

ROBERTO "BOBBY" BARRERA, NATIONAL COMMANDER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

STATEMENT OF
ROBERTO "BOBBY" BARRERA
NATIONAL COMMANDER
OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
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Messrs. Chairmen and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees:

As National Commander of the more than 1.4 million members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and its Auxiliary, I am honored to testify before you today concerning the agenda of our nation's wartime service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors.

Senator Akaka, Senator Burr, Representative Filner and Representative Buyer, I congratulate you on your leadership roles in the first session of the 111th Congress; wherein, you were able to gain the bipartisan support of your colleagues on the enactment of legislation important to our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors. I wish you and your colleagues on these Committees Godspeed in your efforts on behalf of America's service-connected disabled veterans, their dependents and survivors during this session of Congress.

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the DAV. In 1920, veterans who had returned from what was then called the Great War were concerned about the mess our government had made of programs for veterans. One of those veterans was Judge Robert S. Marx, an Army Captain who was wounded on November 10, 1918. Judge Marx had a dream: "We had a common experience which bound us together, and we ought to continue through an organization of our own...an organization of us, by us and for us..." In the first months of 1920, his dream became the Disabled American Veterans of the World War (DAVWW). This organization was born out of their special bonds and the solidarity of purpose they shared as they tried to return to a normal life after the impact of war. In May 1920, the War Department had reported that 741,000 veterans were eligible for membership in the organization. Today, that number is about 3 million, but that special bond and solidarity of purpose remains just as strong 90 years later.

Although the DAVWW had existed for months, September 25, 1920 is considered the official birth of the organization. On that date, Judge Marx, who was later elected National Commander at the first National Convention, convened a National Caucus and the 250 disabled veterans in attendance organized a National Organization, state departments and chapters. The purpose set for the organization at its first National Convention in Detroit in June 1921, still remains the

same: Building better lives for our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors.

While much has changed in the 90 years since the DAV was founded, I believe that Judge Marx and the other founders of this great organization would be proud of our steadfast dedication to our sole mission and the expanded and improved services DAV offers to those who come home from war wounded or sick and their loved ones as well. As National Commander, I am extremely proud of DAV's many accomplishments during the past nine decades.

Messrs. Chairmen, as I mentioned earlier, the DAV was founded in 1920. In 1932 it was chartered by Congress as the primary advocate for America's service-connected disabled veterans, their dependents and survivors.

To remain faithful to the principles on which this organization was founded, and to fulfill our mandate of service to America's service-disabled veterans and their families, the DAV employs a corps of 242 National Service Officers (NSOs), all wartime service-connected disabled veterans themselves, located in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Regional Offices throughout the country. These men and women are professionally trained during a program that generally does not exceed 25 months, of which 16 months is on-the-job training. In addition to learning title 38 law and regulations pertaining to the application for and the evidence needed to obtain benefits and services from the VA for veterans and their dependents, our NSOs are also required to successfully complete academic courses in anatomy and physiology, medical terminology, English composition or legal writing, and public speaking, through an accredited college or university. These dedicated men and women, about two-thirds of whom are Gulf War veterans or veterans of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, continue the legacy to provide the best benefits counseling and claims assistance available anywhere.

During 2009, DAV NSOs interviewed over 167,144 veterans and their families in their claims for VA benefits; filed almost 214,716 new claims for benefits; and obtained \$4.3 billion in new and retroactive benefits for our clients. Our NSOs also participated in 234,569 Rating Board appearances. All of our services are provided at no cost to these claimants.

As a result of the large number of severely disabled military members being treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center (WRAMC) and Bethesda National Naval Medical Center (NNMC), DAV has staffed an office at WRAMC to provide assistance to the young men and women being treated at these facilities.

The number of severe wartime casualties with amputations being treated at WRAMC, NMMC and elsewhere continues to grow significantly. As of February 1, 2010, there were 960 amputees from Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom. These individuals have sustained the loss of an arm(s), leg(s), hand(s), and/or foot (feet). This number includes 730 soldiers, 172 of whom have multiple amputations; 195 Marines, 49 of whom have multiple amputations; 21 sailors, four of whom have multiple amputations; and 14 airmen, two of whom have multiple amputations. Of the 960 amputees, 193, or 20 percent, of these individuals have upper extremity amputations.

