

Association of the United States Navy

Written Testimony in Support of 2019 Legislative Agenda

Submitted to the United States
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
and House Veterans Affairs Committee



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Chief Executive Officer

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Introduction

Distinguished Committee Chairmen Senator Johnny Isakson and Congressman Mark Takano, and Ranking Members Senator John Tester and Congressman Phil Roe and other members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to present the 2019 Legislative Agenda for the Association of the United States Navy.

About Association of the United States Navy

The Association of the United States Navy (AUSN) is an IRC 501[c][19] organization based in Alexandria, Virginia, that works for the benefit of the U.S. Navy Sailors and Veterans. Through legislation and education, AUSN works to advance benefits for those who are serving or have served in the U.S. Navy. AUSN champions legislation on the state and federal levels and engages in targeted issues to support our men and women of the U.S. Navy.

Opening:

On behalf of the Active Duty, Veteran and civilian membership, friends and supporters of the Association of the United States Navy, I would like to thank the Committees for the stewardship and oversight you have provided for all those who have answered the call of duty.

It is an exciting time at AUSN – we are innovating, partnering and aligning ourselves to meet the needs of modern-day Sailors and their families, in parallel with our dedication to our Veterans who have given so much. We are breaking the mold that once formed so many sea-service veteran service organizations (VSOs) as AUSN represents the interests of the entire United States Navy. As promised in last year's testimony, we have forged a strong alliance with the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation, which ensures our Navy's wounded warriors and their families are cared for and supported the Navy way.

A lot has happened since we testified last year. As you know, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act was not enacted, despite having overwhelming bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate. That came as a tremendous disappointment, as for yet another year “Blue Water” Navy Vietnam Veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange will have to battle their illnesses on their own for at least another year as Congress once again pushes this bill forward. We thank you for your support for this bill, and urge your continued vigilance in ensuring its passage in 2019.

Despite this disappointment, there have been positive developments in 2019. Thanks to your efforts, Veterans receiving disability pay and military retirees will see a 2.8 percent cost-of-living increase for 2019, the largest increase in years. We urge the Committees to continue to push for COLA increases on an annual basis to ensure our Veterans are taken care of.

But there are many issues that our Shipmates continue to face, issues that we hope your Committees will work to address this year. Issues such as Veterans' homelessness, suicide, and simply not getting the care they are entitled to through the Department of Veterans Affairs remain key concerns for AUSN.

Toxic exposure continues to be a major ongoing concern. Beyond Blue Water Navy, there is also Burn Pits and PFAS. And there will be other cases in the future. AUSN urges the Department of Defense to improve record-keeping and Congress to establish funding for research centers so that we can get out ahead of toxic exposure issues. That way, Veterans aren't having to go to the VA

or Congress decades after the fact, only to be rebuffed because of poor data and record-keeping.

AUSN is also concerned about a continued problem with predatory educational institutions, which hook Veterans with promises of an education that will help them establish a promising career after service, only to provide a lackluster education and a massive bill. We urge Congress to increase its oversight of these for-profit companies and ensure our Veterans have access to quality, affordable education.

AUSN has been encouraged by the strong leadership your Committees have taken on Navy personnel issues. Everyone here is clearly concerned about taking care of our Sailors, both those serving and those retired, and for that we thank you. But this work requires constant vigilance, and 2019 will be no different.

The reality is that, despite many improvements, our Shipmates still struggle at times to obtain health-care services or they encounter uncertainty in their treatment options. We need new ideas to end uncertainty and turbulence for Sailors, and AUSN supports the modernization of the Department of Veterans Affairs and will do anything we can to assist in that process.

Many of our Veterans are well cared for, but many continue to fall through the cracks. That's why we exist: to ensure that all Sailors and Veterans, whether they served decades ago or are still in uniform, have a system in place that will

take care of them as they have taken care of this country with their service. We are willing to step in to support, but we cannot do it all, and so we urge the Committees to continue to work toward providing support to all Sailors and Veterans.

AUSN believes that to best care for those who have borne the scars of our nation's battles, the medical care priorities of our Veterans must be aligned as:

- 1) Continuity of care between the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA),
- 2) Consistent quality of care, and,
- 3) Sustained certainty in funding to provide timely, high-quality health care for our Veterans.

