

Ranking Member Richard Burr

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Good morning Chairman Filner, Chairman Akaka, and Ranking Member Buyer. It's good to see so many of my House colleagues.

Commander Hill, congratulations on your selection as the Legion's National Commander. You of course will give a national voice to nearly 3 million Legionnaires across the country.

I welcome you and your leadership team who are with us today.

I want to also commend the Legion's work at the State and local level, and the Post and State leaders from North Carolina are among the best. Two North Carolinians are with us today: Coley Hunsucker, from King, NC; and Jeff Joyner from Rockingham. Thank you both for making the trip up to Washington.

You are visiting us at a time our nation faces tremendous challenges. Not only are we fighting the War on Terror, but we have some of our own challenges here at home. We're in the midst of some tough economic times; we have record deficits; and we're engaged in an important discussion on health care reform.

Needless to say, there will be spirited debates in the Congress in the months ahead.

Fortunately, veterans' issues are not one where there is significant disagreement. And many of the priorities you lay out in your testimony, Commander, are ones that Congress is moving forward with:

Both the House and the Senate have passed legislation authorizing an advance appropriations for VA.

The Senate also passed a bill I sponsored -- the Military Spouses Residency Relief Act. This bill would allow military spouses -- like active duty servicemembers -- to keep a "home" state as they are moved around the country by the military.

The Senate is poised to pass additional legislation including provisions which I worked on that will

- improve benefits for veterans with severe traumatic brain injury;
- ensure that severely disabled veterans can receive their compensation soon after separation from service;
- support family caregivers of severely wounded veterans.

Finally, we will again provide record funding for VA...we just have to make sure it passes on time!

With that said we still have some areas of disagreement, and we need The American Legion's support to move these issues forward.

First, any national health care reform proposal must acknowledge and respect the autonomy of the VA health care system and the Tricare system. And veterans who use those systems as their provider of choice must not be punished for doing so. I commend Mr. Buyer for his leadership during the House debate on the issue.

Second—S. 669—a bill I authored to protect veterans' 2nd amendment rights, has been languishing for two years now despite the Veterans' Committee approving it twice. The American Legion has already endorsed the legislation, but I need your help in getting whoever is blocking the bill to at least agree to a vote. Let me tell you what's going on:

Currently, the Attorney General asks VA for the names of veterans who need a fiduciary to help them manage their financial affairs.

Those names go on a list, called the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, or "NICS". If you go on that list you can't buy a gun and, even worse, you're deemed a criminal for even owning one!

Here's my problem with this:

First, the Attorney General has only asked VA for names of its beneficiaries who need help, but not the Social Security Administration. So, we have a policy on the books that discriminates against individuals based on their military service. That's unacceptable.

Second, we have mid-level VA employees making decisions on a matter that leads to the criminalization of the possession of a firearm; our veterans deserve the benefit of a court of law or similar judicial authority....NOT a government bureaucrat.

Commander, thank you for the Legion's support of S. 669...it's my hope that, with your support, we can end this arbitrary, discriminatory, and unfair practice now.

Again, let me close by congratulating you again, Commander Hill, on your election as Legion National Commander.

I look forward to working with you to improve the lives of veterans and their families in the months ahead.

I yield back.

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