The DAV provided free representation at 183 Physical Evaluation Boards (PEBs) across the country in 2009. Also, DAV has worked closely with several large, local law firms, which have

agreed to provide pro bono services to the men and women appearing before the PEBs, and they also have agreed to assist these individuals, free of charge, in pursuing claims before federal courts.

In addition to our work at VA Regional Offices, DAV employs 11 National Appeals Officers (NAOs) whose duty is to represent veterans in their appeals before the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA). During fiscal year (FY) 2009, DAV NAOs provided representation in 31 percent of decided appeals before the BVA or 15,110 appeals. Of the more than 15,000 appeals represented by DAV, more than a third, 5,432 appeals, had been remanded by the BVA previously. In 25 percent, or 3,853, of the appeals represented by DAV, the claimant's appeal was allowed. Thirty-seven percent, or 5,607, of appeals represented by DAV were remanded, of which almost 1,700 had been remanded previously. Almost 63 percent of the appeals represented by DAV resulted in the original decision being overturned or sent back to the Regional Office for additional development and readjudication. Sadly, and indicative of the systemic problem causing the VA's current backlog, almost one-third of the 48,804 appeals decided by BVA in FY 2009, 15,083 appeals, had previously been remanded by the BVA. Also indicative of the systemic problem facing VA is the fact that 61 percent of the almost 49,000 decisions rendered by BVA were either reversed or remanded.

Messrs. Chairmen, DAV's Transition Service Program (TSP) began nine years ago, shortly after the formation of the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program, a jointly sponsored VA and Department of Defense (DoD) initiative to provide transition assistance to separating service members who have disabilities related to their military service. The program was developed to provide a smooth transition from the military back into the civilian world. The BDD program helps members, with 60 to 180 days remaining before they leave military service, file claims for disability compensation (which payments are received shortly after discharge), and transition into the VA health care system. Currently, there are about 140 military installations worldwide that participate in the BDD program.

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

For benefits counseling and assistance to separating service members in filing initial claims in the BDD program, the DAV has 35 Transition Service Officers (TSOs), who provide these free services at military separation centers, under the direct supervision of DAV NSO Supervisors. These TSOs have been trained specifically to perform transition presentations, service medical record reviews, and claims initiating activities at military separation centers at 108 military installations within the continental United States.

In 2007, DAV received a two-year grant of \$1.5 million from the General Electric Foundation for the expansion of our TSP. In 2009, they donated another \$250,000. With the aid of this grant, we were able to hire additional TSOs and expand our services.

The DAV's TSP contributes to our goal of maintaining our preeminent position as a provider of professional services to veterans. In 2009, our TSOs conducted 3,136 briefing presentations to

groups of separating service members, with 86,130 total participants. TSOs counseled 47,009 persons in individual interviews, reviewed the service treatment records of 35,357, and filed benefit applications for 26,207, again at no charge to the separating service members.

Another pilot program, conducted by the VA and DoD, the Disability Evaluation System (DES), has three features:

- A single, comprehensive medical examination
- A single-source VA disability rating
- Enhanced case-management methods

The DES pilot program has been implemented at several Army installations. This pilot program aims to help injured and ill service members get faster access to TRICARE and other health care and VA benefits by developing a single medical examination used by both DoD and VA, with a single-source disability evaluation done by VA and accepted by DoD.

An Army-sponsored task force led by retired General Frederick Franks, Jr. essentially recommends extending the pilot to the entire Army and incorporating the features into a revamped disability system. He recommends that one comprehensive examination be used by the Army to determine whether a soldier continues on active duty and by VA to determine disability levels. This would eliminate the “dual” disability ratings currently in place with DoD and VA. DAV is closely monitoring this pilot program to determine what participation we will have, if any, in this program.

The DAV’s Mobile Service Office (MSO) program is a part of the same goal of maintaining our preeminent position. By putting our NSOs on the road to rural America, inner cities, and disaster areas, the DAV assists veterans where they live, which increases accessibility to the benefits our grateful nation provides for veterans. The DAV initially had 12 state-of-the-art MSOs specifically designed and equipped with laptop computers to accommodate two DAV service officers in the delivery of services throughout the continental United States. Two of the original MSOs have been sold to DAV Departments of Florida and Missouri for their exclusive use.

