being here today, for your service, and I would like to give a shout-out to the folks from Hawaii. And if you are still in the audience and can stand I would like to recognize John Williams and David Carlson from Hawaii. They came a long way to be with us. Mahalo.

[Applause.]

Mr. HIRONO. Commander, last year, as you mentioned, we passed very important legislation, the VA Mission Act, to overhaul the Choice program. And we want to make sure, though, that we are not heading toward privatizing, as you put it, the greatest health care system in the country.

So I wanted to get your thoughts on a specific thing that is happening under the implementation of the Mission Act. The VA recently released the proposed access standards for community care under the Mission Act. Are you at all concerned that the access standards, which I assume you are familiar with what I am talking about, as it is proposed, could move us toward privatizing the VA system?

Mr. REISTAD. Senator, thank you for your question, and with the consent of the Chairman I would like to ask Chairman Bozella to respond.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Thank you, Senator. The Mission Act, of course, is on everybody's radar screen, very high. The American Legion worked hard on the Mission Act with other entities of Congress and VA to make this a reality.

I think the first thing that we always need to keep foremost in all of our minds is all care through VA is VA care. We sometimes seem to forget that when we talk about care of the community or non-VA care, those kind of terms. And when it comes to—whether or not that is privatization, we are carefully monitoring every aspect of that to ensure that if it turns into privatization we will raise the flag.

The thing about VA care is as long as we know that it is VA care, if there are problems, and somebody was mentioning earlier there are always going to be problems, a new system coming on and all that, we know where to go. We are going to go to VA as a VSO, as a leading VSO, to work with them to help fix that problem. We are going to be here to testify before you about those problems. If it is all privatized, who do we go to? So we have to remember—

Mr. HIRONO. Exactly.

Mr. BOZELLA. —we have got to work hard to keep it VA care. And we are familiar with the access standards. We had some input into that. And the one concern that we have is urgent care and the \$30 copays on the third visit. We are not going to be in acceptance of any copays for service-connected disabled veterans.

Mr. HIRONO. Thank you very much.

Commander, I am glad that you mentioned that suicide prevention is still a major factor, a major concern, and that suicide rates are going up. So there was a GAO study regarding what the VA is doing in preventing suicides, and so I do thank Senator Blumenthal, who is right here with us—not to steal his thunder—but under his leadership Senators Boozman, Tillis, who you heard from earlier, and I will be introducing tomorrow Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act. And this bill does make reference to the GAO report and the shortcomings in the VA. So we are on that page with you, Commander.

There was also a reference to the telehealth services, because much of our country is in rural areas. It is an issue that Senator Harris and I took up and there is a provision—there was a provision in the Mission Act to allow for more telehealth, and I am glad to know that it is working out and that you would like to see that further developed.

So, the other questions were already asked, but we are on the page with all of you. Thank you so very much for being here. Mahalo. I yield back.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you.

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back. I would now like to recognize the gentleman from Vermont, Mr. Sanders.

SENATOR BERNIE SANDERS

Mr. SANDERS. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and let me thank Commander Reistad for being here and your fantastic staff.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you.

Mr. SANDERS. And let me thank all of the men and women in the room. You have done something above and beyond what human beings are normally asked to do. You have put your lives on the line to defend this country, and all of us are deeply grateful to you. And it seems to me, having made that commitment to this country, we owe you nothing less than, among other things, the best quality health care that this nation can provide to anybody. You have deserved that and we thank you for that.

[Applause.]

And I also want to thank the Legion not only for the great work you do on veterans' issues but what you do in our communities. In Vermont, for example, your Boys State and Girls State programs are very, very important. I worry very much that a lot of the young people in our country, the kids in this country do not understand what you put your lives on the line to defend. They do not know what the Constitution of America is about. They do not know what democracy is about. And you do a great job, in a very nonpartisan way, in Vermont, in getting kids to think about these important issues. So thank you very much for doing that.

I had the honor of being Chairman of this Senate Committee a number of years ago, and we tried to do our best to expand VA health care. We did not quite get the support that we wanted, the bipartisan support that we wanted. But there was one issue—two issues, actually—that we raised, one where I think we have had some success, one not so much success.

When we talk about health care it has always seemed to me that dental care is part of health care. All right?

[Applause.]

Mr. REISTAD. Absolutely.

Mr. SANDERS. And I can tell you that in Vermont you have got a lot of veterans who have serious problems with their teeth, and if you have dental problems that could lead to other health problems. And one of the things we tried to do is to make dental care a part of VA health care, not just for service-connected folks but for every veteran who accesses VA health care. Commander, is that something that makes sense to you?

Mr. REISTAD. Mr. Chairman, thank you for your question. Absolutely it makes sense to me, and I would like to ask Director Nuntavong to please elaborate on that.

Mr. NUNTAVONG. Thank you for your question, Senator. As I testified before the Senate Committee a few months ago, dental care is health care. Our veterans deserve that health care. When I was on active duty I saw the dentist twice a year regularly to receive my care, and that care needs to continue on as I am a veteran of these United States.

Mr. SANDERS. All right. So I look forward—we will introduce legislation, and have in the past, to make dental care part of VA health care, and we look forward to working with you on that.

Let me touch on the broader issue that Senator Hirono and Senator Tester and others have raised. And I can recall like it was yes—

terday, I think it was right in this room, when I was Chair we had a hearing and we had all of the veterans' organizations. We had the Legion there, we had the VFW, the DAV, and so forth. And I went down the list and I asked them whether they thought VA health care was of high quality. And without exception, including the American Legion, the answer was yes, we are proud of what the VA does. Could it be better? We all agree it can.

But one of the things we are also aware of, because the VA is government program, that every time there is a problem in the VA it makes the front pages of the newspapers. When there is a problem in a private hospital, somehow it does not make the front pages of the paper.

Now one of the concerns that I have is we have a national health care system with a lot of problems. We have got 30 million people uninsured. We have even more underinsured with high deductibles and copayments. We pay the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. And in many ways the VA has dealt with that issue. It has said, "Come on in to the VA. We are going to give you holistic health care, and the door is open to you, and the cost of prescription drugs will be lower than in the private sector."

It is no secret to you, or to any American—now there are big differences of opinion here in Congress. There are people who do believe in privatization. And what I fear very much is if we continue to put all kinds of money into the private sector you are going to be taking money out of the VA. And I worry very much that as we speak today there are 46,000 vacancies in VA health care, and we cannot expect VA to provide the quality care they should if there are those kinds of vacancies.

Do you share the concern that some of us have raised about the fact that we are not adequately funding the VA in making sure that we fill those vacancies? Is that a concern, Commander, that you have?

Mr. REISTAD. Senator Sanders, I would like to ask Director Shuman to please respond to your question.

Mr. SHUMAN. Thank you so very much, Senator. It is absolutely crucial that we fill the 46,000 vacancies at VA. As I have said, you have no greater friend than the American Legion in really working on reforms and legislation to make that happen.

Mr. SANDERS. Okay. And, by the way, thank you, Matt, thank you very much for coming to Vermont for that very great town meeting we did.

Mr. Chairman, my time has expired. Thank you very much. I yield.

Chairman TAKANO. The gentleman yields back. I am informed that Dr. Roe, the Ranking Member of the House Committee would like to—I would like to recognize him for five minutes.

REPRESENTATIVE PHIL ROE

Dr. ROE. Well, it looks like the news story today is that Senator Sanders moved over to the Republican side.

[Laughter.]

Chairman TAKANO. Mr. Chairman, he is still to the left.

Mr. SANDERS. Not very likely.

[Laughter.]

Chairman TAKANO. But he is still seated to the left.

Dr. ROE. Glad to have you here, Senator. First of all, Matt, thank you—excuse me, Mr. Shuman. You have a great staff, Commander, it is a pleasure to work with you guys, so thank you for that.

I want to go through a few things very quickly. As the Chairman just said, the bill we passed in the House last year did cover the Korean—the area in Korea that was sprayed by Agent Orange, for the Blue Water Navy. I have some empathy with that because I stomped around that piece of ground for about a year of my life.

I also want to congratulate the Legion on its 100th birthday. My old division, Second Division, stood up 101 years ago, so it is basically the same age of the Legion. And I also want to thank the Legion. One of the pieces of legislation that I carry with some pride from this is the Harry Colmery Forever GI Bill. That is a great—I used the GI Bill in 1975, when I got out of the Army, and I am grateful, Commander, to this day, of the \$300 a month that my country invested in me at that time to finish my education. And now that you can use it the rest of your life, technology is changing so rapidly, that I thought that was—and we fully paid for that.

I do want to mention just one thing, and, Matt, you were very clear on that. Those 46,000, they are funded positions. When I got here in the Congress, in 2009, we spent \$97.5 billion on all VA care. That is health care, disability benefits, and cemeteries.

And I also want to say one thing about cemeteries. Nobody in the world does it better than the VA. The VA cemeteries are phenomenal. I visited, I do not know how many. I have one a mile from my home in Johnson City, Tennessee. I tell you, if you ever go to sacred ground it is a VA cemetery, or a national cemetery, this government does. And we went—last year we took a group to Europe to see the World War II and World War I cemeteries. It was an extremely moving time for me to have visited those areas and to see how sacred that ground is.

We were spending 97.5. Our budget last year was north of \$200 billion. So the VA has been funded, and everywhere I go ask them, "Do you have adequate resources to carry out your mission?" And basically what they tell me at the VA medical centers and other places, they do have adequate funding to do that. Are there areas that need more funding? Sure. But I think right now that the VA, at least what I hear from the central office and from going down to various places that they have that.

Suicide, to me, is one of the things I think that has bothered me the most—a young person, or even someone my age now that sees that as their only out in life. I mentioned, when Commander Hastings, the Tennessee Guard was here before, he, when he commanded—he has been replaced now—but they started a program called Guard Your Buddy, and he had four suicides in the first 40 days he was the commander of the Tennessee Guard. We have got to do something.

So they put this program in and they have reduced suicide in the Tennessee Guard by almost 70 percent. And I asked, "Is this scalable?" It is, to our guard and reservist members and we should look at programs that work like that, and do not reinvent the wheel. Do that across the country. I think that is doable and it is not very expensive.

And I asked last year—we were spending \$8 billion a year—Senator Boozman talked about this—on mental health issues and suicide, and we had not moved the needle at all. So I said, “Why do not we do something different?” And we had our hearing last September, and then a roundtable following that, and the Chairman is going to continue this, I know, and work with us on trying to find out what works. And let us quit doing the same thing. Let us do something different.

Lastly, and basically I want to ask you guys, on the Appeals Modernization Act. I guess our office is probably the most common thing we deal with are appeals that are backlogged. How do you guys see the new AMA program working? And it just went live last week for everybody, and which—how do you advise a—one of your members which lane to get into?

Mr. REISTAD. Well, thank you for your question, Congressman, and I would ask our Chairman, Ralph Bozella, of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation to respond to your question please.

Mr. ROE. Thank you.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Thank you, Dr. Roe. Of course, the American Legion worked with Congress, with VA, with the Board of Veterans Appeals to design and develop that legislation. It was signed by the President on our stage at our national convention in 2017, and we believe it will work.

And the key to that is training—training our service officers how to do this in the best way, how to give that advice to that veteran, making that choice of the higher review, the supplemental claim, or going directly to the Board of Veterans Appeals. And that is where we are going to focus our efforts. There is not a simple answer for everybody. It is up to that veteran to make that choice, based on the information that we can provide them.

