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STATEMENT OF

JAMES PIDGEON
AMVETS NATIONAL COMMANDER

BEFORE THE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION

CONCERNING

AMVETS' LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

THURSDAY, 3 MARCH 2016
345 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
10:00 A.M

Chairman Isakson, Chairman Miller and distinguished committee members, on behalf of all 23 million American Veterans, we appreciate this opportunity to share our legislative priorities, as well as, our comments on issues of importance to veterans and those that care about them.

Guided by our core principles of Veterans, Family, Patriots and Volunteers, AMVETS seeks to enhance and defend the earned benefits of all American men and women, who are serving or have served honorably in our Armed Forces, through leadership, advocacy and service. As a leading advocate for veteran's rights and benefits, AMVETS serves as one of the preeminent voices of American Veterans on Capitol Hill.

As you are aware, many issues of concern which have surfaced in recent years, such as the situation with: ISIS; Syrian Refugees; Veteran Suicide; Veteran Over-medication; Military Sexual Trauma; VA Accountability and Reform; Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; Veterans Choice; and Quality Assurance Concerns related to the Veterans Crisis Line – remain areas of concern are, therefore, still on our radar. AMVETS is committed to continue monitoring progress made in these areas and, as a dedicated stakeholder, help seek sustainable solutions.

With ongoing military involvement around the world and with no shortage of emerging threats to our national security, we must not forget the legacy of unmatched damage to the physical and mental well-being of those who have served in our most recent conflicts. It is both your responsibility and ours to ensure that these veterans receive any and all appropriate healthcare and other benefits in a timely, competent, compassionate and efficient manner.

Though AMVETS has a comprehensive portfolio of legislative priorities, we will limit our discussion this morning to our top 3 priorities for the last half of this session: Federal Government Reform; Toxic Wounds; and Veteran Suicide.

- ***Federal Government Reform:***

VA Accountability & Reform – Everyone in this room is aware of the seemingly endless scandals coming out of the VA, as well as the bashing the VA has taken, for more than a year now. Though admittedly, there continues to be no shortage of work to be done in this area, thanks to the dedication and innovation of Sec. Bob McDonald and his staff, hope is finally on the horizon.

AMVETS believes the VA needs to continue to raise its standard of customer service, while simultaneously improving its hiring protocols and employee training programs. While we do not adhere to “the beatings should continue until morale improves” management style, VA’s firing authority definitely needs to be strengthened across the system. Though improvements have been made in some of these other areas, including: healthcare access through Choice; the consolidation of non-VA purchased/coordinated care; as well as, staffing shortages and appointment scheduling issues - AMVETS will continue to be fully engaged in the process moving forward.

- ***Toxic Wounds:***

This has been a critical issue for AMVETS for the last four years and we plan to continue taking every opportunity to advocate for veterans suffering from the effect of any form of toxic exposure. It is also important to mention that this is not solely a deployment or combat related issue; two perfect examples of this are Ft. McClellan and Camp Lejeune. This is a quality of life issue, not only for the veteran, but for their progeny as well.

AMVETS strongly supports continued funding of the CDMRP (Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program) Gulf War illness research program at last year's level of \$20 million. Any progress that has been made in the area of Gulf War research can be attributed to solely to the CDMRP. This critically important program must be retained and must be allowed to do its work without undue interference by the IOM (Institute of Medicine) or the DHA (Defense Health Agency).

Furthermore, legislation is urgently needed to assert appropriate Congressional authority over Gulf War Illness research and enable scientific progress to continue, including the need to:

- require VA to properly conduct Institute of Medicine Gulf War studies previously ordered by Congress. The studies have not been conducted in strict accordance with Congress's direction, or in some cases, have not been conducted at all, which sadly suggests an effort to manipulate research by government employees.

Specifically, AMVETS cannot underestimate the importance of requiring the inclusion of animal studies.

- **Veteran Suicide:**

And finally, I would like to comment on an issue that both AMVETS and I are extremely passionate about - preventing Veteran suicide. This is an issue that AMVETS has worked long and hard on and I am pleased to note the recent introduction of HR 4640, the Veterans Suicide Prevention Act.

In recognition of his leadership, I want to applaud and thank Sec. McDonald and Under Secretary for Health, Dr. Shulkin, for facilitating a recent conference focused on ending the tragedy of Veteran suicide. The conference brought together nearly 200 mental health

professionals, caregivers, veterans, their families, veteran's service organizations including AMVETS, members of Congress and experts from other federal agencies.

Furthermore, it has come to our attention that there have been a number of complaints (made in May of 2014 and February of 2015) highlighting problems with VA's Crisis Line response time and staff training. These allegations were investigated by the VA's Office of Inspector General and since then the VA has implemented a comprehensive plan to strengthen the Crisis Line, including:

- Hiring new directors with clinical backgrounds and/or call center experience
- Assessing time-based need for more responders to be on staff
- Improving staff training with dedicated training managers and better programs
- Investing in new technology to upgrade phone systems and handle increased call volume
- Expanding the physical center's operational work area to create 45 new responder workstations

With the release of the report last month, the VA has also released a new list of improvements currently in the works, including:

- Adding 68 more responders to the crisis line workforce
- Increasing internal capacity to handle incoming calls by strengthening third-party contracting management
- Continuing improvements to phone system technology and internal tools
- Continuing assessment of new training programs and work processes to ensure trained crisis responders are available in times of a veteran's need

It is worth mentioning that since its inception in 2007, the Veterans Crisis Line has saved over 53,000 lives through its services.