This year, DAV will be replacing its 10 MSOs with new and improved vehicles, which will be better equipped and better able to provide private, quality services to our clients.

Thanks to the generosity of a \$1 million pledge from the Harley-Davidson Foundation in August 2006, the DAV has been able to expand our MSO mission. The mission of this project, Harley’s Heroes Tour, is for outreach to millions of veterans of all generations to show the high honor DAV and Harley-Davidson give them as a result of their service and sacrifice to our country, and to provide benefits counseling to those veterans.

Our MSOs are also used for outreach and service on other public awareness programs. Since 2003, the DAV has sponsored the World War II B-25 Mitchell Bomber, Panchito, and, in 2005, we expanded the program to include a second restored B-25 Bomber, Special Delivery (the B-25 bombers were used in the Doolittle Raid on Japan during World War II). These B-25s are featured at air shows around the country. This sponsorship has allowed DAV to reach out to the many thousands of Americans who attend these air shows and who stop by to learn about our

organization's free services and volunteer opportunities. To meet the demand created by the success of this program, DAV purchased another MSO dedicated solely to the air shows across the country.

DAV MSOs continue to target other special events and interests, including Native American Indian Reservations, NASCAR races, military retiree conventions, Vietnam Moving Wall, homeless stand downs, community fairs and parades, Veterans Day and Memorial Day activities and information seminars.

These specially equipped MSOs, along with special disaster relief teams, are also deployed by DAV to areas devastated by disasters. They were sent to the Gulf Coast regions hardest hit by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and to the tornado-destroyed town of Greensboro, Kansas, shortly after those devastating disasters. Our MSOs were used twice in 2008 for disaster relief. For Hurricane Gustav, we used one MSO in Louisiana, and for Hurricane Ike we used two, one in Louisiana and the other in Texas. These mobile offices allowed the DAV to provide much-needed assistance directly to displaced service-disabled veterans and their families. Fortunately, in 2009, there were no devastating disasters that required the use of our MSOs.

During 2009, our service officers in our MSOs interviewed 18,647 persons, filed 14,324 claims and visited 727 sites across the country.

Equally vital to the success of our mission to rebuild the lives of our nation's wartime service-disabled veterans are the activities of the more than 14,000 DAV and Auxiliary members who selflessly volunteer their valuable time to assist America's sick and disabled veterans. Last year, these men and women continued to serve this nation by providing 2.2 million hours of essential services to hospitalized veterans, saving taxpayers \$41 million in federal employee costs.

In an effort to meaningfully touch the lives of more veterans in need of assistance, in October 2007, DAV created the Local Veterans Assistance Program (LVAP). Opportunities have always existed for individuals to assist veterans and their dependents – and DAV and Auxiliary members have always answered that call. We see examples of this each and every day aimed at meeting the main objective of our organization to build better lives for America's disabled veterans and their dependents.

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

1. Chapter and Department Service Officer work.
2. DAV specific outreach efforts, such as DAV Air show Outreach Program, Harley's Heroes, National Guard mobilizations and demobilizations.
3. Fundraising efforts to assist disabled veterans.
4. Direct assistance to veterans, widows, or families, including yard work, home repairs, and grocery shopping.

During 2009, 1,350 volunteers participated in the DAV's LVAP for a total of 240,238 hours of volunteer service. The DAV is constantly looking for new ways to recruit and engage new

members and volunteers, and we believe this new program will be to the advantage of all whom we serve.

The DAV has sought to reward a new generation of VA volunteers and in 2000 we created the National Commander's Youth Volunteer Scholarship Program to ensure the future of a viable volunteer program. In remembrance of former VA Secretary and former DAV Executive Director Jesse Brown, we renamed the scholarship program in his honor. Annually, the Jesse Brown Scholarship Program honors outstanding young volunteers who participate in the VA Volunteer Service Program and generously donate their time and compassion to sick and disabled veterans. Since its inception, the DAV has awarded 111 scholarships totaling about \$738,000.

Again, in 2009, Ford Motor Company donated \$25,000 to the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship Program.