Dr. ROE. Thank you. I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Bozella.

Chairman TAKANO. Thank you. Chairman Roe yields— Ranking Member Roe yields back. I would like to now recognize the gentleman from Connecticut, former Marine veteran, Senator Blumenthal, for five minutes.

SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to you and members of the House Committee for being here today. We appreciate your coming over to the Senate side, whether it is the left or the right part of the dais and podium. And thank you, Commander, for you and your team being here and your leadership day in and day out. I know from my experience in Connecticut, as a proud member of the Legion, that you are involved in so many community activities, and particularly the Boys State activities where two of my sons—three of my sons have participated, I believe, two of them now veterans themselves. And they better be members of the American Legion, as a matter of fact, if they know what is good for them.

I want to thank Tom Flowers—I think he is here today—the commander of the Connecticut department. Thank you very much, and everyone from Connecticut who is here. This is a great day for you to be here, when we are introducing legislation in honor of your being here, the Reach Every Veteran in Crisis Act, which I

am helping to lead along with my colleagues, Senators Boozman, Sullivan, Hirono, and Brown—you heard Senator Hirono talk about it—because the VA has failed in reaching out to veterans who are at risk of suicide, spending only a tiny fraction of the money appropriated by the United States Congress for them to do their job.

There has not been a lot of talk this morning about the Blue Water Navy Act. We came literally within a hair in the Senate. One or two members blocked unanimous consent from our proceeding with the House bill. Thanks to the House, which was, I think, near unanimous in supporting it. Unfortunately, here in the Senate we dropped the ball. And again, coming to the VA, I must say we all regret that Secretary Wilkie has been equivocal. Members of his team have been less than forthcoming in their support. I think that is an understatement. I am here to ask for your continued support in passing the Blue Water Navy Bill.

[Applause.]

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you, Senator. We absolutely are in support of that, and let me take a moment of personal privilege. My Legion cover may say Virginia but I entered the United States Army out of New Haven, Connecticut.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Thank you for your service, and thank you for that Connecticut connection. We are proud of it. Thank you.

The Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act. I am the co-sponsor of the measure that Senator Moran mentioned earlier, because our battlefields are so rife with toxics and poisonous substances, whether it is burn pits or the nerve gas that are found literally on today's battlefield in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, where our men and women are exposed to those risks.

The Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act looks to the time that is necessary for diseases to manifest themselves. One of our fellow American Legion members, Gerry Wright, has championed this step. He was my guest at the State of the Union. We spoke to a lot of my colleague about the need for the Agent Orange Exposure Fairness Act, not only for the Vietnam veterans but also for veterans elsewhere in the world—the Korean DMZ, for example, where they have been similarly exposed to Agent Orange, which is a pesticide. It is a toxic chemical that has caused illnesses that we have not properly accounted for, and I hope for your support of that measure as well.

Mr. REISTAD. Senator, I believe we approved a resolution for that at our last national convention. Mr. Wright has been in continual contact with me about that, and I know he has been traveling around the country asking for support of that legislation and doing a dynamite job at it. So you have our support.

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. He has been tireless. As you know, he traveled across the country on his motorcycle with the insignia "Sprayed and Betrayed," which is a powerful way to put the betrayal of trust by the VA in those veterans who suffer from those diseases, as he does. And he is a real champion and I know he has been in touch with you, probably quite frequently. He is a great advocate.

And again, I just want to finish by thanking all of your team. They do just a remarkable job here in the Nation's Capital and all around the country. Thank you so much.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you.

Chairman TAKANO. The Senator yields back. I want to now recognize the gentleman from Texas, a new member of Congress, Mr. Allred, for five minutes.

REPRESENTATIVES COLIN ALLRED

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and if there are any Texans who have hung in there I would love it if you could raise our hand or stand up. Just let me see you up there. Thank you so much to the Texans for your incredible service. I am incredibly honored to be representing Dallas. Commander Reistad, thank you so much for being here today and to your incredible staff.

I understand that I owe you a happy birthday coming up here, nearly 100 years of incredible service to our nation's combat veterans, and to really all of our veterans. And so on behalf of the 34,000 veterans in my district, and really, all of the people who live in my district, I want to thank you and everybody at the Legion for all of your incredible service to our country.

Mr. REISTAD. Thank you.

Mr. ALLRED. I had the honor of being an appointee in the Obama administration at the Department of Housing and Urban Development before I sought this office, and we placed a large focus on combating and ending veterans' homelessness, through the HUD and VA supportive housing program. And I was concerned to see, in 2017, a rise in veterans' homelessness. I am happy to see that there was a slight reversal of that in 2018.

And I would like to just ask you where we stand how HUD and the VA are working together with you and with other VSOs to combat veterans' homelessness, moving forward.

Mr. REISTAD. I would like to ask our legislative director, Matt Shuman, to elaborate, please.

Mr. SHUMAN. Thank you for the question, Congressman. Making sure that there is not one homeless veteran on the street is absolutely the critical mission, one of the critical missions of the American Legion. The point in time, in December, just a few months ago, roughly we had about 30,000 veterans at any given point who were homeless, and I think we have already said this, that is too many.

The HUD-VASH program and the SSVF programs really need to be made permanent. We need the staff that run those programs, do not need to be worrying about if they are going to have a job in six months. If they are worrying about themselves, how are they worrying about providing quality services and wraparound services to veterans?

Further, it is not just about giving a homeless veteran home. We can give them the biggest mansion in America. Unless we also provide those wraparound services, from health care to job placement and mental health, they are going to end up back on the street. So we really need to take care of those veterans.

Mr. ALLRED. Thank you, Mr. Shuman. I completely agree with you and I think that your recommendation is right on. It is hard for us to plan long-term around a temporary program, and also, homelessness often has so many factors that go into it and providing a home is only one step in combating that. So thank you for that. We will certainly be working towards that.

Chairman Bozella, I wanted to thank you for mentioning some of the creative therapies that are out there for veterans. We have a great organization in Dallas called Equest that does great work with our veterans through equine therapy, which you mentioned specifically. And I am deeply concerned, as many of the members who have spoken here today are, about suicide prevention and what we can do to use creative methods to provide our veterans with the care that they need.

And when I visited with the VA in Dallas, which is the second-largest VA in the country, they expressed interest in having some help in working with some of the outside groups to kind of better form other forms of therapies and to use some of the resources that are at their disposal in a more efficient way. What can we do, in Congress, to help those organizations, work with our VA to make sure that all of the resources that we have out there—and there are a number of great groups out there that are doing this kind of work—that they are actually at the fingertips of the VA?

Mr. REISTAD. Chairman Bozella.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Thank you, Congressman Allred. The number one thing that needs to happen is for VA to believe that alternative therapies are, in fact, viable, that they do work for people. One of the things that they do is they help veterans stay in the evidence-based therapies, the cognitive-based therapies, the prolonged exposure. Some of that therapy can be very difficult for people, and I am sure Dr. Roe would understand that, how tough it is to relive a traumatic experience.

And sometimes they want to leave, and the CAM, we call it, complementary and alternative medicines, keeps them engaged. It does give them a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. The equine stuff I think you are referring, it is almost magical what happens when veterans are teamed up with a horse and they have to care for that horse. That is a sense of purpose. That is a sense of belonging, having to care for another being. And those kind of things work tremendously.

So I think VA, they—and, by the way, they are coming around to this stuff now, and it has taken a while but they are getting there. I am glad to hear Dallas is interested. You can talk to the American Legions, the VFWs in your areas. You can get that kind of support from VSOs, and I am sure they will be there for you.

Mr. ALLRED. We will do that. My time has expired but I just wanted to again thank all of you for being here. Thank you for your service to our country, and thank you so much for helping us understand things that we need to be working on to make sure that we keep our commitment to our veterans.

Chairman TAKANO. The gentleman yields back. I would now like to recognize myself for five minutes and just ask a few questions.

Commander, the 2017 Government Accountability Office report found that VA faces significant challenges in recruiting and retaining employees. As we have said earlier, as was said earlier in the hearing, over 10 percent of full-time authorized and budgeted positions, funded positions, amounts to about 45,000 vacancies, and most of these being health care providers.

Does the Legion have some specific recommendations about how VA can attract high-quality applicants and recommendations on

how to reduce the long and cumbersome hiring and onboarding process at VA?

Mr. REISTAD. Absolutely. Absolutely we do, Mr. Chairman, and I would like to ask Chairman Bozella to please address that question.

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Representative Chairman Takano, that is one of the—the number one causes we see for the number of vacancies there are in VA health care is the onboarding process. Yeah, there is a gap with money, certainly, but the process, it takes three months or longer to recruit, to interview, to do paperwork, to actually bring that person on board is a very difficult process.

I believe that Senator Cory Gardner from Colorado would like to introduce legislation that is calling for a pilot program in at least 10 VA sites to reduce the onboarding process. That would make a difference.

Chairman TAKANO. So it is not my imagination. It is not—you are verifying or validating some of the anecdotal stories I am hearing about internists or specialists saying they have not even received an acknowledgment they have applied to the VA, and that these are people that want to work for the VA and are highly employable, but the VA's lengthy process of hiring has, you know, forced these individuals to just take other employment before they accept employment or even get interviewed at the VA.

Mr. BOZELLA. If I may, Commander—

Mr. REISTAD. You may.

Mr. BOZELLA. —Mr. Chairman, if you think about some of the really competitive health care environments in certain cities—the Bay Area, Chanin and I were there just a few weeks ago, and New York City, Denver, places that are growing like that. And you have a competitive health care environment and people are coming there applying for jobs, and if it takes three to four month to get hired with the VA for less money, or if they can get hired at a private hospital much sooner, at more money, which way do you think they would go?

Chairman TAKANO. Yeah. Well, one other question related to this. Senator Sanders and I, in the Choice Act, we were able to, along with other members and also the help of the Republican—my Republican colleagues, we inserted about 1,500 medical residencies into that bill, newly funded medical residencies across the country. Do you believe that the overall physician shortage is contributing to our difficulties in hiring and retaining?

Mr. BOZELLA. Thank you, Commander. Mr. Chairman, yes, the overall physician shortages, especially in rural areas, absolutely does contribute to this particular problem.

Chairman TAKANO. Great. Well, I am going to yield— cut my questions short. I want to give now Ranking Member Roe his opportunity to give his closing statement.

Dr. ROE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A couple of things on alternative therapy, Mr. Bozella. I asked some wounded warriors, would they like to fish. And so the people that were doing that, they said, "Yeah, but are they going to catch any fish?" I said, "I can guarantee you they will. I have a fish hatchery in my district, so we have worked that out pretty well." They caught a lot of fish.

And back to hiring, as the Chairman is speaking of, he is absolutely right. Look, I can hire someone in my practice before VA can lick a stamp. They have got to get their act together on hiring people quicker, these qualified people, and especially on medical professionals—nurses, PAs, all of that. You are 100 percent correct on that.

Thank you, and as we finish today I want to thank all the Legion members who have taken their time away from their families to come here today to be with us. I want to thank you for that.

I would like to bring something to your attention, Commander, and the folks in the room, and ask for your help. And I know the VA—the Legion is an ardent supporter of all constitutional rights.