One additional area that needs attention, and will most likely require additional funding, is the lifting of budget restrictions negatively impacting the supply and demand of Crisis Line collaterals. AMVETS, along with numerous other veterans' service organizations and many grass roots organizations aligned with supporting our military families are working hard to disseminate information. Team AMVETS in CA and other AMVETS Departments throughout the country have received thousands of pieces of Crisis Line promotional material but we need more and have been told there are limits based on significant budget restraints. It would seem to me that the availability of this type of information is baseline to support the Secretary's recent Veteran Suicide 'Call to Action'.

This concludes my testimony, I'll be happy to answer any questions.

2016 Legislative Priorities

Federal Government Reform

- Extend Advanced Appropriations to all Remaining Discretionary & Mandatory Programs
- Strengthen Accountability & Ease VA Hiring Protocols
- Implement Whistleblower Protections
- Ensure Adequate Investment in VA Capital Infrastructure
- Improve & Modernize VA/DoD Information Technology Systems

Toxic Wounds – Recognition & Treatment

- Toxic Exposure of Fort McClellan Veterans
- Recognition of Gulf War Illnesses & the Need for Continued Research
- Compensation for Gulf War Veterans

Veteran Unemployment

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- Veteran Anti-Discrimination
- Civilian Credentials for Military Training & Experience
- Veterans Priority of Service in Employment & Training Programs

VA/DoD Health Care & Mental Health

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- Eliminate Over-Medication & Improve Access to Alternative Treatments
- Combine & Leverage Purchased Care Programs
- Traumatic Brain Injury & Post Traumatic Stress Research & Treatments
- Continued Cutting Edge Sensory Aids/Prosthetics Research & Development

Veterans/Family Benefits

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- Tinnitus & Hearing Loss Presumptive Service Connection
- Expand VA Caregiver Benefits & Program

- Repeal Survivor Benefits Plan/Dependency & Indemnity Offset

Women Veterans & Service Members

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- Eliminate Military Sexual Trauma (MST) & Sexual Harassment
- Ensure Availability of Safe Housing for Homeless Veterans with Dependent Children
- Improve Access to Gender-Specific Health Services & Prosthetics

POW/MIA Recovery/Identification & Cemetery Affairs

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- Continuing Over Site of DPAA (Recovery/Identification) & National Cemetery Operations
- Increase Veterans Burial Benefits
- Creation of POW/MIA Forever Stamp

Honor/Support/Recognition

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- Support of the States of Israel & Taiwan
- Recognize Contribution of LAO/HMONG Special Forces
- Support Federal Court Ruling for the National Old Soldiers Home at WLA
- Support for a Congressional Gold Medal for 'Dust Off' Crews
- Creation of an AMVETS 75th Anniversary Stamp



Jim Pidgeon served in the US Navy from 1969-1973 including deployment as a Flight Deck Trouble Shooter on the USS Kitty Hawk in Vietnam. Jim attended The College of the Sequoias where he studied business, marketing and creative writing.

In 1975, three years prior to his graduation from The College of the Sequoias, he started his first company, TNT Automotive. In the early eighties, Jim's interest in plastic injection and molding led to his second company, FBN Plastics. He invented, manufactured and marketed products for the hardware, lawn and garden markets, including the Black Hole Gopher Trap, with nationwide sales. In 1998, he became a founding partner in Dondero, Brown and Pidgeon Commercial Properties. All three companies are still in business today.

Jim has been a member of AMVETS since 1984 serving in a variety of capacities including Post Commander, Department 1st Vice Commander, Department Commander and National First Vice Commander. Additionally, he served as the National Service Foundation President for six years.

Jim Pidgeon's accomplishments as an AMVET include coining the name "Team AMVETS" and conducted trademark research for several phrases for the Department of California and their Service Foundation. He also invented the Freedom Bar Program and was instrumental in launching the Welcome Home Program. He led Team AMVETS California on Capitol Hill in numerous meetings with key legislators including senior ranking Congressman Waxman and Senators Boxer and Feinstein. Jim also met with leaders of the Veterans Affairs, the VA Appropriation Committee and homeless Veterans.

In 2013, Jim was the Department of California AMVETS Bronze Helmet Veteran of the Year, and Minority Leader Congress Woman Connie Conway honored him as the Veteran of the Year in California's 26th District. Also in 2013, he was honored as Small Business of the Year in his hometown of Tulare, California.

Jim is also a Life Member of DAV, VFW and the American Legion. He and his wife Paulette, a retired school teacher, have four adult children and three grandchildren.

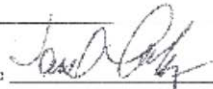


HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Witness Disclosure Statement

Required by House Rule XI, Clause 2(g)

Your Name: James Fitzgibbon		
1. Are you testifying on behalf of a Federal, State, or Local Government entity?	YES	NO
2. Are you testifying on behalf of an entity other than a Government entity?	YES	NO
3. Other than yourself, please list what entity or entities you are representing:	AMVETS	
4. Please list any offices or elected positions held or briefly describe your representational capacity with the entities disclosed in question 3. AMVETS National Commander		
<i>(For those testifying on behalf of a governmental entity, ignore these questions below)</i>		
5. a) Please list any Federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts), including the amount and source (agency) which you have received and/or been approved for since January 1, 2013:		
b) If you are testifying on behalf of a non-governmental entity, please list any Federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) and the amount and source (agency) received by the entities listed under question 3 since January 1, 2013, which exceeded 10% of the entities' revenues in the year received:		
6. If you are testifying on behalf of a non-governmental entity, does it have a parent organization or an affiliate who you specifically do not represent? If so, list below:	YES	NO

Signature: 

Date: _____