The DAV also employs 176 Hospital Service Coordinators at 193 VA facilities across the country to oversee DAV's transportation program. The DAV's transportation program provides free transportation to and from VA health care facilities to those veterans who could not otherwise access needed medical care. Between October 2008 and October 2009, DAV's National Transportation Network logged more than 24 million miles and transported more than 645,000 veterans to VA health care facilities. More than 8,900 volunteer drivers spent 1.4 million hours transporting veterans during 2009. Since our national transportation program began in 1987, over 12 million veterans have been transported more than 473 million miles, for a total of 25.9 million volunteer hours.

Messrs. Chairmen, the leaders of this great organization are extremely proud of the service provided by DAV volunteers, many of whom are disabled veterans themselves or the family members of disabled veterans. These volunteers, many of whom are seated before you today, continue to serve the needs of our country's disabled veterans on a daily basis. Our nation's sick and disabled veterans are much better off because of the time these volunteers are willing to donate. I applaud their efforts and their dedication.

In 2009, DAV donated 151 vans to VA, free of charge, to transport veterans to their VA medical appointments. This year, we will donate 103 vans to VA at a cost to DAV of \$2.5 million. Since 1987, the DAV has donated 2,260 vans, at a cost of \$46.6 million. Our commitment to this program is as strong as ever. We have vans in every state and nearly every Congressional district serving our veterans—your constituents. DAV not only advocates on behalf of our nation's veterans, we also continue to give back to our nation and our fellow veterans.

Additionally, DAV's efforts were aided by the support of the Ford Motor Company with the presentation of a check in the amount of \$200,000 for the purchase of nine new vehicles for the DAV's Transportation Network. Since 1996 Ford has donated 141 vehicles to the DAV Transportation Network. The DAV is proud that Ford Motor Company continues to honor its commitment to the men and women who have served our nation and who have protected our freedoms through its generous donations.

As these statistics demonstrate, the DAV has remained committed to its mission and directs its resources to the most needed and meaningful services for America's service-disabled veterans

and their families. These services aid veterans directly and support and augment VA programs, which have been authorized by Congress. Our record of service on behalf of our nation's service-disabled veterans and their dependents and survivors remains unmatched. The DAV is able to do so only with the continuing financial support of an American public that is grateful for all that our veterans have done.

One of DAV's highest priorities the last several years, and an issue we advocated for during the past several decades, reform of VA health care funding, finally was enacted into law on October 22, 2009, when the President signed H.R. 1016, the "Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009." This important legislation, overwhelmingly passed by Congress, requires the Administration to include health care funding account estimates and details for appropriations for the fiscal year following the current fiscal year for which the budget is submitted. Further, it requires the Comptroller General to study the adequacy and accuracy of the VA baseline model projections for health care expenditures for three years and report the study results to Congress.

Messrs. Chairmen, the veterans of this country owe you and your colleagues a debt of gratitude for the passage of VA health care budget reform. Passage of the "Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009," means that VA will know well in advance what its new budget will be, they will receive it on time, they will be able to appropriately prepare for the new fiscal year and, most importantly, health care services to veterans will not be disrupted due to lack of planning or untimely budgets.

As a secondary result of our efforts to reform the budget for VA health care, Congress has provided budgets for VA that have met or exceeded the recommendations of the Independent Budget (IB) the last three years, even though the budgets were late two of the three years.

Messrs. Chairmen, DAV agrees with your initial assessments that this new budget for FY 2011 (and, in the case of VA health care, for FY 2012) is a very positive first step in fulfilling the nation's promises to veterans to ensure a robust VA health care system and a long-overdue reform of the disability benefits adjudication process. We applaud the Administration's progressive views on these matters. As you know the Administration requested \$125 billion, an increase of \$12.2 billion over last year. Compared to the request for total discretionary funding of \$60.3 billion including medical collections, the IB, in which DAV is a partner organization, recommends \$61.5 billion, \$1.2 billion more than requested—almost \$400 million of the difference is for long-term health care needs.

Within our overall support for this budget, DAV would call your attention to our concern about the requests in three cases: construction projects and grants, biomedical research, and information technology, which account for the balance of the difference in the IB recommendations and the Administration's request. These accounts have been reduced significantly or are being flat-funded. We hope that the Committees will examine VA's justification for submitting these insufficient levels and will reassure DAV and all sick and disabled veterans that these three key VA programs will receive sufficient funding next year.