Yesterday, we in the House voted on a rule that would permit limited debate on legislation that would impact veterans' Second Amendment rights. This bill, H.R. 1112 will be considered in the House later today, this afternoon, a bill that unfortunately has had very little debate, minimal committee process. A little-known and poorly understood provision of this bill would amend the law to read as follows: "It shall be unlawful to sell any firearm or ammunition to any person knowing or having reasonable cause to believe such person has been adjudicated with mental illness, severe developmental disabilities, or severe emotional instability."

To put this in perspective, there are over 1.6 million disabled veterans with a service-connected adjudication by VA of mental illness, including nearly 1 million with PTSD. H.R. 1112 has the potential to add all names of those veterans to the FBI's NICS list and prevent those veterans from being able to purchase or possess a firearm. I offered that amendment to clarify that veterans with VA mental illnesses and other affected adjudication to be exempt from the bill's standard, but that was ruled out of order.

Many people do not realize that the VA already regularly sends the names of veterans who have a VA fiduciary for inclusion on the NICS list, not because there is a concern that the veteran might be a harm to themselves or others but because VA has determined that that veteran needs assistance in handling his or her financial benefits.

I am concerned that the expanded definition proposed in H.R. 1112 would infringe on the Second Amendment rights of millions of veterans solely because they sought the benefits from VA that they have rightly earned to their service to our country and now have been adjudicated with a service-connected mental illness. But like those veterans with fiduciaries, even though there may not be—there may not have ever been a finding by judicial authority, a judge, that the veteran possesses a danger to themselves or society, these veterans would be told that they were good enough to use a firearm to fight for our freedoms but not good enough to bear arms as a civilian.

The last thing I want to do is discourage veterans from seeking VA benefits because they are afraid it might cost a constitutional right if they receive a rating decision for a service-connected mental illness.

And look, we need your help with this, just to slow this down and debate it, and everyone up here wants people who are mentally unstable not to have a firearm. There is not a person in this room

that does not want that. But we do not want veterans who protect the rights of the Constitution to give up those rights.

Please, I ask for your help just to slow this down. I do not think it was intended. I do not think that was an intention with this bill, but I think that certainly is going to be what happens.

Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you. It is a privilege to serve with you on the Committee and I look forward to working in the next—this Congress to carry out all the things we talked about, and hopefully more, and with that I yield back my time.

Chairman TAKANO. I thank the gentleman. I just want to address briefly the concerns raised by my friend and colleague, Phil Roe, about the bill that he mentioned. That bill will not come up for a vote today. It will come up for a vote tomorrow, scheduled for tomorrow.

I want to say that the concern arises out of, actually, language that was meant to replace a more offensive, current language, language in the current law, which refers to people who are mentally defective. That is obviously outdated, offensive language, and the Judiciary Committee looked for—struggled to find language that would replace the current language of "mentally defective." That is wrong, that is terrible language, and that is actually in the current law.

The language that is currently in the bill is meant to be placeholder language. They are trying to find the right terms, so that what Dr. Roe talked about—and he actually said—he used the word "potentially," potentially. And we are talking here about getting the language right so that it cannot be interpreted in such a way that veterans who have financial difficulties are not put on the NICS list. We want to avoid that from happening. You know, people on my side of the aisle are interested and committed to protecting the Second Amendment rights, especially of our nation's veterans.

And so the Chairman, Chairman Nadler, my understanding is that he is writing a letter assuring that any final language of the bill, before it is sent over to the Senate, is corrected, and he is committed to working with the veteran service organizations and getting this language correct.

So stay tuned. We will be in communication. I have been—as soon as I heard Dr. Roe bring this concern to yesterday's joint hearing I immediately went into work, as the Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the House, to work with the Democratic leadership to problem- solve this particular issue.

But let me just say that I always, always enjoy these joint hearings and hearing the priorities of the American Legion. We will be meeting with the Secretary of the Veterans Affairs Department today, Secretary Wilkie. I will be pressing him on the question of will he be appealing the Blue Water Navy decision, and I will encourage him to desist from doing that. And regardless of his answers, we are going to move forward with the Blue Water Navy bill, as I have introduced it in this session of Congress, and we are going to pass that bill, and we are going to press the Senate to get it done, and we are going to get this issue off the table in the 116th Congress.

[Applause.]

And I want to acknowledge that Dr. Roe had taken this over the finish line in the House, and to clarify there was some doubt about whether the vote was unanimous. It was unanimous. Thank you, Phil Roe, for that unanimous vote in the last Congress, and we are going to get it done—we are going to get it done in the Senate, and what I need your help with is to make sure that no Senator stands in the way of Blue Water Navy—the Blue Water Navy bill solution. So thank you.

Let me also say that I do appreciate the Legion's stance on the 30-minute access standard. I do think it still raises questions. It is potentially a good thing, also potentially something that could result in a diversion of precious health care dollars away from the existing internal capacity of the VA to serve veterans.

It is potential. It is all a matter of how this administration, you know, rolls out and implements the Mission Act. And, of course, we will be working very closely with the VA—with the American Legion, to make sure that the rollout of the Mission Act and its implementation is done in such a way that we build capacity, internal capacity, and we are flexible enough to reach the veterans where they are and to make sure they get health care that is second to none.

We will also be doing our level best to make sure that the Forever GI Bill is implemented, and I certainly do appreciate the American Legion stance on closing the 90/10 loophole. That will do much to protect our student veterans and to ensure that they are on their way to success in our economy and the job market.

And with that—

Dr. ROE. Mr. Chairman, may I be recognized for just one minute?
Chairman TAKANO. I will yield for—

Dr. ROE. Thank you. Just to clarify a few points on this 1112, I am not trying to engage in fear-mongering but I am concerned where H.R. 1112 may take us. It is my belief that the Judiciary Committee did not mean to have this negative impact on veterans. However, I do think that the process of 1112 has been rushed and that is an unintended consequence. Additionally, we cannot ignore the very real implications for our veterans, even if that is not the intent of the bill. It can happen.

I am also not saying that a simple diagnosis of a mental health condition alone would amount to a veteran's name being sent to the NICS list. On that, I think that the NICS Improvement Act of 2007 is fairly clear. But right now, via adjudications that certain veterans require a fiduciary to handle their financial benefits are deemed to meet adjudication as a mental defect, requirement under Title 18, and those veterans are placed on the NICS list.

The process itself would not change as a result of H.R. 1112, only the definition. Under current law, quote, mental defective definition is already binding on VA and based on current law, VA regularly sends veterans' names to the FBI. And again, under H.R. 1112, nothing about that process would change, but the definition of who should be added to the NICS list would be significantly expanded.

That is why I think it is a very real possibility that VA ratings decisions that award service connection for PTSD or other mental illnesses, just like current VA adjudications that a veteran requires

a fiduciary would cause our nation's brave men and women who serve to lose their constitutional rights to bear arms.

And to be clear, I am not saying that no veteran should not be placed on this NICS list. We all know that is true. But I do believe that we must tread very carefully and ensure that proper due process is given and that a judicial authority, not a VA rater or a bureaucrat, should be the one who decides whether or not a veteran is a harm to themselves or others before we look at infringing on their constitutional rights. It is a slippery slope we are on.

Chairman Takano, I appreciate your indulgence. You have been very good about this, and I yield back my time.

Chairman TAKANO. Well, I do believe in a robust and thorough and complete discussion of the issues of the day, including—and especially including the fundamental issues of our constitutional rights and of the Second Amendment.

But let me just say that 90 percent of Americans—90 percent of Americans, including overwhelming majorities of those who belong to the National Rifle Association, believe that background checks are reasonable, and in order to make those background checks effective we need to have, you know, the NICS list also complete.

And that being said, we are working—I think working with VSOs like the American Legion. The Chairman and the parties can get this language correct. We are talking about trying to replace outmoded, offensive language that already exists in law, and to find that sweet spot in a law that makes the NICS list complete but also does not unfairly—unfairly and unjustly put our nation's veterans on those lists.

So with that I would like to call—to adjourn these proceedings, and thank you, the American Legion, for another great year of testimony.

Mr. Reistad. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 12:36 p.m., the Joint Committees were adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Material Submitted for the Hearing Record



THE AMERICAN LEGION



THE AMERICAN LEGION LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Submitted to accompany testimony before Congress by
American Legion National Commander Brett P. Reistad
February 27, 2019

PREAMBLE TO THE AMERICAN LEGION CONSTITUTION

FOR GOD AND COUNTRY
WE ASSOCIATE OURSELVES
TOGETHER FOR THE FOLLOWING PURPOSES:

- To uphold and defend the Constitution
of the United States of America;
- To maintain law and order;
- To foster and perpetuate a
one hundred percent Americanism;
- To preserve the memories and incidents
of our associations in the Great Wars;
- To inculcate a sense of individual obligation
to the community, state and nation;
- To combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses;
- To make right the master of might;
- To promote peace and goodwill on earth;
- To safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of
justice, freedom and democracy;
- To consecrate and sanctify our comradeship
by our devotion to mutual helpfulness.

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Mission continues beyond basic training

Mission. It's a word we take very seriously in The American Legion. It's a word that has been ingrained in every member of our organization since the first day of military basic training. Some Legionnaires were wounded while carrying out missions. Many lost friends, comrades and even family members who made the ultimate sacrifice for the nation we love, during a mission.

A century ago, The American Legion was founded by veterans who had a post-war mission. Their mission, one that continues today, was to care for veterans, provide patriotic programs for our nation's youth, advocate for a strong national defense and instill societal pride in what it means to be American.

It is fitting that the most significant veterans legislation passed by Congress in 2018 was called the VA MISSION Act. By reforming the Department of Veterans Affairs health-care infrastructure, streamlining community care, expanding caregiver benefits, increasing access to private-sector care and recruiting quality health-care professionals, Congress is living up to President Lincoln's mission to "care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

An important aspect of The American Legion's legislative agenda – or mission – is to expand upon Lincoln's promise and include equal benefits and respect for "her who shall have borne the battle, and for her widow and her orphan."

And just as the most successful missions in the military require strong leadership, VA cannot accomplish great tasks on its own. It requires leadership from Congress and the White House, along with respectful dialog and assistance from The American Legion, our nation's largest veterans service organization.

It also requires "a devotion to mutual helpfulness." This is a mission that every American should undertake, and it is one that is enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion and recited by our members at every official Legion meeting.

This devotion must extend to support for our nation's first responders, Gold Star families and those working to prevent veteran suicide. Each of these communities has sacrificed enormously on our behalf. We owe them not only our gratitude but our tireless efforts to ensure that America never forgets its debt to those who have carried out their missions.

These are our legislative priorities. These are our callings. *These are our missions.*



Brett P. Reistad
National Commander
The American Legion

ABOUT THE COMMANDER

- » U.S. Army sergeant, Presidential Salute Battery, 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, (Old Guard) 1974-1978
- » Member of American Legion Post 270 in McLean, Va.
- » Retired lieutenant with the Fairfax County Police Department
- » Serves as law-enforcement services coordinator with the Regional Organized Crime Information Center
- » Elected American Legion national commander during the organization's 100th National Convention on Aug. 30, 2018

Brett P. Reistad
National Commander

WARTIME SERVICE

KEY POINTS

- Title 38, Part 3, Sec. 3.2 of the Code of Federal Regulations, dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs, lists official beginning and termination dates for most war periods, from the Indian Wars to the present day, to be used in determining the availability of veterans benefits.
- The American Legion recognizes the nearly 1,600 casualties suffered by members of the U.S. Armed Forces in service to the nation during unrecognized periods of hostilities.



