

STEPHEN R. ZEITZ, NATIONAL COMMANDER, JEWISH WAR VETERANS OF THE USA

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES OF THE  
JEWISH WAR VETERANS OF THE USA

As Presented By  
STEPHEN R. ZEITZ  
NATIONAL COMMANDER

BEFORE A JOINT SESSION OF THE  
SENATE AND HOUSE  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEES  
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INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Murray, Chairman Miller, and Members of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs, my fellow veterans and friends, I am Stephen R. Zeitz, the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. (JWV). JWV is Congressionally Chartered and also provides counseling and assistance to members encountering problems dealing with the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and other government agencies. JWV is an active participant in The Military Coalition, a select group of over 30 military associations and veterans' organizations representing over five million active duty, reserve and retired uniformed service personnel, veterans, families, and survivors on Capitol Hill. In fact, I am very proud that our National Executive Director, Colonel Herb Rosenbleeth, who is here with me today, was recently elected President of the Military Coalition. On March 2 and 3, our National Executive Committee members were here in Washington to meet with their Representatives and Senators as part of JWV's Capitol Hill Action Day(s). Our members prepared diligently for these important meetings and successfully presented many of JWV's legislative priorities to their members of Congress and congressional staff.

Members of the committee, it was a singular honor for me to present the JWV Medal of Merit to the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, at our Congressional Reception during our days on Capitol Hill. It was equally rewarding to JWV to have so many of you participate with us!

JWV's presentation to the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee reflects our strong interest in and great concern for world events. While we advocate health care and compensation for veterans, JWV is also deeply involved in U.S. interests overseas. We must be always vigilant to protect the freedoms won by our brave veterans!

Also, Madame Chairwoman, I recall with the greatest pride and pleasure, that we presented you with the JWV Medal of Merit at our Congressional Reception in 2006. Our sincere congratulations to you on your selection as Chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

Mr. Chairman, yesterday, March 15th, we at JWV celebrated our 115th birthday. For all of these 114 years, JWV has advocated a strong national defense and just and fair recognition and compensation for veterans. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA prides itself in being in the forefront among our nation's civic and veterans groups in supporting the well-earned rights of

veterans, in promoting American democratic principles, in defending universal Jewish causes and in vigorously opposing bigotry, anti-Semitism and terrorism both here and abroad. Today, even more than ever before, we stand for these principles. The Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. represents a proud tradition of patriotism and service to the United States of America. As the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA (JWV), I thank you for the opportunity to present the views of our 100,000 members on issues under the jurisdiction of your committees. At the conclusion of JWV's 115th National Convention in Savannah, GA, our convention delegates adopted our resolutions for the 112th Congress. These mandates establish the legislative agenda for JWV during my year as National Commander.

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

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

#### NO GOVERNMENT FUNDING

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA, Inc. does not receive any grants or contracts from the federal government.

#### THE MILITARY COALITION

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

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

#### THE PARTNERSHIP FOR VETERANS HEALTH CARE BUDGET REFORM

JWV is proud to be a member of the Partnership for Veterans Health Care Budget Reform. The Partnership is a coalition of nine veteran service organizations which meets regularly at DAV. JWV fully supports the partnership's two main concerns, i.e., the quality, accuracy and timeliness of VA claims, and the threat to advanced funding for the VA. Our thanks to Peter Dickinson and Joe Violante, of DAV for their outstanding leadership and expertise.

#### VA BUDGET

Madame Chairwoman and Mr. Chairman, JWV is vitally concerned about proposed freezes to domestic spending that may affect veterans. In fact, a better word would be alarmed about proposed freezes to domestic spending that may affect veterans.

This nation has thousands of troops in combat. And many thousands who have returned from combat in the recent past.

VA health care must be fully funded! The Congress should do no less!

#### PROPOSAL BY REPRESENTATIVE MICHELLE BACHMANN (R-MN)

Veterans are alarmed by the recent proposal from Representative Michelle Backmann (R-MN) which would freeze the Department of Veterans Affairs health care spending and cut veterans disability benefits. JWV is strongly opposed to any suggestion to reduce veterans' health care spending. The number of veterans needing care continues to grow as troops return from Iraq and Afghanistan. It is incomprehensible to think that VA health care funds could be frozen without hurting these returning veterans.