Messrs. Chairmen, major policy positions of the DAV, such as reform of the VA health care funding system, are derived from resolutions adopted by the delegates to our annual National

Conventions. Since our first National Convention in 1921, the DAV's annual legislative program has served to guide our advocacy for disabled veterans in accordance with the will of our members. Our 2010 mandates cover a broad spectrum of VA programs and services and they are available on DAV's website, www.dav.org. Since DAV was founded in 1920, promoting meaningful, reasonable, and responsible public policy for service-disabled veterans has been at the heart of who we are and what we do. Our will and commitment to building better lives for our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families come from feelings deep inside each of us, nurtured in the fertile soil of our own personal sacrifices and strengthened by the vitality of our membership and the support of the American public.

A core mission of the VA is the provision of benefits to relieve the economic effects of disability upon veterans and their families. For those benefits to effectively fulfill their intended purpose, VA must promptly deliver them to veterans. The ability of disabled veterans to care for themselves and their families often depends on these benefits. The need for benefits among disabled veterans is usually urgent. While awaiting action by VA, they and their families suffer hardships; protracted delays can lead to deprivation, bankruptcies, and homelessness. Disability benefits are critical and providing for disabled veterans should always be a top priority of the government.

VA can promptly deliver benefits to entitled veterans only if it can process and adjudicate claims in a timely and accurate fashion. However, VA has neither maintained the necessary capacity to meet its claims workload nor corrected systemic deficiencies that compound the problem of inadequate capacity. If a claim is not properly adjudicated the first time, it can take years or even a decade or more to receive an accurate decision. No one should be treated in that manner, especially a veteran who has earned the benefit due to honorable service to his or her nation.

Rather than making headway and overcoming the chronic claims backlog and consequent protracted delays in claims disposition, VA has lost ground to the problem, with the backlog of pending claims growing substantially larger. The claims inventory has swollen, and the appellate workload is growing at an alarming rate, suggesting further degradation of quality or at least continuation of quality problems.

Reform of the veterans benefits approval system is DAV's biggest priority for this year. "Do It Right the First Time to Save Time, Resources and Lives" will be the rally call behind which DAV members, other veterans and concerned citizens can unite to eliminate the logjam of claims, streamline the process and reduce the time it takes to obtain a quality, accurate benefit decision from the VA.

Our goals are simple: disabled veterans and their dependents and survivors should be able to apply for benefits through a simple, uniform and modern IT-based process that enables VA to make accurate decisions within acceptable time frames, and active duty service members should be able to apply for benefits before discharge through a simple, uniform and modern IT-based system that enables accurate decisions by the time of their discharge.

The DAV and others have identified the problems that cause too many disabled veterans and their families and survivors to wait too long for disability compensation rating decisions that are too often wrong or inaccurate. These problems include:

- Accuracy of Decisions on Veterans Disability Compensation
 - o VA's Inspector General reported in March 2009 that almost a quarter (22 percent) of all veterans' claims for disability compensation were decided incorrectly in the 12-month period reviewed. During that period, over 200,000 veterans received inaccurate decisions on disability compensation.
 - o Statistics from the BVA and U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) demonstrate that about two-thirds of cases appealed to them and decided on the merits contain errors.
 - o The emphasis has always been on production, the quantity of cases, and not on the quality of those decisions.

- Timeliness of Approving Claims for Veterans Benefits
 - o As of February 13, 2010, there were 480,706 claims for disability compensation and pensions awaiting rating decisions; 180,785 (37.6 percent) of the claims have exceeded VBA's 125-day strategic goal.
 - o The average time to approve a rating has exceeded 180 days for more than a decade (1999 – 2009).

- Complexity of Application and Approval Process
 - o VA continues to rely on a cumbersome paper-based system, beginning with a 23-page application, to review and evaluate claims for disability compensation and pension.
 - o From 2006 to 2008, there has been about a 50 percent increase in the most complex disability compensation applications, those in which a veteran claims eight or more disabilities.

To realize the magnitude of the problem, one need only review the March 2009 VA Inspector General's report or the BVA or CAVC statistics for any given year that indicates about one-third of the cases at BVA had been there previously or that about two-thirds of the appealed cases at BVA and CAVC are reversed or remanded.