The guided missile frigate USS *Stark* (FFG-31) lists to port after being hit by two Iraqi Exocet missiles within 30 seconds in May 1987. Thirty-seven U.S. sailors were killed during this unrecognized war period. *DoD Photo*

Unrecognized armed hostilities recognition

The American Legion, a congressionally chartered organization comprised of wartime service veterans, includes among its key purposes:

1. To preserve the memories and incidents of the great wars and other hostilities fought to uphold democracy;
2. To cement the ties and comradeship born of service; and
3. To provide mutual helpfulness to fellow veterans and continued service to community, state and nation.

Congress, usually through a declaration of war or authorization for the use of military force, has often designated the beginning dates of wars or armed conflicts while end dates have been traditionally designated via presidential proclamation or congressional legislation. In some instances, additional legislation extended the official timelines of war or armed conflict, to broaden the eligibility of veteran benefits.

The American Legion, and its nearly 2 million members, have identified fundamental shortcomings in the U.S. government's wartime service designations and calls on congressional leaders to reassess and expand the timeline and characterization of "wartime service."

Currently, the U.S. government recognizes only a few distinct official periods of war or armed conflict since World War II, such as Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon/Grenada/Panama and Gulf War/War On Terrorism. However, between these official periods, and during so-called "peacetime eras," **the U.S. military has been involved in frequent known armed hostilities resulting in nearly 1,600 U.S. personnel combat deaths and wounds.** Yet, their sacrifices remain unrecognized as "wartime service" because these hostile events fall outside the U.S. government's few distinct official periods of war or armed conflict.

The American Legion has aided, assisted and comforted those men,

women (and families) who were called into service or volunteered during all of the unrecognized armed hostile events, and to this day, the organization continuously provides support and aid to veterans regardless of wartime or peacetime service era. The Legion does this regardless of the veteran's membership status in the organization.

Many veterans of wartime and peacetime eras alike have asked The American Legion and Congress for greater inclusion within the organization's membership ranks, subsequent to a reassessed and expanded timeline that recognizes the services borne during armed hostile events not fitting within the government's current designated periods of war and armed conflict. These men and women wish only to stand counted and to join their fellow brothers and sisters-in-arms in continued service to the nation as American Legionnaires.

Likewise, and in accordance with the charter, history, tradition and purposes of The American Legion, it is fair, proper and reasonable that all military personnel who served on active military duty during all unrecognized armed hostilities be recognized in accordance with the U.S. government's reassessed and expanded designation of wartime service era.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Congress should pass S. 504, the Let Everyone Get Involved in Opportunities for National Service Act (LEGION Act), a bill aimed at authorizing The American Legion to determine the requirements for membership in The American Legion.
- Declare that the United States has been continuously engaged in a state of war from Dec. 7, 1941, to such date in the future as the U.S. government may determine that there has been an end to armed hostilities.

CURRENT OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED WAR ERAS

World War I	April 6, 1917, to November 11, 1918
World War II	December 7, 1941, to December 31, 1946
Korea	June 25, 1950, to January 31, 1955
Vietnam	February 28, 1961, to May 7, 1975
Lebanon/Grenada	August 24, 1982, to July 31, 1984
Panama	December 20, 1989, to January 31, 1990
August 2, 1990, to Present	Gulf War/ War on Terrorism

CARE

KEY POINT

- Modernizing the VA health-care system is an investment in VA's future and the best path forward.

“It is critical that we deliver a transformed VA health-care system that puts veterans at the center of everything we do. We are on the cusp of the greatest transformative period in the history of VA.”

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, testifying at a joint congressional hearing Dec. 19



Photo by Matthew Hinton

The future of VA health care

In 2018, Congress approved and the president signed into law the most significant legislation to transform the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health-care system since 1996 – the VA Maintaining Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act, or the VA MISSION Act. It includes provisions to consolidate all community care programs into a single, streamlined program; provides funding to extend the program through 2019; expands comprehensive assistance; strengthens the ability to recruit, hire and retain quality medical personnel; and reforms the VA health-care infrastructure.

The legislative package is comprised of five titles that address major areas of deficit, including: increased access to private-sector care, consolidation of community care programs, expansion of the Family Caregiver Program, and recruitment of qualified medical professionals.

One of the largest changes the legislation will bring to VA health care is the expansion of the Community Care Program. The VA MISSION Act gives veterans more control when it comes to their health care, such as: increased access to private-sector care, improvements to standards for quality, access to walk-in care, ensuring individuals can get appointments scheduled in a timely manner, and continuity of care. This section offers veterans access to community care if VA is unable to provide the services needed. Some considerations for access to community care include distance between the veteran and facility, type of service, timeliness of available appointments, and whether or not the veteran seeking care faces an excessive burden.

The VA MISSION Act also requires the prompt payment of providers. Service providers must be paid within 45 days for paper claims and under 30 days for electronic claims.

The VA MISSION Act requires VA to develop a program to educate veterans about their health-care options within the VA medical system.

CARE

These programs will teach veterans about: eligibility criteria for care under VA, priority enrollment groups, copayments and other financial obligations that fall on the veteran, as well as utilization of standards for quality and access. Veterans will be provided with information on how to file a complaint about their VA health care if they have problems.

Matters relating to non-VA providers include: a process to ensure safe opioid-prescribing practices, improved information sharing with community providers, competency standards for non-VA health-care providers and access to, and participation in, national and state-level prescription drug-monitoring programs. Additionally, Title I includes provisions to use the remaining Veterans Choice Fund to pay for health-care services at non-VA facilities or through non-VA providers, as well as permitting VA health-care professionals to provide treatment with telemedicine. The Family Caregiver Program is also addressed in this section of the VA MISSION Act. Title II requires VA to assess the capacity of each Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) and identify deficiencies within each VISN. Title III focuses on improving the recruitment and retention of quality health-care professionals by providing two-to-four-year scholarships to medical students in exchange for service at VA. The VA MISSION Act also increases the amount of education debt reduction available from \$120,000 to \$200,000 over five years, and establishes the VA Specialty Education Loan Repayment Program. It establishes a pilot program for veterans healing veterans by supporting four years of medical school education costs for two veterans at select medical schools. Another provision requires VA to ensure clinical staff are able to participate in the Education Debt Reduction Program.

Title IV develops a plan to address problems in underserved facilities and criteria for designating those facilities. These criteria include, but are not limited to, the ratio of veterans to providers, range of specialties covered and whether or not the facility is meeting VA's goals when it comes to wait times. In order to address the underserved facilities, the law creates a pilot program to provide medical deployment teams to these flagged facilities. Finally, it requires VA to establish medical residency programs at covered facilities.

Title V requires VA to submit annual reports on performance bonuses and awards given, including the amount of each bonus or award, the job title and the location where the recipients work. Additionally, Title V requires VA to be transparent with vacancy information on a VA website, mandates an Inspector General review of the website and requires VA to report annually the steps taken to reach full staffing capacity.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Ensure frequent oversight into how VA is implementing the VA MISSION ACT, to ensure the intention of the law is followed.
- Once the VA MISSION Act is fully implemented, conduct congressional hearings to ensure all programs are operating the way that best serves the 9 million veterans utilizing the VA health-care system.

“This nation owes our veterans more than a thank you. Veterans deserve a health-care system that works for them, regardless of where they live, what medical condition they are struggling with, and whatever their means. The VA MISSION Act makes the VA stronger, and allows veterans to seek care in their community when the VA can't deliver.

Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont.
Ranking Member, Senate
Veterans Affairs Committee

”

CARE

KEY POINTS

- The American Legion's System Worth Saving program assesses the quality of care and services at select VA facilities throughout the country.
- Nine million veterans use VA for health care.

“The state of VA is better ... We have a more experienced team in place at all levels, and it is better because we have a workforce dedicated to the care of veterans, their families, caregivers and survivors.”

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, in testimony before Congress on Sept. 26, 2018



Photo by Jared Soares

Protect the best care anywhere

In 2017, The American Legion contracted with Phillip Longman and Suzanne Gordon to evaluate VA health care and determine if it remains a system worth saving. The report showed that VA performs as well as, or better than, other health-care providers on quality measures like patient safety, patient satisfaction, care coordination and innovative medical practices.

VA operates the largest federally funded, integrated health-care delivery system in the United States. It serves 9 million veterans, employs nearly 400,000 people, and is one of the largest employers of veterans in the United States, with one-third of its workforce having served in uniform.

In 2018, The American Legion System Worth Saving Task Force visited 18 medical facilities to identify best practices and challenges and to offer recommendations to improve the delivery of health care at VA hospitals and community-based outpatient clinics (VBOC). Those visits revealed that VA facilities continue experiencing growth in veteran populations, need improved physical and information technology infrastructure and struggle with shortages of physicians and nurses.

The American Legion supports legislation that capitalizes on VA's strengths and core competencies while ensuring that veterans continue to have access to the best care.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Attend The American Legion's town hall meetings that are kickoff events for each System Worth Saving site visit. These meetings offer elected leaders the opportunity to hear directly from veterans about their VA health-care experiences.
- Do not sponsor or support legislation that authorizes VA to centralize operations successfully managed by local VA medical facilities.
- Enhance VA's ability to offer telehealth services and telemedicine to rural communities.

CARE



Photo by Lucas Carter

VA recruitment and retention

A 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report revealed significant challenges in recruiting and retaining employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs. The GAO determined that the largest critical needs were medical officers, nurses, psychologists, physicians' assistants, nurse practitioners and medical technologists.

As of June 2018, VA reported 45,239 overall vacancies out of a total of 419,353 full-time authorized and budgeted positions. Positions include 40,456 vacancies in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA); 1,978 vacancies in the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA); 233 vacancies in the National Cemetery Administration (NCA); and 2,572 vacancies in VA staff offices.

VA employment candidates must go through a long and cumbersome hiring and on-boarding process, causing many potential employees to ultimately look elsewhere. In order to compete with the private sector, VA also needs to do a better job showing why it is a good place to work and offer meaningful incentives to recruit and retain top talent.

The American Legion understands recruiting highly skilled health-care professionals to fill vacancies at VA facilities is an ambitious undertaking, given resources and regulatory constraints. Recruitment and retention solutions can be achieved, many without additional legislative action, to provide full staffing of top health-care professionals.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Pass legislation addressing the recruitment and retention challenges VA has regarding pay disparities among physicians and medical specialists who are providing direct health care to veterans.

KEY POINTS

- Through its System Worth Saving program, The American Legion has documented staffing shortages and recruitment performance challenges at dozens of VA care facilities.
- A 2017 GAO report found that VA's largest staffing shortages included physicians, registered nurses and psychologists.

“ VHA hires more than 2,800 mission-critical physicians annually. Yet, physicians have consistently been identified by VHA as a critical staffing priority due to recruitment and retention concerns.

Debra A. Draper, Director,
Health Care Team, Govern-
ment Accountability Office

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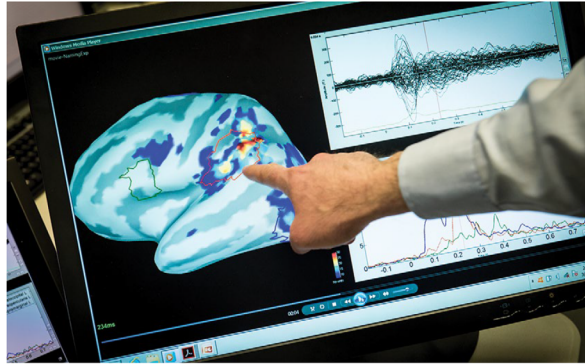
CARE

KEY POINTS

- The American Legion TBI/PTSD Committee understands, evaluates, expands awareness and advances research into effective therapies and treatments for TBI and PTSD.
- The Legion will continue to review methods and strategies to treat TBI and PTSD in order to reduce veteran suicide.

