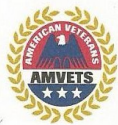




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A M V E T S

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STATEMENT OF

CLEVE GEER
AMVETS NATIONAL COMMANDER

BEFORE THE

JOINT HOUSE AND SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

CONCERNING

AMVETS' LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

WEDNESDAY, 6 MARCH 2013

345 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

10:00 AM

As the National Commander of AMVETS, it is my honor to share our concerns and comment on the issues under the purview of your committees. As one of the largest veteran service organizations in the country, as well as one of the authors of the Independent Budget, AMVETS has a proud history of assisting veterans and advocating for veterans rights and benefits. Since 1944 AMVETS has been at the forefront of public policy related to military and veteran issues and national defense.

In anticipation of working with your Committees throughout this year, I offer this introduction to some of the areas of interest to the quarter of a million members of AMVETS. Today, with more than a decade of continuous war behind us, horrific budget cuts just beginning to be implemented and fiscal uncertainty on the horizon, our men and women in uniform have remained steadfast in their mission to defend this great nation. Over the last dozen years of war, many of these brave service members paid the ultimate price for our freedom and others, at the completion of their service or due to injuries, have joined the ranks of our nation's veterans. This dedication and sacrifice must never be forgotten and the promises made to this nation's heroes must be fully and faithfully honored.

Now is the time for the Administration and Congress to step up and acknowledge all that our veterans have done for this country. We, as a nation, have, through the sacrifice of our veterans and military members, incurred a solemn obligation to support them in every way possible now and into the future. President Obama once said that the national budget would not be balanced on the backs of veterans and AMVETS adamantly supports this concept of preserving all earned veteran benefits. Our service members and veterans do not deserve to be asked to continue making sacrifices; they don't deserve excuses or broken promises, they deserve this nation's full support and nothing less. They've done the hard work on behalf of all Americans; now is the time for all Americans to relieve them of their heavy burdens.

Today's military and veteran community is faced with many challenges and AMVETS is dedicated to aggressively tackling these issues on behalf of American Veterans everywhere including:

Veteran Unemployment

- Reserve Component
- Active Component
- Veteran Anti-Discrimination

VA/DoD Health Care & Mental Health

- Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) & Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS)
- Prosthetic & Sensory Aides
- Suicide Prevention
- Ft. McClellan Toxic Chemical Exposure

Veterans Benefits

- Maintain Military Retirement and Health Care Benefits
- Concurrent Receipt (Active & Reserve Component)
- VA Claims & Appeals Backlog

Women Veterans & Service Members

- Military Sexual Trauma (MST) Prevention and Treatment
- Creation of a Sexual Assault Oversight and Response Office
- Gender Specific Healthcare

National Guard & Reserve Service Members

- Improved USERRA Protections
- On-going Transition Between State and Federal Service
- Veteran Status

Homeless & Rural Veterans

- Provide a Full Continuum of Care for Homeless Veterans (employment training, housing, legal aid)
- Access to Physical and Mental Health Care and other benefits
- Increase Travel Reimbursement Rates

POW/MIA Recovery/Identification & Cemetery Affairs

- Improved Over Site of Mortuary Affairs Operations
- Increase Veterans Burial Benefits

Veterans Treatment Courts

- Increase Number of and Access to Veterans Treatment Courts Nationally
- Enhance Resources to Address Mental Health and Substance Abuse Issues

Honor and Remembrance

- Establish the National Desert Storm War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Veteran Anti-Discrimination

AMVETS believes that perhaps the greatest and most comprehensive assistance this nation could provide for its veterans is to protect them from all forms of discrimination and employer bias by enacting the AMVETS Veteran Anti-Discrimination Initiative and by strengthening USERRA. Since moving to an all-volunteer military, the number of veterans serving in Congress and at all levels of leadership is the smallest it's ever been and this, added to the years of constant focus on the negative aspects of war, has created the perception that all veterans are flawed, dangerous and unstable. While it is true that veterans should be protected from all forms of discrimination under USERRA, sadly that is not the case, in part, due to ignorance of its legal requirements as well as lax oversight and enforcement. Sadly, those who have served and fought for their country do not enjoy the same protections and advantages under the law. In fact, just the opposite is often true; frequently those who have served and sacrificed are at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers.