#### VA HEALTH CARE

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the largest integrated health care system in the country. VA's mission is to "care for him who shall have borne the battle, and his widow and his orphans."

JWV strongly urges Congress to insure that the VA remains open to Category 8 veterans.

#### MEMORIAL IN ARLINGTON CEMETERY FOR JEWISH CHAPLAINS

Congressional approval is needed for permission to install a Memorial for the Jewish Chaplains who perished while in service. Currently, Chaplains Hill in Arlington appropriately memorializes the names of 242 Christian military chaplains who perished while on active duty. None of the 13 Jewish chaplains who have died while serving are so honored.

Therefore, JWV asks your support for the following two Congressional resolutions:

H.Con.Res.12 - Expressing the sense of Congress that an appropriate site on Chaplains Hill in Arlington National Cemetery should be provided for a memorial marker to honor the memory of the Jewish chaplains who died while on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States.

S.Con.Res.4 - Latest Title: A concurrent resolution expressing the sense of Congress that an appropriate site on Chaplains Hill in Arlington National Cemetery should be provided for a memorial marker to honor the memory of the Jewish chaplains who died while on active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States.

#### LONG TERM CARE

As the VA care shift from an inpatient to an outpatient system, VA must ensure the needs of our aging veteran population are being met.

JWV believes that VA should take its responsibility to America's aging veterans seriously and provide the care mandated by Congress. Congress should do its part and provide adequate funding to VA to implement its mandates.

JWV recommends Congress provide designated funding for Long-Term Services (i.e. staffing, capacity, and program development).

#### TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY, POST TRAUMATIC STRESS, AND VETERAN SUICIDE

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) has been referred to as the "signature wound" of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) conflicts. More combat veterans are surviving blast injuries than in previous conflicts due to body armor and improved battlefield treatment. However, survivors of blast attacks sustain injuries, including but not limited to: TBI, hearing loss, blindness, amputations, PTS, nerve damage, lung injury and musculo-skeletal

damage that requires extensive rehabilitation and mental health therapy to enable them to live autonomously. The effects of these injuries may endure for a lifetime.

Currently, most existing research on brain injury focuses on injuries sustained from automobile accidents. The JWV believes that more research is needed on combat-related traumatic brain injuries, where service members may experience more than one blast episode. TBI can cause various neurological outcomes and diseases and increases the veteran's risk for Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease. Both DoD and VA have acknowledged the lack of research on brain injuries and the difficulties of diagnosing PTS and TBI because of the comorbidity of symptoms between the two.

VA's budget will need to have increases in recruitment packages and incentives in order to keep competitive against the private sector and attract specialty care providers.

#### MANDATORY FUNDING

This country has a sacred obligation to those who have served and defended our nation to fully provide for their needs when they return from battle. Mandatory funding is necessary so that all category eights receive the care they need, so that veterans receive long term care, and so that VA medical research will be second to none! This is especially important now that we know more about the real challenges and expenses with injuries to the brain, eyes, amputations, and other catastrophic injuries.

Only when the VA not only knows in advance the level of its funding but also knows with certainty that its funding levels will be adequate for all of its requirements can our veterans be assured that all of their health care needs can and will be met.

#### IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS

Although the majority of our members are from previous wars and conflicts, JWV strongly supports those veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Their priorities are our priorities. Therefore, JWV asks that the Congress launch a well-funded, researched and integrated nationwide campaign to eliminate the mental health stigma faced by servicemembers.

That the Congress enact legislation to support the caregivers of wounded warriors who have sacrificed so much to care for their loved ones.

Congress must help veterans find gainful employment by leveraging federal contract rules, supporting veteran entrepreneurship and extending tax credits to employers who hire recently returned veterans.

#### FISCAL YEAR 2012 AND 2013 ADVANCED APPROPRIATIONS

The VA Advanced Appropriations, passed by the last congress, must not be taken away by the 112th congress. Many in the new congress are saying they will roll Federal agencies back to 2008 funding levels. The result would be a major cut to the VA.

#### CLAIMS BACKLOG

Although the Department of Veterans Affairs has made the filing of claims considerably faster and easier, there continues to be a serious backlog in the processing of claims by the Department of Veterans Affairs which, too often, can result in the claim not being processed before the veteran passes away. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA has joined with our comrades in all veterans' service organizations in a call to have this intolerable backlog abated as quickly as possible. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the Congress and the Secretary of the

Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that the backlog of claims is reduced to a reasonable level.