“Our veterans deserve the best medical care that we can offer. We believe that funding additional medical research will provide another tool in the physician’s toolbox for the treatment of TBI and PTSD.

Past National Commander
William Detweiler, Chairman,
 TBI/PTSD Committee



U.S. Air Force photo by J.M. Eddins Jr.

The road home from PTSD/TBI

Since 2001, U.S. troops have been engaged in combat on multiple continents in the Global War on Terrorism. More than 3 million Americans served in Iraq or Afghanistan through the first 17 years of the war, and VA projects a post-9/11 veteran population of just under 3.7 million by 2020.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have become known as the “signature wounds” of these wars, and in recent years, thousands of studies, articles and reports have focused on their effects on veterans and active-duty personnel. With no end to the Global War on Terrorism in sight, the post-9/11 cohort will continue to grow, as will the number of veterans requiring mental health care.

At least 370,688 servicemembers were medically diagnosed with TBI between 2000 and 2017, according to the Department of Defense. Researchers have reported that between 20 percent and 30 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have PTSD and/or depression. While the number of veterans diagnosed with TBI and PTSD is increasing significantly, the types of treatments offered remain limited and inadequate.

The American Legion’s TBI/PTSD Committee has spent eight years studying scientific research and meeting with clinicians, policy analysts and mental health experts to understand the problem and explore potential solutions.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Increase budgets for DoD and VA to improve the research, screening, diagnosis and treatment of TBI and PTSD.
- Urge DoD and VA to closely monitor and study drugs prescribed in potentially toxic combinations, particularly involving addictive benzodiazepines and opioids, especially when prescribed by non-VA providers through the Choice Program.
- Improve training for DoD and VA personnel to identify and prevent suicide risks.

CARE



Photo by Jacob Langston

KEY POINTS

- Women have voluntarily served in every war since the American Revolution.
- Women now routinely serve in combat and deserve equal benefits as their male counterparts.
- Female veterans are the fastest growing demographic in the veteran community.
- Hypertension, PTSD and depression are the top three diagnostic categories for women veterans treated at VA.

Improving care for women veterans

Never before have so many women servicemembers been routinely assigned to combat zones. They sustain the same types of injuries as their male counterparts. The number of women enrolled in the VA system is expected to grow by 33 percent over the next three years. VA must ensure women veterans receive gender-specific health care to meet their needs across the entire network. Finding ways to ensure that these veterans are welcome and receive the services they deserve is vital to The American Legion.

The 2017 Department of Veterans Affairs Women Veterans Report noted that the total population of women veterans is expected to increase at an average rate of about 18,000 per year for the next 10 years.

The American Legion strives to improve the quality of care for all women veterans.

The American Legion continues to focus on:

- Visiting VA health-care systems to explore any issues that could be preventing VA hospitals from providing gender-specific care
- Educating women veterans about the importance of identifying as a veteran
- Ensuring full-time gynecologists are available at all VA medical centers
- Advocating for an increase of female providers to assist female veterans who have been victims of Military Sexual Trauma

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Enact legislation for VA facilities to implement current standards of care to women veterans, providing the latest diagnostic and treatment methods.
- Provide child-care services at all VA medical centers.
- Urge VA to meet the privacy needs of women veterans at its facilities.

“Male or female, The American Legion believes a veteran is a veteran. Period.”

Brett P. Reistad,
The American Legion
National Commander

CARE

KEY POINTS

- Data from VA's National Screening Program reveal that about one in four women, and one in 100 men say they have experienced Military Sexual Trauma (MST).
- Men are less likely to report MST than their female counterparts, but MST is a military issue, not a women's issue.

“What do I want now? I want to be treated with the respect I deserve in the current VA system and not retraumatized.”

Diane Chamberlain, Author of *Conduct Unbecoming: Rape, Torture, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from Military Commanders*



U.S. Air Force photo by Airman Michael S. Murphy

Improve access to care for MST victims and survivors

The American Legion continues to track and monitor all issues related to Military Sexual Trauma (MST). MST includes any sexual activity against one's will, or during a time when one is unable to consent to sexual activities, while serving in the military.

According to a VA Office of Inspector General review and the Department of Defense 2017 *Report on Sexual Assault in the Military*, more than 5,200 servicemembers reported a sexual assault in fiscal 2017. The reported sexual assaults occurred during their military service and was an increase of about 10 percent from the previous year.

The American Legion is deeply concerned with the plight of MST survivors and continues to work with Congress to find the right treatment for every patient while urging VA to be flexible and to ensure that these veterans receive the care they need.

The American Legion will work to ensure that those who have become victims are treated, while urging the U.S. Armed Forces to take steps to eradicate MST entirely.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Ensure VA has all necessary resources to remain committed to providing veterans access to help they need to recover from MST.
- Encourage better awareness training in the DoD for MST sensitivity and develop more comprehensive care options for survivors, including better availability of therapists and group therapy, along with other options to make MST care more accessible to veterans.

CARE



Photo by Clay Lommeth

Veteran suicide prevention

In 2017, VA reported that the suicide rate among 18-to-24-year-old male Iraq and Afghanistan veterans has risen nearly fivefold, to an all-time high of 124 per 100,000 – 10 times the national average. The suicide rate of 18-to-29-year-old female veterans has doubled.

In the past, bias and stigma against mental injury prevented accurate data collection, research and treatment. Accurate numbers may also have been hard to determine after previous wars due to classifications of suicide as deaths by motor vehicles, poisoning, drowning or other accidents.

High suicide rates among veterans are not a recent phenomenon. In 1922, The American Legion declared the “worst casualties of the world war are just appearing” as high rates of veteran suicide were gaining national notice four years after the armistice that ended World War I. Similarly, high rates of suicide emerged after later U.S. wars.

Multiple factors feed into four primary causes of veteran suicides:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder;
- Traumatic brain injury;
- Loss of a sense of purpose; and
- Loss of a sense of belonging.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Urge the DoD and VA to implement an automatic flagging system to alert providers of potentially fatal prescription drug combinations.
- Provide VA the necessary funding for complementary and alternative therapies for treating TBI, PTSD and other mental health conditions.
- Improve VA's hiring process for mental health providers.
- Increase funding for DoD and VA suicide-prevention programs.

KEY POINTS

- In 2018, The American Legion published a white-paper report on veteran suicide that examines recent trends and their potential causes, recommending steps to address the crisis.
- The American Legion continues to be deeply concerned with high numbers of veterans who die by suicide and those who return from war suffering from TBI and PTSD.
- The American Legion established a suicide-prevention program in 2017 and aligned it with the TBI/PTSD Committee, which reviews methods, programs and strategies that can be used to reduce veteran suicide.

“Veterans considering taking their own lives are not beyond help. There are things the VA can do to prevent it.”

Dr. Keita Franklin, National Director, Suicide Prevention Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

CARE

KEY POINTS

- Veterans of various eras and theaters of operation are currently receiving different levels of VA caregiver benefits, based on their dates and locations of service.
- All veterans deserve equality in terms of benefits regardless of the era in which they served.

“These hidden heroes have served as an unpaid workforce, absorbing the overwhelming challenges that can come with caring for a veteran.

Elizabeth Dole, Elizabeth Dole Foundation founder and former U.S. senator



Photo by Lucas Carter

Support for veteran caregivers

The American Legion has long argued that the Department of Veterans Affairs Caregiver Program must be expanded to include all generations of veterans. The American Legion believes that all veterans deserve equality in terms of benefits, regardless of era.

Policymakers are slowly recognizing the nearly 6 million caregivers who provide support for veterans in need of intensive personal assistance due to medical conditions related to military service. On June 6, 2018, President Trump signed the VA Maintaining Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act or MISSION Act. Section 161, Expansion of Family Caregiver Program of Department of Veterans Affairs, expands eligibility for veterans with service-connected medical issues on or before May 7, 1975. Previously, access to this program was limited only to post-9/11 service.

The American Legion urges VA to provide the same level of benefits to all eligible enrolled veterans. VA caregiver benefits should not be limited to specific eras but expanded to assist all who should be eligible. VA has enrolled veterans, including those who require caregiver assistance in day-to-day health-care needs, regardless of when they served.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Remove all eligibility dates from current legislation and public laws, and revise them to include veterans who otherwise meet the eligibility requirements.

CARE



Photo by Clay Lomneth

Prevent veteran homelessness

Generally, the causes of homelessness can be grouped into three categories: economic hardship, health issues and lack of affordable housing. Although these issues affect all homeless individuals, veterans face additional challenges in overcoming these obstacles, including prolonged separation from traditional support systems, such as family and friends; stressful training and occupational demands, which can affect personality, self esteem and the ability to communicate after discharge; and non-transferability of military occupational specialties into the civilian workforce.

Through the U.S. Housing and Urban Development's annual point-in-time count estimate of America's homeless population, communities across the country reported that 37,878 veterans were experiencing homelessness in the United States in 2018, accounting for just under 9 percent of all homeless adults. Since 2009, veteran homelessness has dropped considerably, obtaining a new low in 2018.

The American Legion is focused on prevention, "to get them before they get on the street." The American Legion offers support to at-risk and/or homeless veterans and their families, advice and counseling, assistance obtaining care and benefits, financial help, career fairs, business development workshops and other forums.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Permanently authorize the Supportive Services for Veterans and Families program and maintain funding levels necessary to keep it operational.
- Fund legal services for homeless veterans.
- Continue to fund the homeless veterans Grant and Per Diem Program (transitional housing) at the level of need demonstrated in local communities.
- Provide a higher allocation of project-based HUD-VA Supportive Housing vouchers for homeless veterans.

KEY POINTS

- Ninety-one percent of veterans experiencing homelessness are men.
- Three in five homeless veterans (62 percent, or 23,312 veterans) stay in emergency shelters or transitional housing, while two in five (38 percent, or 15,000) were staying in places not suitable for human habitation.
- Most veterans experiencing homelessness are without children (98 percent, or nearly 40,000 veterans). About 2 percent have dependents.

“When given enough resources, and enough focus by leadership, communities are absolutely able to house every single veteran who needs help.”

Kathryn Monet, Executive Director, National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

CARE

KEY POINT

- The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act would impact an estimated 90,000 veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

“The people who are questioning what veterans went through weren’t there on the ships in Vietnam. They weren’t drinking and brushing their teeth and bathing in water tainted by this terrible chemical.

Rear Adm.
Christopher W. Cole
(U.S. Navy ret.)
Association
of the U.S. Navy



DoD Photo

Blue Water vets deserve benefits

Veterans who served on open-sea ships off the shore of Vietnam during the Vietnam War are called “Blue Water veterans.” Currently, only those veterans who physically set foot on the land of Vietnam or served on its inland waterways between Jan. 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975, are presumed to have been exposed to the toxic defoliant Agent Orange, which is linked to numerous adverse health conditions and diseases.

