



We exist to help those who cannot help themselves

STATEMENT OF
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LEGISLATIVE OFFICER
OF THE
AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE/U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C.
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Chairmen and members of the House and Senate Veteran's Affairs committee and guests, my name is Charles Susino Jr., Past National Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War. I am honored to provide testimony and welcome the new committee chair and members.

A lot of positive work has been done over this past session of Congress addressing the needs of the veterans. We extend our gratitude for your efforts. Looking forward, several pieces of legislation need to move through Congress and those in place must be implemented effectively. On each such initiative there are several phases required to provide the necessary needs for the veteran. It is to identify the need and accurately develop legislation targeted to address the need. Once passed by Congress, effective implementation is necessary for the veteran to realize the benefit. All three phases are critically important and too often it is this last phase that falls short. This is true for both recent laws and ones that have been on the books for years. We have access and communication with members of Congress however to insure the implementation phase is achieving the desired results, our suggestion would be to provide formal, structured access by the service organizations to the top VA management including who direct the implementation side.

VA Efficiencies and Accountabilities

We have confidence in Secretary McDonald in addressing head-on the many weaknesses of the VA system. As a former chief executive officer, an army veteran, and a father-in-law who was a WWII prisoner of war, we believe he has the back ground, understanding, and leadership to raise the VA to the level of performance required to meet our needs. We support the Secretary's efforts to reorganize the VA and obtain better access and understanding for the veteran without compromising efficiencies and accountabilities. We ask for your part that the oversight includes the kind of metrics that can measure if gains are being realized. We caution however in establishing a customer service organization as he suggests not to remove resources from the service providers, in the end they provide the care and treatment to the veterans. A key metric is the ratio of VA employees directly providing treatment and care to the veterans divided by the total number of VA employees, therefore the higher the per cent age, the better organizational efficiencies and lower overhead. Stated another way, you want a higher number of care and treatment providers and a lower amount of administrative personnel. Lastly, metrics that are leading indicators are most desirable. We support him however we, the service organizations, and you, Congress, need to hold the Secretary and the VA organization accountable. That requires close interaction and performance monitoring. Congress and the President must establish goals and expectations of performance and timeframes that are aggressive.

H.R. 454: Military Retiree Survivor Comfort Act

A newly drafted Bill, H.R. 454: Military Retiree Survivor Comfort Act resides in committee. It is targeted to address an injustice to the surviving spouse of a military retiree. Under current law, the month the veteran passes away; their pension is rescinded from the individual's account. So at the worst time, while the spouse is grieving, money is being removed from their bank account because the veteran did not live the entire month. We believe this is inexpensive to resolve and shows the compassion deserving of the grieving spouse. Anecdotal evidence with other organizations providing a pension reveals the last month's check is retained and we believe our military retirees deserve the same consideration. In 1996 Congress voted to allow survivors to retain the veterans' last month pay for VA disability and pension payments. The military retiree survivors should have the same consideration.

HR 4741 Surviving Spouses Benefit Improvement Act of 2014

In the last Congress, HR 4741 Surviving Spouses Benefit Improvement Act of 2014 was introduced to address issues related to the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation [DIC] payable to the surviving spouse. Currently, an eligible surviving spouse would receive a basic DIC benefit of \$1,215 monthly. This is 41.0% of the basic compensation rate for a veteran with a spouse receiving disability compensation at the 100% disabled rating. This has called into question the adequacy of DIC payments. In comparison to most other government programs, the spouse would receive approximately 50%, still a hardship when the family income is reduced by 50% yet most costs remain. We ask that the new Congress revisit this issue. You will find through research that some form of DIC has been in effect since the early years of our country's formation.

Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention Act

A long standing concern has been the rate of suicide of returning veterans. Many veterans returning from service overseas struggle with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. As a result, an estimated 8000 veterans take their lives each year which equates to a per cent age far exceeding the rate of the general population. We applaud the Congress and President for signing into law the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention Act. We ask that Secretary McDonald and Congress oversee the implementation and determine if it is achieving the desired results and if not, act promptly to make the necessary changes.

H.R. 526, the "Furthering Asbestos Claims Transparency Act

H.R. 526, the "Furthering Asbestos Claims Transparency Act", or the "F.A.C.T. Act" as it is being called, was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives at the end of January. It is being pushed by the defendants and corporations' trade associations in order to make it more difficult for victims to receive the compensation they are entitled to. Following the death caused by asbestos related illness, families desperately need to promptly receive the compensation for their medical and other costs. As you are aware this military exposure was concentrated in the Navy where asbestos was commonly used for pipe insulation throughout the navy vessels. Asbestos has been banned for over 40 years however exposure to this deadly material impacts its victims years later, so to create a law at this time to restrict in any way just compensation is wrong for the victims, wrong for the military veterans and wrong for America. There is no debate as to the negative impacts on health and we ask that you take a strong stance against this act.

Homeless Veterans

A troubling statistic is the amount of homeless veterans that exist in our country. The VA has stated in a directive that it is targeting to eliminate homelessness by the end of 2015. We ask that the Secretary report on the progress of this initiative and what if any corrective actions are being taken to achieve this goal. It is a disgrace that any American veteran has no place to call home.

POW/MIA Commemorative Chair

We are proud of the many military memorials throughout our country, at the federal, state and local levels that honor those that have served our country. It is an ever present reminder to the public of the sacrifices of our military men and women to preserve America's

freedom. Fewer memorials however, make it visually clear of the pain and suffering of the veteran and their families especially those that were lost and or imprisoned as a result of battle. We ask for your unified support of HR 5391 and S. 2053 authorizing the installation of a POW/MIA commemorative chair on the Capitol grounds. With such a highly visible location and modest costs, the Chair would promote the honor, respect, and individual and family suffering as a result of conflicts for the many tens of thousands of veterans since WWII.

Advanced VA Appropriations

In Washington, there is a never ending struggle regarding appropriations within the government each year. We again ask for the simple change in procedure to provide advanced appropriations for VA health care and discretionary and mandatory accounts. To put this category of costs in the cross hairs of political debate each year is wrong and should be corrected with this procedural change.

Civilian Detainees

During wartime, there have been civilian detainees held in enemy prison camps, often side by side with our military prisoners of war. In fact, they were often individuals working on government contracts building facilities for the military which lead to their capture. To date, they do not receive any compensation nor health benefits resulting from their imprisonment. Overtime, the numbers of these individuals has reduced dramatically yet, there is time to do the right thing and include them within the VA healthcare system. This is deserving treatment for those civilians imprisoned because they were supporting our military operations. We ask that you take action to correct this long overdue injustice.

Special Groups Of Veterans

This is a long standing subject for our veterans who faced the enemy. Back in 1986, Congress and the President mandated VA health care for veterans with service connected disabilities as well as other special groups of veterans. Almost thirty years ago, it included veterans up to WWI and we ask the special groups to be revisited and updated to include WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Cold War, and our recent conflicts in the Middle East. Congress should examine ways to accomplish this without compromising those veterans with service related disabilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments and appearing before you on behalf of the American Ex-Prisoners of War.

God Bless Our Troops

God Bless America

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Thank you

Yours truly

Charles Susino, Jr.

Past National Commander

American Ex-Prisoners of War