Currently, there are two distinctly different medical systems dedicated to dealing with our service members and Veterans – the DoD and the VA. While each medical system services a different population – either those who currently wear or who have previously worn the uniform of our nation's Armed Forces – the problem lies in the fact that each system is structured to treat its patients in different ways. The DoD medical system treats Active Duty service members, generally healthy men and women answering the call of duty to our nation. The VA medical system is dedicated to a wide range of Veterans, varying in age and with complex medical issues that may not have begun to impact them until long

after they left the service. Even more complex is the care required for the children of our Veterans whose afflictions originate with their parent's service.

AUSN believes that the DoD and VA medical systems should not be concerned with whether the patient is a Sailor deployed on a ship, submarine or ashore, or if the patient is a Veteran trying to receive assistance for a disability that he or she suffered while on active duty. Our men and women should be receiving the same treatment and the same quality care from the day they enter the military and swear their oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America until the day they die.

Our Navy's Shipmates in Need:

AUSN's membership is passionate about providing comfort and care to our Shipmates and Veterans whose service has resulted in hardship and scars, both seen and unseen. AUSN has embarked on an innovative project designed to dramatically augment how our country cares for our wounded Shipmates that focuses on providing the resources that our government does not provide. AUSN's partnership with the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation throws open opportunities to assist those suffering from illness, injury, or battle wounds to engage in new approaches to recovery. Right now, the Navy Wounded Warrior Safe Harbor Program does its mightiest, herculean in fact, to address the needs of these Shipmates. But, like many Federal programs, it is limited by resources. The reality is that this program can only bring so much care to these Sailors. AUSN – in

partnership with the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation – can provide financial, emotional and informational assistance for a healthy transition from military life.

Continuity of Care:

Our nation has a long history of caring for our servicemembers when they go into harm's way, and to continue medical treatment when required. For many years, organizations have called for overhauling the VA system due to lack of continuity of care. AUSN believes that a solution to continuity may be to incorporate the successful medical care aspects of the DoD medical system with that of the VA.

AUSN stands with your Committees to ensure those who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) receive world-class medical care. While both the DoD and VA medical systems treat PTSD and TBI, they have their own distinct medical care processes. A Sailor injured in combat while serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere may be medically evacuated back to the United States to be treated at Walter Reed Medical Center. That Sailor may receive care and treatment not currently available for their Shipmates with the same injuries being treated at VA facilities. Conversely, if a service member is being provided specific health-care treatment while on active duty and is then transferred to receive health care at a VA facility, the current dual system may not recognize the medicine or health-care treatment they have been receiving. Some Veterans have been required to restart treatment, from the

beginning, in the VA system, leading to significant medical condition regression compared with the progress that had been made while they received DoD medical care on active duty. Additionally, when a service member or Veteran is transitioning from one facility to another, the only thing that should change is their doctor, not the treatment or quality of care received.

Members of these honorable Committees, a successful way to ensure continuity of care is expediting the full digitization of medical records. At this time last year, we offered the example that almost every county in the country has digitized their patients' medical records. It is intuitively obvious to medical service providers that expedited continuity of care is largely enhanced with access to a patient's digitized medical records. Is it possible for the VA and DoD to have one common digitized medical records program? AUSN says yes, it is possible. We suggest that to improve alignment, expedite continuity of care and fluidity between the DoD and VA medical systems, digitizing VA medical records should be a top priority.

Quality of Care:

The nation's quality of medical care for our Veterans runs the complete gamut. Some private institutions or organizations provide high-end medical care for their patients, sometimes at a significant cost. Several recommendations have circulated with respect to privatizing the VA Department to provide Veterans the choice to seek and keep their own doctors.

In some current DoD medical systems, with no military treatment facilities nearby, it is a common practice to provide service members the ability to choose their own doctors. It is then the responsibility of the service member to ensure that medical documents are provided to their Command, so they can be filed in the military medical record.

Veterans should not only have the right to choose, but also should receive the best treatment and quality of care in the facility where medicine excels – be it a DoD or VA facility – if it is the best fit for the Veteran.

AUSN recommends that by aligning and combining programs, the U.S. government could save money and provide additional benefits for our service members and Veterans. Uniting the best of these two medical systems into a cohesive unit would allow for quality and continuity of care among our service members when they transition from DoD medicine to VA medicine.

It is important that the VA focus on what it does best: caring for service-related injuries. The VA should align its policies and work more closely with DoD medicine, along with medical research institutes, to strive to provide the most modern, transparent and best possible care for our Veterans.