Our solution calls for developing a work culture at VA that emphasizes quality at all steps in the claims adjudication process. Creating a management culture that measures and rewards quality of results, not just quantity, and provides sufficient training of VA's management and workforce in order to achieve this outcome. Creating a secure and accessible paperless IT system that rapidly moves and organizes information necessary for VA to approve claims for benefits, while optimizing workflow and business processes. Creating a universal and simple application process that provides claimants with regular updates on the progress of their claims, and allows them to access their records and the status of their claims.

Currently, in the Veterans Health Administration, veterans can, through VA's my HealtheVet, access their health records and military information online. Veterans should have the same online access to their claim records and claim status.

The DAV is pleased that Secretary Shinseki has pledged to transform the VA into a people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking organization. We look forward to working with the Secretary to improve and reform VA's benefit delivery system.

Messrs. Chairmen, in the near future, DAV plans to have, with the support of other major veterans and military service organizations, a comprehensive package of both short-term and

long-term solutions, which will contain both administrative and legislative provisions. Once we have concrete administrative and legislative solutions, we will share them with your staffs.

With the realization that we shall have ample opportunity to more fully address other DAV legislative resolutions during hearings before your Committees and personally with your staffs, I shall only briefly comment upon a few of them at this time.

In addition to reforming and correcting the problems at VBA prohibiting the timely and accurate production of claims decisions, the members of the DAV call upon the members of these Committees to stand up for veterans and:

- Support a realistic increase in VA disability compensation rates to improve the standard of living of disabled veterans and their families.
- Match certain entitlements to vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits under Chapter 31 with those of the Post-9/11 Educational Assistance Program under Chapter 33.
- Support screening and adequate treatment for mental health care, especially post traumatic stress disorder, and traumatic brain injury.
- Support training, counseling and financial assistance for family caregivers.
- Support legislation to remove the prohibition against concurrent receipt of Survivor Benefit Plan payments and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.
- Support legislation to remove the prohibition against concurrent receipt of military longevity retirement pay and VA disability compensation for all affected veterans.
- Increase the face value of Service Disabled Veterans' Insurance (SDVI).
- Authorize VA to revise its premium schedule for SDVI to reflect current mortality tables.
- Support additional increases in grants for automobiles or other conveyances available to certain disabled veterans, and provide for automatic annual adjustments based on the increase in the cost of living.
- Provide an additional increase in the specially adapted housing grant.
- Support the fullest possible accounting of our POW/MIAs from all wars and conflicts.
- Extend commissary and exchange privileges to service-connected disabled veterans.
- Extend space-available air travel aboard military aircraft to 100 percent service-connected disabled veterans.
- Allow an extension of Vocational Rehabilitation in excess of 12-year limitation.
- Support an expansion of POW presumptions.
- Support legislation to repeal the prohibition against service connection for tobacco-related illnesses.

Messrs. Chairmen, your Committees' support of these issues are greatly appreciated by the men and women who have sacrificed so much for our country—our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors.

The DAV is providing major support to the Disabled Veterans LIFE Memorial Foundation (Foundation) in its work to construct, with private funds, a memorial to disabled veterans in Washington, D.C. to honor the brave men and women—our heroes who have sacrificed so much and who have contributed greatly to protect and defend our cherished freedoms—who were disabled as a result of their military service. Several years ago, Congress enacted legislation that authorizes construction of the memorial on select lands in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol.

Congress authorized the transfer of the land to the U.S. Park Service for the construction of this memorial; however, along with the transfer comes the need to do street reconfiguration work. This work has to be paid for by government funds. Congress and the Department of Transportation have provided us with some of this money and for that we are grateful but, I call on all of you to support our efforts to appropriate the remaining \$2 million so that the property can be reconfigured and the Foundation can obtain the proper permits to begin groundbreaking and construction of the memorial.

Additionally, the members of DAV are very appreciative of the fact that Congress passed legislation to provide for the minting of coins by the Treasury to commemorate disabled veterans and to contribute a surcharge on the coins to the fund for construction of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. These coins are being minted and sold this year and were rolled out on February 25. The additional revenue from the sale of these coins will greatly assist the Foundation in achieving its fundraising goal so that construction of the memorial can begin in the very near future. Thank you again for your efforts to make this memorial a reality.