Blue Water veterans who did not set foot in Vietnam or serve on the inland waterways must prove they were exposed during military service in order to receive disability compensation for conditions related to exposure. These claims are decided on a case-by-case basis.

The Department of Veteran Affairs asked the National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Medicine (IOM) to review medical and scientific evidence regarding Blue Water veterans’ possible exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides. IOM’s 2011 report concluded that “there was not enough information for the IOM to determine whether Blue Water Navy personnel were or were not exposed to Agent Orange.”

However, a 2002 Australian study concluded that “personnel on board ships were exposed to biologically significant quantities of dioxins,” and Australia began granting disability benefits to its former sailors in 2006.

U.S. Vietnam veterans, who served alongside the Australians on the open sea, have the same health problems associated with herbicide exposure and deserve the benefit of any doubt regarding the presumption of service-connected disabilities related to such exposure.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Pass H.R. 299 the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act.
- Amend Title 38, U.S. Code, to presume exposure to Agent Orange for any military personnel who served during the Vietnam War on any vessel that came within 12 nautical miles of the Vietnam coastline.

CARE



U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Kasey Zickmund

Electronic health records

In the 1970s, VA developed its own electronic health record (EHR) residing within VA's Veteran Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA). Critics soon voiced concerns about VistA's inability to electronically exchange health-record information between VA, DoD, other federal agencies and community health-care partners.

In 2018, VA signed a \$10 billion, 10-year contract with the Cerner Corp. to adopt the same EHR system as DoD. VA later said it would need another \$5.8 billion for project-management costs.

VA awarded Cerner three firm, fixed-price task orders on the contract. Under the first task order, Cerner will build and provide project management, planning and pre-initial operating capabilities. Under the second, it will conduct facility assessments at three sites in the Pacific Northwest. And under the third, it will provide an EHR hosting solution.

VA began deployment of its initial three sites in 2018, with the goal of fully implementing the system by March 2020. VA has designated 260 full-time employees to the department's new EHR Modernization Program Office and is adding more staff as the agency implements the system to more sites.

The VA/DoD Interagency Program Office stood up three governance boards to manage project risks. The first is a functional governance board to mitigate disputes between on-the-ground clinicians and other health-care staff. The second is a technology governance board, to mitigate technology issues. The final board would resolve issues unsolved by other boards.

In 2018, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs created the Subcommittee on Technology Modernization to oversee VA's EHR modernization project.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Ensure VA's EHR initiative remains fully funded.
- Require VA to regularly report EHR progress to Congress.

KEY POINTS

- The new VA Cerner electronic health record (EHR) system will operate on a similar platform as the DoD's EHR system – MHS Genesis – in an effort to improve interoperability between agencies.
- Medical records in the new system will be able to follow a person through the transition from active duty to VA.

“Caring for our nation's heroes must always remain above partisan politics. I'm proud to work with Rep. Conor Lamb and the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization as we provide oversight of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs overhaul of their electronic health records system.”

Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind.

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CAREERS

KEY POINTS

- The American Legion conducts bi-annual credentialing roundtables that include stakeholders from government, industry and credentialing authorities. During these discussions, leaders from all over the country find ways to help veterans lead productive lives using the skillsets they already possess.
- The Department of Defense's United Services Military Apprenticeship Program reached a milestone of 100,000 active participants in 2017.
- Despite escalating DoD's apprenticeship success, the Post 9/11 GI Bill is a vastly under-utilized recruitment conduit; only about 2 percent of Post 9/11 GI Bill recipients apply for the apprenticeship or on-the-job training benefits.

“It is absolutely essential that veterans and their families have access to quality licensing and certification programs. These programs provide important paths to success for our veterans. Many of them lead to meaningful employment and real economic opportunities.”

Joseph W. Wescott II Ed.D.,
National Legislative Liaison,
National Association of State
Approving Agencies



U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Ariel Owings

Licensing and credentialing

The military invests extensively in formal state-of-the-art training for its servicemembers, complemented by extensive on-the-job training and hands-on experience. Early in their military careers, servicemembers gain opportunities for experience that are unmatched in the civilian sector. However, the eligibility requirements for civilian credentials seldom offer direct recognition of military training and experience as a means of qualification, thus delaying immediate civilian employment and career advancement for veterans.

The American Legion has established its Credentialing Advisory Task Force in order to promote the transferability of military skills and experience and expand upon progress by increasing awareness in the fields of licensing, certifications and credentialing.

The task force will report to the national Veterans Employment & Education Commission and stay actively involved to reform our nation's credentialing system to:

- Stay abreast of civilian credentialing trends to ensure military credentialing policies and programs remain relevant.
- Ensure consideration of the needs of servicemembers and veterans.
- Promote military training and experience as a widely accepted form of transferable civilian skills.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Reintroduce H.R. 3018, the Veterans' Entry to Apprenticeship Act, empowering businesses to design pre-apprenticeship programs for veterans through the Post-9/11 GI Bill.
- Recognize civilian credentialing trends and advocate for the needs of servicemembers, veterans and spouses.
- Promote military training and experience as widely accepted forms of competency for civilian employment.
- Support the growth and expansion of the U.S. Military Apprenticeship Program.

CAREERS



Photo by Clay Lomneth

Veterans Preference hiring

Veterans Preference hiring benefits veterans of every economic class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and creed. It is triggered when a hiring manager is deciding between two equally qualified candidates, one a nonveteran and the other a servicemember or veteran. Veterans Preference requires a veteran to be fully qualified for the position sought.

The American Legion calls on Congress to reaffirm the Veterans Preference Hiring Act of 1944. In light of recent policy changes, the reorganization of the Office of Personnel Management and expanded use of new hiring authorities for federal agencies, The American Legion supports congressional reaffirmation action in support of the continued application of Veterans Preference in the new federal workforce environment.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Reaffirm continued application of Veterans Preference for federal hiring and reduction-in-force actions as originally intended by the Veterans Preference Hiring Act of 1944.
- Mandate that agencies using new hiring authorities, such as direct-hire authority, report annually to Congress on the employment level and representation of veterans in the agencies' workforce, along with the number of veterans hired using these new authorities.
- Report all federal veteran recruiting and applicant-sourcing activities to ensure the veteran community is aware of job opportunities, regardless of hiring authority used, and any other activities that demonstrate federal commitments to affirmative outreach to veterans.
- Require that agencies that fall below the representative rate of veterans, as determined by the rate veterans are employed in the private sector, be required to discontinue any special hiring authorities until the under-representation of veterans is corrected.
- Update Public Law 89-554, Title 5, Sec. 3310, Veterans Preference occupations.

KEY POINTS

- Title 5, Sec. 3310, originates from Public Law 89-554 dated Sept 6, 1966, that still lists guards, elevator operators, messengers and custodians as occupations reserved for veterans.
- According to the Office of Personnel Management in 2016, 31.1 percent of all new federal hires were veterans, down from 32.5 percent in 2015.
- Veterans Recruitment Appointment can be appointed to a position through GS-11 without having to compete with other applicants.
- Executive Order 13518, Veterans Employment Initiative, aims to boost employment of military veterans, especially those of Iraq and Afghanistan, in the federal government.

“I think the right answer is for OPM to tighten up the rules to help agencies get better results with category ranking, and for agencies to ensure their HR staff know how to run the hiring process.”

Jeff Neal, Director at the National Academy of Public Administration and Partnership for Public Service

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CAREERS

KEY POINTS

- Veterans are 45 percent more likely to start their own businesses, compared to their civilian counterparts.
- About 9 percent of small businesses are owned by veterans. Collectively, these 2.4 million businesses employ 6 million Americans and generate over \$1 trillion in receipts.

“From 1944 to 1954, the original GI Bill's entrepreneurial insurance and loan guaranty program, resulted in 214,500 loans made to start small businesses and an additional 62,500 loans made to start farms. Cross-referencing 1944 entrepreneurial programs to Census SBO Data and SBA Research in this century, a correlation is seen in the nation's investment in entrepreneurial programs for veterans leading to a sustained and unparalleled expansion of the American economy.”

William (Bill) Elmore, former Associate Administrator for the U.S. Small Business Administration's Office of Veterans Business Development



Photo by Lucas Carter

Access to capital for small business

A key obstacle facing veteran-owned small businesses is lack of access to capital. Investments are needed to develop and bring to market innovative veteran-generated products and services.

Most veterans lack the requisite capital or collateral for traditional bank loans. The original GI Bill was intended to give returning servicemembers the training and resources they needed to become gainfully employed in civilian life. Reintegration benefits also included loans and grants for America's entrepreneurial veterans. Under the original GI Bill, the Veterans Administration guaranteed more than 215,000 small business loans from 1944 to 1954.

Solutions to address this issue include adding an entrepreneurship component to the current GI Bill or creating more pathways for veterans to gain access to capital through public-private partnerships.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Congress should reintroduce H.R. 3248, from the 114th Congress, the Veterans Entrepreneurial Transition (VET) Act, allowing the Small Business Administration to carry out a three-year pilot program to assess the feasibility of offering grants to up to 250 eligible veterans and retiring or honorably discharged members of the U.S. Armed Forces to start, expand, or acquire qualifying business enterprises.

CAREERS



Photo by Lucas Carter

Federal contracting for veteran-owned businesses

In 1999, Congress passed the Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act, recognizing service-disabled veterans as a preferred contracting group. Through that legislation, an annual goal of at least 3 percent of all federal prime-contract awards for service-disabled veteran-owned firms was established.

Agencies across the federal government, including the Department of Transportation (DOT) have “set-asides” for contracts going toward small businesses that are owned and controlled by particular groups of people that are designated for contracting preferences. The bulk of DOT’s budget manifests in state grants for infrastructure repair. By legislation, 10 percent of that budget is set aside for small businesses, but veteran-owned small businesses are excluded from this program.

As the youngest, federally recognized and preferred contracting group, veterans do not always receive the same contracting preferences as other groups. Currently, there is no preference for veterans when it comes to building our nation’s roads, highways and critical infrastructure.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- The American Legion urges Congress to appoint a VA advisory committee to ensure parity for veterans in all small-business government contracting programs and provide advice and recommendations on specific VA veteran-owned small-business issues.
- Congress should reintroduce H.R. 1694, the Fairness to Veterans Act, which simply states that if any business is going to get a preference, then veteran-owned small businesses should at least get that same preference.

KEY POINT

- Veteran-owned firms have a big economic impact across the country:
 - » California, Texas, Florida, New York and Georgia have the most overall impact.
 - » By population, South Carolina has the most, followed by West Virginia.

“According to the Census’ Survey of Business Owners, 11.1 percent of all construction firms are owned by veterans. That’s 380,395 veteran businesses... 10.5 percent of manufacturing firms are owned by veterans. That’s 64,542 veteran manufacturing businesses. We’re more than ready; it’s time Congress provides fairness to veterans in transportation contracting.”

Vincent J. Troiola, Chairman,
American Legion Veterans
Employment & Education
Commission

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CAREERS

KEY POINTS

- No fewer than 132,218 veterans participated in VA's Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment program in fiscal 2017.
- VR&E benefits are typically limited to 48 months, though the benefit period can be extended under certain circumstances. In most cases, veterans are entitled to a subsistence allowance while they are enrolled in an education or training program.
- Courses under the VR&E program should be courses that are approved for the GI Bill.