#### AGENT ORANGE BENEFITS EXPANDED TO OTHERS

The Department of Veterans Affairs refuses to recognize that men and women who served on ships off the coast of Vietnam and other sites in Southeast Asia were exposed to Agent Orange as well as other toxins.

The Department's refusal to recognize that these service members were exposed by air currents, polluted drinking water, handling toxin tainted items such as clothing, airframes, etc. The main reason for the Department's stance appears to be monetary rather than scientific or compassionate. The men and women suffering from the results of toxic poisoning arising out of their military service are now being denied the medical services they desperately require because of the stance by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress to designate that any veteran who served anywhere proximate to where any toxin was used, manufactured or distributed to be presumptively eligible for services and benefits deemed a disabled veteran.

#### ENDING HOMELESSNESS FOR VETERANS

Far too many of our fellow veterans are homeless. Women veterans have unique problems finding suitable safe housing. There must be a nationwide unified effort to identify all homeless veterans with particular attention being paid on the needs of the female veterans.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA demands that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs fulfill his promise to end homelessness among the veterans' population and develops new and innovative projects which meet the needs of these comrades as well as expand the use of the existing available programs.

#### EXCEPTION TO THE PHARMACEUTICAL FORMULARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Our service members have risked themselves in defense of our Nation, people and principles. Some of these veterans have been wounded on battlefields at the far corners of the earth during these years of war.

Traumatic brain injuries are among the harms suffered by our veterans during their military service, at times resulting in cognitive impairment that limits their rehabilitation, employability and independence.

The pharmaceutical formulary for the Department of Veterans' Affairs currently lacks a proper treatment for the cognitive impairment of attentional disorders pursuant to these brain injuries. Generic substitutes for the branded medications will not be available in the United States for more than seven years.

The Department of Veterans' Affairs has been directed to economize its operations, including by the restriction of its pharmaceutical formulary to generic versions of medications. The cost of prescribing a particular non-generic medication is outweighed by the benefits to be gained from rehabilitation, improved cognition and increased employability of impaired veterans. The rehabilitation, employability and independence of our wounded veterans is in the economic interest of the American people.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA demands an exemption be granted to the pharmaceutical formulary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs, to allow healthcare providers

to prescribe branded medications to their patients, our veterans, to advance their rehabilitation toward the independence that our Nation so highly values and where the treating physician so prescribes.

#### OPPOSITION TO TRICARE COST INCREASES

The Department of Defense (DoD) seeks increases to TRICARE costs for military retirees. Those who wear the uniform of their country for twenty or more years are, for all practical purposes, enrolled in a 20- to 30-year pre-payment plan that they must complete to earn lifetime health coverage. In this regard, military retirees and their families pay enormous “up-front” premiums for such coverage through decades of service and sacrifice. Once that pre-payment is already rendered, the government cannot simply ignore it and focus only on post-service cash payments – as if the past service, sacrifice, and commitments had no value.

DoD and the nation – as good-faith employers of the trusting members from whom they demand such extraordinary commitment and sacrifice – have a reciprocal health care obligation to retired service members and their families and survivors that far exceeds any civilian employer’s.

JWV is strongly opposed to any increases whatsoever in TRICARE costs for career military personnel.

#### HEALTHCARE DISPARITIES

The Department of Veterans Affairs Center for Minority Veterans Advisory Panel has repeatedly identified a serious disparity between the quality of services made available to female and minority veterans as compared to all other veterans.

The National Institute of Health has identified this disparity of services as the number three issue among its top five priorities at the Department of Veteran Affairs. This pattern of a lower quality of health services for the poor, disadvantaged, female and minority ethnic and racial groups equates to higher levels of morbidity and mortality. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA finds such disparity unconscionable and inexcusable.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA demands that Congress and the Department of Veterans Affairs immediately take any and all steps necessary to close this disparity of services.

#### STOLEN VALOR ACT

The Congress of the United States enacted the Stolen Valor Act to protect those men and women who were honored for their service to this Nation while serving in the Armed Forces.