Helping Lost Shipmates:

A goal moving forward for AUSN members is to activate their state and local resources with the goal of bringing relief to our homeless Veterans. As you

know, homelessness is a complex issue and our Navy Veterans reflect a microcosm of our society. Our efforts focus on transitioning the Sailor to civilian life and providing avenues to employability, training and socialization.

Proper Funding:

AUSN believes that the key to improving Veteran care is providing consistent, sustained funding. The biggest issue facing the implementation of a modernized VA medical care program is figuring out the best way to pay for it.

One way is through community partnerships with other health-care providers. Veterans often find themselves using the VA for everything, because, to them, they feel connected to the people they encounter while at the VA. One possibility for ensuring that Veterans are using the VA for only service-related injuries is to provide insurance for Veterans who did not retire from service and were honorably or medically discharged. Providing Veterans this option for insurance would allow the VA to use the revenue to fund other medical care benefits that are urgently needed for our Veterans. When Veterans require medical care from a doctor, because of PTSD, TBI, or from an injury they received while on active duty, the VA may or may not be the best facility to care for them. If these Veterans have medical conditions outside of military-related injuries, they should be able to go to any health-care center provided through the Tricare system.

DoD medicine has been constant, consistent, and adaptive when it comes to caring for our Sailors, and AUSN suggests there should be no difference when it comes to the continuity and quality of care of our Veterans.

The funding for the DoD and VA for Veteran medical care must be sustained and consistent. At the time of a service-related injury or an exposure to toxins, for example, a Veteran may be unaware of current or long-term medical dangers. The Congress and our nation should hold the bottom line that Veterans should NOT be denied medical care for deserved and required treatment of service-related injuries or exposure to toxins.

Closing:

In closing, let me say this: when it comes to our Sailors and Veterans' health, we must not take our eye off the ball. The suicide rate for Veterans ages 18-34 surged by around 10% between 2015 and 2016, according to the latest VA statistics. Toxic exposure continues to claim Veteran lives every year, sometimes decades after the initial exposure. And many others simply struggle to get the care they need through an oftentimes byzantine health care system between the DoD and the VA.

Real lives are at stake here. We must not hem and haw, we must not drag our feet, we must not kick the can down the road when it comes to the health of our Sailors and Veterans. Delaying necessary care by a year to wrangle over records and data means actual lives will be lost. The silent scourge of inaction has fatal

consequences for those who have fought on the front lines for the United States of America.

I leave you with the story of Dennis, a Veteran we helped through the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation who has been battling brain cancer for years. Despite having tremendous skills that would make him a valuable asset in the business world, he faced having his electricity shut off because of being too sick to work – all while having a family to support. One can only imagine how difficult that must be for a Sailor who served his country with honor and distinction.

The Veteran community is filled with stories like these. It's a major reason why AUSN exists. And it's a stark reminder that what we do here has a real effect on the lives of American heroes.

Thank you for your continued bipartisan support of our Veterans, and I stand by for any questions the Committees may have.



REAR ADMIRAL CHRISTOPHER W. COLE, USN (RET)
Chief Executive Officer

Using the breadth of experience gained from his career in the Navy and private sector, Rear Admiral Cole comes to AUSN through his service as President of the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation. RADM Cole's chief platform while serving as National Executive Director is to bring about an alignment of our organization's modernization plan with the needs of the US Navy in three areas; 1) professional development of Sailors throughout their career; 2) providing opportunity for Sailors transitioning, and; 3) addressing the needs of our struggling and wounded Shipmates and offering relief and support.

During his military career as an aviator, Rear Admiral Cole served in various flying and staff positions, ultimately commanding two aircraft squadrons and two amphibious ships. He graduated from the Naval War College, was a member of the Secretary of Defense Strategic Study Group and attended the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

As a Flag Officer, Rear Admiral Cole served as the Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Korea in Seoul, Republic of Korea; Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic in Norfolk, Virginia; and Director, Ashore Readiness Division (N46) in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, D.C.

Upon retirement from active service in January 2004 and prior to joining AUSN Rear Admiral Cole was a consultant to the Defense Industry in national security, energy strategy, environmental protection, BRAC, military construction, and installation management. In addition to his AUSN work he serves as President of the Navy Safe Harbor Foundation and is Chairman of the Board of Directors of Military Bowl Foundation.