U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Justin Roux

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program

Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) was established to provide service-connected disabled veterans ways and means to obtain gainful and meaningful employment to achieve and sustain independent living. VR&E should continue to make every effort to demonstrate efficacy in delivering these services while at the same time substantially improving quality of life for veterans.

In order to ensure long-term success of this veteran-centric program, a concerted effort is needed from all federal agencies who play key roles in the seamless transition of servicemembers into the civilian workforce. Vocational training, job assistance, quality health care and physical rehabilitation are crucial to each veteran and family member in achieving economic well-being.

“(The VR&E) program should be the crown jewel of benefits provided to veterans.

Rep. Jodey Arrington,
R-Texas.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Congress should ensure adequate vocational rehabilitation counselors and employment coordinators are provided in order to reduce caseloads and offer more individualized counseling for veterans.
- Congress should work to improve interagency collaboration and communication among key stakeholders of the program.
- Eliminate the 12-year delimiting date for eligibility to Chapter 31 benefits and allow veterans with employment impediments to qualify for VR&E benefits for life.
- Provide training programs geared specifically for VR&E counselors through Management Concepts Incorporated.

CAREERS



Photo by Mike Strasser

New approaches to transition

With an estimated 200,000 servicemembers leaving the military each year, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is an important component in the change to civilian life. The American Legion continues to help transitioning servicemembers obtain gainful employment through resume/interview workshops, career fairs and entrepreneurship workshops (Boots 2 Business), but as the booming economic landscape evolves, it is important that military and veteran interests are represented in civilian workforce initiatives. In response to previous American Legion recommendations, changes to TAP were introduced and passed in the fiscal 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), that requires responsible oversight.

To support this, The American Legion has established an employment advisory task force in order to identify, scale and guide innovative employment solutions for transitioning servicemembers and veterans. The American Legion Employment Innovative Advisory Task Force will report to the Veterans Employment & Education Commission and provide a compelling set of innovations that will, if adopted by the DoD and other related agencies, improve the quality, timeliness of services, relevance and usefulness of information shared in TAP.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Hold the DoD accountable for implementation of the "Better Access to Technical Training, Learning, and Entrepreneurship (BATTLE) for Servicemembers Act" which was in the fiscal 2019 NDAA.
- Hold unit commanders or their designees accountable for ensuring all servicemembers, in particular the Reserve component, are afforded the opportunity to attend TAP.
- Introduce legislation to authorize military spouses to accompany servicemembers participating in TAP.

KEY POINTS

- In 2018, The American Legion conducted the Transition Assistance Program Effectiveness Pulse Survey, which showed that fewer than 12 percent of veterans agreed that TAP helped them contact veterans service organizations or identify community resources for ongoing support, post-transition.
- According to a 2017 Government Accountability Office report, approximately 85 percent of all servicemembers participated in TAP-required workshops. However, less than 15 percent took advantage of the two days of supplemental classes.
- The John McCain NDAA for fiscal 2019 adapted provisions of the BATTLE Act, which folds these optional two-day workshops on higher education, skills training and entrepreneurship into the five-day TAP workshop.

“In keeping with today's digital warriors, the current method of delivering TAP content is in dire need of modernization.”

Linda Brooks-Rix
CO-CEO, AVUE Technologies Corporation

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EDUCATION

KEY POINTS

- The backlog of pending GI Bill claims in September 2018 was the highest since the Post-9/11 GI Bill was enacted.
- In 2009, VA issued emergency payments to GI Bill beneficiaries who experienced delays longer than 30 days. In 2018, no emergency payments were issued even as wait times soared to more than 90 days.

“You can’t have these young people going homeless. They have to pay their bills. Congress has provided the money; taxpayers have provided the money. It’s time for the VA to do their job.”

Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn.,
Ranking Member, House
Committee on Veterans Affairs



Photo by Noel St. John

Maintain integrity of the GI Bill

Congress passed the largest increase to the Post-9/11 GI Bill through the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2017. VA, however, is currently facing a crisis of failure to process claims in a timely manner and curb tuition abuse. Technological malfunctions at VA resulted in delayed GI Bill housing payments to hundreds of thousands of veterans during the 2018 fall semester.

Reports from school-certifying officials indicate that this is the largest payment delay the history of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, causing substantial hardship to thousands of veterans unable to afford basic living expenses. Fraud, waste and abuse also still exist within flight programs that take advantage of the GI Bill.

In 2015, *The Los Angeles Times* reported that some institutions of higher learning imposed extremely high flight fees in the absence of mandated spending caps. VA data showed that while the number of students taking flight training went up by only 171 students in 2013 and 2014, the total cost to taxpayers grew by \$37 million. VA, for example, paid more than \$534,000 in tuition and flight payments for just one student.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Demand that VA execute decisive actions to ensure that veterans do not have to wait longer than 30 days for approved GI Bill benefits.
- Pass legislation to align the cost of GI Bill payments for public school flight programs with the existing rate on tuition and fees for private and non-profit schools and return the cost savings to VA education programs.

SECURITY



U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Anthony VanFriedenberg

Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity remains a top concern across the public and private sectors. Overall, threats are multiplying and organizations have little control over them. Billions of new devices are connected to the internet, each bringing with them potential new security threats and the always-unpredictable element of human behavior. The sheer volume of information, ranging from threat intelligence to third-party assessments, continues to increase. In an environment with increasing risks from new threats, new disruptive technologies and legacy systems that continue to demand attention, companies are simply unable to bring on enough qualified staff to keep up.

An audit report released in early 2018 showed the Department of Veterans Affairs continues to face significant challenges in complying with the requirement of the Federal Information Security Management Act. The report offered 29 separate recommendations for improving the department's cybersecurity. Health-care networks are a major target for cyber criminals, and The American Legion is concerned about the privacy of veterans enrolled in VA health care.

The digital age has also created challenges for the Department of Defense and the nation. The open, transnational and decentralized nature of the internet that we seek to protect creates significant vulnerabilities. Competitors deterred from engaging the United States and its allies in an armed conflict are using cyberspace operations to steal our technology, disrupt our government and commerce, challenge our democratic processes and threaten our critical infrastructure.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Congress should prioritize investments in cyber defense, resilience and the continued integration of cyber capabilities into the full spectrum of military operations and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

KEY POINTS

- In just the last five years, companies as diverse as Saudi Aramco, Sony, Target, Yahoo and Deloitte have all been breached by criminal and/or state cyber attackers, compromising the personally identifiable information of hundreds of millions of people and costing billions in lost productivity and damages.
- Global data privacy regulations are popping up everywhere due to the major consequences of massive data breaches. Over the last few years, we've seen many data breaches in large enterprise organizations.
- Sixty-three percent of IT decisionmakers say that security is their top concern regarding digital technologies and processes, based on a recent survey conducted by Blackberry.

“We must dominate in cyber. The complexity and interdependencies of our digital modernization and adversary use of cyber means it is more critical each day that we place cyber security first.”

Dana Deasy, Chief Information Officer, DoD, March 28, 2018

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SECURITY

KEY POINT

- The fiscal 2019 budget reflects the Trump administration's priorities of ending defense funding sequestration, rebuilding military readiness and modernizing the U.S. Armed Forces.

“Combat is unforgiving, and it is more unforgiving in armies that are not manned, trained, equipped and well-led.

Gen. Mark A. Milley,
U.S. Army Chief of Staff



U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kaila V. Peters

Strengthen the U.S. military

The Pentagon's 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) lays out a world where great-power competition, rather than counterterrorism, will drive Department of Defense decisionmaking and force structure. According to the NDS, the United States is emerging from a period of strategic atrophy and should be aware that competitive military advantage has been eroding. Today's global security environment is more complex and volatile than at any point in history.

The National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 authorizes \$717 billion in defense spending, which reverses the effects of sequestration and exceeds the defense spending caps set by the Budget Control Act of 2011. However, according to an outline done by the Pentagon in early 2018, the planned trajectory of the defense budget will not be enough to rebuild the military and create separation between the United States and its strategic competitors.

The American Legion supports strengthening the U.S. military in these uncertain times, in personnel and supportive equipment. The administration, leaders at the Pentagon and in Congress must do everything possible to ensure our nation, citizens and allies are protected.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Pass a fiscal 2020 budget commensurate with the expressed needs of the DoD to fulfill the Secretary of Defense's 2018 National Defense Strategy.

SECURITY



Photo by Lucas Carter

Fund law-enforcement agencies

Law-enforcement agencies across the country are changing the tactics and strategies they use to respond to pressing and chronic threats posed by violent crime, criminal gang activity, illegal and prescription drugs, human trafficking and domestic terrorism. Many law-enforcement agencies are confronting increases in violent crime within their jurisdictions and are doing so with fewer or limited resources.

Over the course of any given year in the last century, more than 100 law enforcement officers lose their lives in the line of duty. A recent deadly shooting at a synagogue left four officers wounded by gunfire. Without their courage, this tragedy would have been far worse.

The nation also faces an unprecedented opioid overdose epidemic. Police organizations are often expected to be the first responders to individuals in crisis and also act as the first line of defense against the threat illegal opioid abuse poses to communities.

In addition to addressing core missions of combating violent crime and defending our nation's laws, the Department of Justice must expand into taking on cybercrime and transnational organized crime, as well. Local agencies have the potential to assist with these challenges but often lack the funding and training required.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Provide federal funding to law-enforcement agencies to ensure they are equipped with necessary and modern equipment, training and technology.

KEY POINTS

- Over the last decade, more than 1,500 law-enforcement officers have died in the line of duty, over one-third due to gunfire.
- More than 900,000 sworn law-enforcement officers now serve across the United States, the highest figure ever.
- A 2017 report from the Health Resources and Services Administration notes an average 116 people a day die from opioid-related drug overdoses, a serious law-enforcement issue.

“As a retired police officer, I understand the need to fund law enforcement so our first responders will have the resources that they need to protect our citizens and communities. Just as we advocate to fully support our military troops as they risk their lives for us, we must do the same for our men and women in blue.”

Brett P. Reistad
The American Legion
National Commander

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SECURITY

KEY POINTS

- The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's Office of Servicemember Affairs has recovered some \$130 million in relief for servicemembers, veterans and families.
- The 2017 "Payday, Vehicle Title, and Certain High-Cost Installment Loans" rule limits how frequently a lender can offer, collect and extend high-interest loans, in order to prevent lenders from trapping consumers into cycles of compounding debt. The rule is scheduled to be rewritten soon.



iStock

“Financial distress compromises individual and unit combat effectiveness. Security clearances are revoked. Troops are rendered non-deployable. Families suffer...”

Col. Paul Kantwill (ret.)
Former Assistant Director
for Servicemember Affairs,
Consumer Protection
Financial Bureau

Financial protections from scams

In 2006, a DoD report revealed that predatory payday loan shops and car dealers were swarming military communities and targeting troops with interest rates of 300 percent or more. Broad bipartisan support led to the enactment of the Military Lending Act (MLA), covering interest limits on payday, auto title and tax refund anticipation loans. The MLA was broadened in 2015 to include credit cards, installment loans and overdraft lines of credit, all subject to the 36 percent cap.

However, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) decided in 2017 to suspend supervising banks, credit card companies and other lenders that deal with members of the military and their families to make sure they're not committing fraud or abuse. The American Legion is deeply concerned by this decision.