Messrs. Chairmen, as demonstrated in my testimony, the DAV's work for our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors involves many issues and many challenges. When it comes to meeting the needs of our nation's wartime service-disabled veterans, the DAV is strong in its advocacy. As the voice of our nation's disabled veterans, we advocate for our government to fulfill its promises to those men and women and their families and survivors, all of whom have sacrificed so much for our cherished freedoms and way of life.

Messrs. Chairmen, as a severely disabled veteran of the Vietnam War, I am extremely conscious of the grave responsibility to work as a spokesman for disabled veterans at such a time in our nation's history. Recently, I had the honor to visit Brooke Army Medical Center and the Center for the Intrepid in San Antonio. I met some of our nation's true heroes, their family members and devoted medical professionals who provide some of the best care our nation has to offer. The passion and compassion exhibited by all three groups are hard to ignore. As a severely disabled veteran, I am also acutely aware of how I and my family were helped as a result of veterans' programs administered by the VA and authorized and paid for by Congress.

Sadly, as a user of VA programs, I am also aware that more must be done to ensure that the needs of our nation's severely disabled veterans and their families, especially family caregivers, are met. In my case, and in the case of many severely disabled veterans, the support of family is what helps us get through rehabilitation. This family support comes at a great expense to family members—physically, mentally and financially. I am constantly reminded of how important my family's support was to my recovery, and it still is important today. However, our government too often overlooks the importance of the family support system to severely disabled veterans and their recovery and rehabilitation. Unfortunately, for many of our newest severely disabled veterans, rehabilitation of their physical wounds will require years of sustained medical and rehabilitative care services.

Messrs. Chairmen, we must not forget that benefits and services for disabled veterans, in fact all veterans, remain primarily the responsibility of our government. The citizens and government of a country that sends its sons and daughters to defend its homeland and fight its wars have a

strong moral obligation to repay them for bearing such a heavy burden. Our indebtedness to veterans is more important than any other part of our national debt because, without their sacrifices, we would not exist as a nation, nor would the citizens of many foreign nations enjoy the freedoms many Americans take for granted.

While we can never fully repay those who have stood in harm's way protecting freedom, a grateful nation has established a system to provide benefits and health care services to veterans as a measure of restitution for their personal sacrifices and as a way for all citizens to share the costs of war and national defense.

We believe funding for veterans benefits and health care services should be a top priority for Congress and the Administration as a continuing cost of our national defense. Once the guns fall silent, veterans should not have to beg for benefits they have earned and rightfully deserve for their service and sacrifice. A promise of benefits and services alone is not good enough. Approved programs must be sufficiently funded. As a nation, we must be willing to bear the costs of providing special benefits to such a unique group—those men and women who were willing, on behalf of all Americans, to serve in the military and fight our wars to preserve our cherished freedoms and democratic values.

Messrs. Chairmen, as you can see, our work for disabled veterans and their families continues to involve many issues and many challenges. Although we can be proud of the accomplishments made on behalf of disabled veterans in the past, much remains to be done. When it comes to justice for disabled veterans, we cannot be timid in our advocacy. These Committees and the DAV, working together with mutual cooperation, must battle for what is best for our nation's disabled veterans and their families and survivors. Veterans have every right to expect their government to treat them fairly. We call upon you, the members of these Committees, as our advocates in Congress to help us to educate your colleagues about the priorities of disabled veterans.

I hope I have demonstrated that America's disabled veterans, rather than being satisfied to rest on their laurels, continue to stand ready to actively and unselfishly be involved in their communities and across the nation to assist our government in meeting the needs of other service-disabled veterans, their dependents and survivors.

Messrs. Chairmen and members of these Committees, I ask that you, as I do, remain mindful that the freedoms and prosperities enjoyed by all citizens of our nation have been paid for with the lives and health of many brave Americans. All we ask in return for our sacrifices and our service is for this nation to honor its sacred contract with America's disabled veterans. We must, therefore, honor and care for those who distinguished themselves in defense of our freedom—whatever the cost. Disabled veterans and their dependents and survivors deserve nothing less.

Messrs. Chairmen, this completes my testimony. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the DAV to share our proud record of service to veterans and our country and to discuss our agenda for the 111th Congress. Thank you also for all that your Committees have done and for all that you will do for veterans in the future.

May God bless America. May God bless America's soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, and Coast Guardsmen who have been placed in harm's way. And may God bless the work of these Committees on behalf of our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families and survivors.