A federal District Court Judge has ruled that this Act of Congress is unconstitutional on its face as a violation of the First Amendment’s guarantee of the freedom of speech. The freedom of speech has never been deemed to be an absolute right without any restrictions. The Stolen Valor Act protects the sacrifices of the men and women upon whom honor has been bestowed.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon the Solicitor General and the Department of Justice to appeal this miscarriage of justice to the level of courts necessary to protect the men and women upon whom medals were bestowed for their service from those who would rob them of their distinctive and distinguished service.

#### THANKS GO OUT TO THE VA’S NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE

The Department of Veteran’s Affairs National Suicide Prevention Hotline has recorded its 10,000th rescue on July 4th, 2010.

The hotline is staffed 24/7/365 by trained counselors, social workers, health technician assistants

and responders who handle 15 phone lines and three chat rooms. These professionals have handled 260,000 calls in the three years since its inception. The men and women who work for the Hotline deserve the accolades and thanks of everyone who has worn the uniform of the United States.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA extends its sincerest and most heartfelt appreciation to those who work for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline and who serve the veterans' community in a very quiet but significant way.

#### THANKS TO THE VA FOR MAKING THE FILING OF CLAIMS FASTER AND EASIER

The Department of Veterans Affairs has streamlined the process of filing of claims with the Department. The newly installed process will make the filing of claims considerably faster and easier.

The new process will enable the veterans to access the Department's claims system remotely so as to facilitate the filing of claims by veterans who might otherwise fail to file for benefits to which they are entitled.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA congratulates and thanks the Department of Veterans Affairs for moving forward and making its services more readily available to all deserving veterans.

#### VETERANS COURTS

There are a growing number of states and courts recognizing that many veterans have problems with the legal system and the courts as a result of their service to this Country which arises out of their having been a member of the Armed Forces.

These states and courts realize that by diverting these former members of the military into alternative programs which are prepared to treat the individuals' particular social needs the greater society is thus served.

These states and courts acknowledge that incarceration is not an appropriate placement for this segment of the population but treatment and rehabilitation is the better avenue. The studies developed to study the results of these alternative programs seem to justify the growth of these alternatives to incarceration.

Therefore, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA congratulates those states and courts who have taken the initiative of installing the Veterans Courts in their legal systems and recommends to those states who have not done so as of yet that they do so, as well.

#### CORRECT THE SURVIVOR BENEFIT PROGRAM (SBP)

Survivors of military retirees who die of service-connected causes and who paid into SBP, and survivors killed in active-duty, should receive both SBP and DIC (Dependency and Indemnity Compensation) benefits without the current dollar for dollar offset. JWV strongly supports legislation to end this offset.

JWV strongly supports HR 178, The Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act, which would correct this inequity.

#### MIA/POW

There are now 1,699 Americans listed by the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) missing and unaccounted-for from the Vietnam War. DPMO just posted the news that the remains of CDR Frank Green, Jr., USN, MSgt Ralph Reno, Jr., USA, and SFC James Moreland,

USA, have been identified. CDR Green, listed as MIA in North Vietnam on July 10, 1972, was recovered December 9, 2008, and his remains were identified November 1, 2010. MSgt Reno was recovered August 29, 2000, and his remains were identified as part of a group on October 5, 2010. SFC Moreland, recovered April 12, 1995, was identified October 13, 2010. The Jewish War Veterans is deeply grateful that these three Americans can at long last receive the honor they deserve and that their families no longer endure uncertainty.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA calls upon Congress and the President to continue this Nation's commitment to locate and return to this Nation the remains of the MIA/POWs still listed as Killed in Action-No Body Found and to continue to use all our available resources for that single purpose.

#### BACK-UP TO DOD

VA Hospitals must be adequately funded, staffed and equipped to perform their vital role as this nation's only back-up for DoD medical facilities. U.S. military personnel could possibly suffer casualties exceeding the capacity of the combined military medical treatment facilities.

In such a case, the VA would be vital to the nation. JWV strongly urges the Congress to fund the VA to fully handle this potential workload.

#### BLINDED VETERANS

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA is a supporter of the Independent Budget. The Independent Budget emphasizes that recent data compiled by both DoD and VA sources reported that 13.9 percent of all those wounded evacuated from Operation Iraq Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) climbed to the second most common injury from the wars only behind hearing loss.