The acting CFPB director's claim that the Dodd-Frank Act does not give the bureau statutory authority to enforce the MLA is a major reversal from established precedent. The American Legion supports DoD's belief that "the full spectrum of tools, including supervisory examinations, contribute to effective industry education about, and compliance with, the MLA." The CFPB must demonstrate greater vigilance on behalf of servicemembers to support military readiness and secure successful transitions to civilian life.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Stop any attempts by CFPB leadership to weaken the MLA, including the bureau's supervisory enforcement authority and rules against predatory lending by all businesses, including car dealerships.
- Support the function and implementation of the CFPB's rule on "Payday, Vehicle Title, and Certain High-Cost Installment Loans."

AMERICANISM



Photo by Corey Perrine

Protect the U.S. flag from desecration

The American Legion strongly believes the U.S. flag is a symbol of our nation's freedom and all that we hold in common, secured by the servicemen and women who have sacrificed so much.

The 1989 5-4 Supreme Court decision that defined U.S. flag burning as free speech demands a constitutional amendment in order to return to the states the ability to protect our nation's venerated symbol of freedom and unity. That is why The American Legion continues to urge Congress to approve such an amendment to protect the flag from physical desecration. The amendment itself would not protect the flag, if passed. It would be the decision of the people through their elected representatives to decide if laws should be passed to provide the protection.

The American Legion is not alone. The U.S. House of Representatives has routinely passed such an amendment, and it fell short by just one Senate vote in July 2006. Every state has endorsed a memorializing resolution supporting passage of the amendment. And surveys show a majority of Americans agree that the flag should be protected.

The proposed flag protection amendment is not an infringement upon the Bill of Rights. Instead, it is a wonderful exercise in the popular sovereignty the Bill of Rights was designed to protect.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Pass legislation identical to House Joint Resolution 61 from the 115th Congress. It would give power back to the people to decide if laws should be passed to protect the flag under which every U.S. servicemember has served.

KEY POINTS

- Surveys show most Americans support passage of a constitutional amendment that would allow Congress to protect the U.S. flag from desecration.
- Every state has passed memorializing resolutions to ratify a constitutional amendment prohibiting flag desecration.
- The House of Representatives has passed the amendment six times by supermajorities, only to see it fall short in the Senate – by just one vote the last time it reached the floor.
- The U.S. flag was protected for 100 years prior to 1989 without adverse consequences. The American Legion believes in returning to the people the power they once had.
- In 2018, a letter was hand delivered to the White House from National Commander Brett Reistad requesting the president's support of such an amendment.

“Congress shall have power to prohibit the physical desecration of the flag of the United States.

Proposed flag protection amendment

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SECURITY

KEY POINTS

- Gold Star parents, surviving spouses and children each have unique issues that need to be addressed.
- Veterans service organizations are capable and willing to provide support to Gold Star surviving families, and that support should be referenced upon notification of death.

“ I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Abraham Lincoln's
Nov. 21, 1864, letter to Mrs.
Lydia Bixby, who lost two
sons in the Civil War



DoD photo by Sgt. Janelle Sennert

Support for Gold Star families

Servicemembers do not serve alone. Their spouses, children and other loved ones also sacrifice. While every servicemember raises his or her hand and swears an oath to die, if necessary, to defend the nation, a disconnect often exists between the military community and surviving family members.

The American Legion recently created a full-time staff position at its national headquarters to advocate for Gold Star families.

Surviving families should receive the highest level of support as they face heart-wrenching decisions immediately upon being notified. Every branch of service should have an effective Gold Star program that ensures the families have all the support they need from the moment they are informed of their loved one's sacrifice. Reports have also surfaced of surviving parents and siblings not having access to graves of their loved ones who died while in the service because the grave site is located on a military installation. In many cases, family members may be unaware of the services offered by local Gold Star coordinators, who can ensure access and assistance.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Establish a program within the Department of Defense that ensures Gold Star families receive the benefits and support they have earned.
- Ensure that Gold Star families are provided access to appropriate installations in order to visit the graves of loved ones.

AMERICANISM



Photo by Jeyhoun Allenbaugh

Expedited citizenship through military service

Immigrants have always made up a portion of the U.S. Armed Forces, and joining the military has been one of the fastest ways to become a U.S. citizen. More than 8,000 troops with green cards became citizens that way in 2017 alone. But the process to obtain citizenship doesn't happen automatically and requires the servicemember to ensure every step is completed during enlistment. If these veterans do not complete the process of becoming citizens, they can be deported for even a minor misdemeanor, just like any other non-citizen. This can happen many years after serving, affecting veterans who consider the United States their home.

A recent report released by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services shows a 65 percent drop in the number of active-duty servicemembers who applied for, or became, naturalized citizens in the first quarter of 2018. The report notes that policy changes within DoD make it more difficult for servicemembers to get their naturalization paperwork in order, such as USCIS's decision to no longer accept their fingerprints collected by DoD. The American Legion strongly opposes illegal immigration but believes in fairness for veterans.

WHAT CAN CONGRESS DO?

- Implement measures within the Department of Defense to ensure the process of naturalization through honorable military service is completed prior to discharge.

KEY POINTS

- Between 2009 and 2016, the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest Program (MAVNI) allowed approximately 10,400 non-citizens to join the military and lend critical language and medical skills to the nation's defense.
- The list of new immigrants who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of the United States, is long and distinguished, dating back to 1775.
- Hundreds, possibly thousands, of veterans have been deported for committing certain crimes, many non-violent and substance-abuse related, after serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.

“It was my dream to serve in the military. Since this country has been so good to me, I thought it was the least I could do to give back to my adopted country and serve in the United States military.”

Lucas Calixto, reservist and Brazilian immigrant

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The American Legion Legislative Agenda February 27, 2019

- The American Legion seeks the passage of S.504 in the 116th Congress. S.504, sponsored by Senator Sinema, would authorize The Legion to determine the requirements for membership in The Legion. S.504 currently sits in the Senate Judiciary Committee.
- The American Legion wishes the United States government declare the period from December 7, 1941 until the present as a continuous state of war, so that troops serving during the 1987 USS Stark incident, Operation Eagle Claw, Operation Praying Mantis, and other combat operations could receive proper recognition for their service.
- The American Legion wishes to see continued oversight regarding the implementation of the VA MISSION Act and Congressional hearings on its effectiveness following implementation. The Legion also wants Congress to enhance VA's ability to offer telehealth services and telemedicine to rural veterans and refrain from supporting legislation authorizing VA to centralize operations successfully managed by local VA facilities. Concurrently, continued funding for VA's EHR initiative and regular VA reports on EHR progress to Congress are desired. Finally, The American Legions seeks legislation addressing recruitment and retention issues, including pay disparities, regarding staff providing direct health care to veterans.
- The American Legion wants increased DoD and VA budgets to improve research screening, diagnosis, and treatment of TBI and PTSD. It also desires improved monitoring of prescribed drugs like benzodiazepines and opioids, especially when prescribed by non-VA providers, and improved training for DoD and VA personnel regarding suicide prevention. The Legion also wishes for additional funding for DoD and VA suicide prevention programs, improving the VA's hiring process for mental health providers, and the adoption of an automatic flagging system to alert providers of dangerous drug combinations at DoD and VA.
- The American Legion requests legislation for VA facilities to implement care standards for women veterans, child-care services at all VAMCs, and respect for women veterans' privacy needs at VA facilities. The American Legion also requests Congress ensure VA has all necessary resources to promote recovery from MST and encourage better awareness training in DoD regarding MST, in addition to development of more comprehensive care options for MST survivors.
- The American Legion wants Congress to remove eligibility dates from legislation and public laws regarding caregivers, revising them to include veterans who meet all other eligibility requirements.
- The American Legion requests the Supportive Services for Veterans and Families program be permanently authorized and funded. The Legion also requests continued funding for legal services for homeless veterans and the homeless veterans Grant and Per Diem Program at level of need demonstrated in local communities. Finally, a higher allocation of project-based HUDVASH vouchers for homeless veterans is preferred.
- With regards to Blue Water Vietnam Veterans, the Legion requests passage of HR 299 and an amendment of US Code Title 38 to presume exposure for military personnel who served on any vessel which came within 12 nautical miles of Vietnam.

- The American Legion requests the reintroduction and passage of H.R. 3018. Also desired are increased advocacy for the needs of military personnel, veterans, and spouses regarding civilian credentialing trends, and the promotion of military training and experience concerning competency for civilian employment. The Legion also wants support for the growth and expansion of the U.S. Military Apprenticeship Program.
- The American Legion wants reaffirmation of continued application of Veterans Preference, in addition to continued Congressional oversight regarding the implementation of the policy. The Legion also requests an update of Public Law 89-554, title 5, Sec. 3310, and increased efforts to make veterans aware of federal job openings.
- The American Legion requests Congress protect service members and dependents from financial scams by stopping CFPB attempts to weaken the Military Lending Act. The Legion also seeks support for the function and implementation of the CFPB's rule on "payday, Vehicle Title, and Certain High-Cost Installment Loans."
- The American Legion opposes flag desecration and requests Congress pass identical legislation to House Joint Resolution 61 from the 115th Congress. This would allow Congress to pass legislation prohibiting desecration of the American flag.
- The American Legion requests Congress support Gold Star families by establishing a program within DoD ensuring Gold Star families receive proper benefits and necessary support. Additionally, the Legion wants to ensure Gold Star families have access to installations so they may visit the graves of loved ones.
- The American Legions asks Congress to protect immigrant veterans by implementing measures within DoD to ensure naturalization through honorable service is completed prior to discharge.
- The primary obstacle facing veteran-owned small businesses is the lack of access to capital. The American Legion is advocating that Congress reintroduce HR 3248, the Veterans Entrepreneurial Transition (VET) Act from the 114th Congress, which would allow the Small Business Administration to run a three year pilot program that would provide grants to veterans to start, expand, or acquire qualifying business enterprises.
- Federal agencies have mandatory "set asides" for contracting with small businesses. This program excludes veteran-owned small business. Congress should reintroduce HR 1694, the Fairness to Veterans Act, which states that if any business is to get a preference, veteran-owned small businesses should get that same preference. Additionally, the Legion urges Congress to appoint a "Veteran-Owned Small Business Advisory Committee" to advise the VA on these issues.
- The American Legion urges Congress to ensure that the VR&E program has the resources it needs to carry out its mission, and work to improve interagency collaboration and communication. The 12-year delimiting date for Chapter 31 eligibility should be eliminated. Management Concepts Incorporated should provide training for VR&E counselors.
- The American Legion urges Congress to: hold the DoD accountable for the implementation of the Better Access to Technical Training, Learning, and Entrepreneurship (BATTLE) Act, hold unit commanders accountable for ensuring that all

veterans are given the opportunity to attend TAP, and introduce legislation to allow military spouses to accompany servicemembers to TAP.

- The G.I. Bill crisis has negatively impacted thousands of veterans nationwide. Congress should demand that VA “execute decisive actions” to ensure that veterans do not wait longer than 30 days for their approved G.I. Bill benefits. Congress should also pass legislation to align the costs of G.I. bill payments for public flight school programs to existing rates for private and non-profit schools.
- The American Legion asks Congress to prioritize cyber defense investments, including the integration of cyber defense capabilities into military operations and the VA.
- The American Legion asks Congress to pass a 2020 defense budget that will allow the DoD to fulfill the Secretary of Defense’s 2018 National Defense Strategy.
- The American Legion asks Congress to provide federal funding to law enforcement agencies to ensure they are equipped for the best, most modern equipment.