VA Poly Trauma Center in Palo Alto, and Hines VAMC Low vision Clinic both found in TBI vision screening that 63% and 68% respectively, screened positive for visual system dysfunction related to their TBI.

Vision research published from the Palo Alto VAMC Poly Trauma Center found that 75 % have visual subjective complaints, with objective visual diagnostic disorders found of diplopia, field loss, accommodation insufficiency, convergence disorder, ocular-motor dysfunction, 55% inability to interpret print, with 4% of those resulting in legal blindness .

The IB requests that there must be an increase to \$ 10 million in FY 2012 to allow for the exploration of new and promising vision research opportunities. There are 1,089 low vision veterans are enrolled in VA VIST Teams requiring specialized rehabilitation services. While blinded veterans are usually referred for VA Blind Rehabilitative Center (BRC) programs many of the new TBI functionally visually impaired veterans are being not having consultation and referral to meet the needs of low vision rehabilitation. BVA has found some severe eye injured Army reserve members unaccounted for and that were never centrally tracked by registry while in the DOD system.

The establishment of the Vision Center of Excellence (VCE) for the prevention, diagnosis, mitigation, treatment, and rehabilitation of military eye injuries was authorized by the FY2008 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) (PL100-181 section 1623) has been mismanaged, and suffered from lack of clear governance between both Assistant Secretary Defense Health Affairs, and VHA at senior levels. From November 12, 2008 to November 2009 the VCE had total staff of two physicians without any administrative operational support. It was late February 2010, before two full-time VA staff were hired, then late March before two more VA staff were



selected, to be assigned to the VCE with current total of four VA staff being assigned late May 2010.

This vital legislation established the VCE as a joint Department of Defense (DOD) and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) program to improve the care of American military personnel and veterans affected by combat eye trauma and to aid those suffering from vision loss and vision anomalies. Despite the legislative mandate, and Secretary of Defense Gates including the implementation of the Vision Center of Excellence as his second top health care issue in the Quadrennial Defense Report (QDR February 2010), the bureaucratic policy and funding issues have continued and hindered significant progress toward the full establishment of the VCE for two years. As we enter into this critical period of funding for FY 2012 the operational and governance management of the VCE and the NDAA FY 2009 authorized Hearing Center of Excellence must both have Health Executive Council (HEC) oversight and joint House Armed Services and VA Committees hearings.

Congress created in National Defense Authorization Act FY 2008, DOD/ VA "Vision Centers of Excellence" and joint Eye Trauma Registry. JWV requests joint HASC and HVAC Committee hearings on the implementation of the Vision Center of Excellence and greater oversight of Health Executive Council (HEC) on the VCE. JWV requests that the VCE be funded at not less than \$10 million for FY 2012.

#### JWV COUNTER TERRORISM COMMISSION

Mr. Chairman, the threat and potential dangers of terrorism, at home and abroad, cannot be overstated. We all remember the deadly attacks on September 11, 2001. Terrorism in the form of suicide bombers, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), ambushes, etc, have caused and are causing horrible loss of life, limb, and suffering both to our personnel, and to innocent civilians. Far too many veterans are casualties of an act of terrorism.

Of equal, and possibly even of greater importance to our nation, is the threat of terrorism to U.S. interests abroad and even here at home. We have witnessed the shoe and underwear bombers, the deadly attack at Fort Hood, and the attack on Fort Dix that was prevented. The recent terrorist attack in Austin, Texas on an IRS occupied facility is of great concern to JWV.

I am proud to be able to inform you that under the leadership of our Chairman, PNC Robert Zweiman, JWV has established a Counter Terrorism Commission.

#### CONCURRENT RECEIPT

JWV strongly believes that disabled veterans should be permitted to receive both military retirement benefits and VA disability compensation.

JWV knows that these programs have unique intents and purposes: military retirements benefits are intended to compensate for years of service, while VA disability compensation is intended to provide for disability or death attributable to military service.

JWV urgently requests the Congress to pass H.R. 333, the Retired Pay Restoration Act, as soon as possible.

JWV demands that Congress make it permissible to receive both benefits concurrently.

#### CONCLUSION

Madame Chairwoman and Chairman Miller, our country is still sending thousands of brave young men and women off to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our country must, therefore, pay for the costs involved.

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