With this in mind, AMVETS is seeking protected status for all American veterans to give them every advantage in finding gainful employment, housing, and educational opportunities. This comprehensive, nearly cost-neutral initiative would enhance veteran access and equity in all areas and it would provide legal recourse to veterans experiencing any form of discrimination.

Veteran Unemployment

During this time of persistent unemployment in our country, the problem of veteran unemployment, especially for our National Guard and Reserve members, should be seen as a national disgrace. In recognition of those who honorably and selflessly fought to maintain the freedoms of those who stayed behind, we as a nation cannot do enough to ensure that American Veterans get the proper skills, certifications/credentials and degrees necessary to be successful and competitive in the civilian job market.

Veteran unemployment is a complex problem which will require the efforts of federal and state governments, the business community and the military/veterans community working in concert if any meaningful solution is to be developed. The efforts of any one entity alone will be insufficient to meet the challenges posed by this massive problem facing American Veterans everywhere and it's important to keep in mind that veterans, like their civilian counterparts, require not just a job, but living-wage employment following their service. The vast majority of working-age veterans want to continue to be productive citizens and they need to be provided every opportunity to achieve their career goals. In recognition of the unimaginable sacrifices made by American Veterans, Congress and the Administration need to continue to make a concerted effort to guarantee that veterans have access to employment and training opportunities.

Additionally there needs to be a better system to connect employers with open positions to unemployed veterans; the current system of merely posting jobs online, while beneficial, just isn't

enough. There are literally hundreds of online employment and career sites catering to veterans and civilians alike, which unfortunately can leave veterans confused and overwhelmed. What is needed is a comprehensive ‘veteran employment resource guide’ along with a single portal or site where all of these opportunities can be accessed in one place. The ‘Hero2Hired’ program is a good example and should serve as a good foundation to build on.

In addition to the previous issues, there is the very real problem of licensing and credentialing which is required in certain career fields. AMVETS believes that if an individual has received training and practical experience in a career field while serving in the military there should be a streamlined process for demonstrating their knowledge and expertise in order to qualify for any necessary license or credential.

Lastly, Congress and the Administration need to consider the very real connection between unemployment and its effects on the already vulnerable mental health of our veterans. Common sense suggest that individuals who are gainfully and appropriately employed, who are able to support themselves and their families, who are able to utilize their skills and abilities, who are receiving any necessary health care, who feel useful, challenged and appreciated are less likely to suffer from depression, substance abuse problems and/or commit suicide.

Health Care & Mental Health

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is not only the largest direct provider of healthcare services in the nation, it also provides the most extensive training environment for health professionals as well as providing the most clinically focused setting for medical and prosthetic research. While providing primary care to American Veterans is among the VA’s prime responsibilities, it also provides specialized health care services including: spinal cord injury, blind rehabilitation, traumatic brain injury, prosthetic services, mental health, and war-related poly-trauma injuries. AMVETS believes that in order to avoid catastrophic degradation to these critical services that Congress needs to:

- pass a budget on a regular basis. The need for sufficient, timely and predictable funding cannot be over-emphasized;
- continue advanced appropriations;
- continue to introduce and support legislation that protects veterans’ benefits such as **HR 813, the Putting Veterans Funding First Act of 2013**, introduced by Chairman Miller. Thank you sir! Another example of benefits protection legislation introduced by both Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Michaud is **HR 357 the G.I. Tuition Fairness Act of 2013**, which gives public institutions of higher education a choice – either charge veterans in-state tuition or no longer be eligible to accept G.I. bill students. Last but by no means least, I’d also like to acknowledge the important work done by Chairman Sanders on the chained CPI threat. The **chained CPI** would cut benefits to disabled veterans and social security recipients, who are among the most vulnerable Americans. Thank you sir!

Unfortunately, the VA also faces significant challenges ensuring that newly returning war veterans have access to post-deployment readjustment services and specialized treatments while guaranteeing that all other enrolled veterans gain and keep access to effective, timely, high-quality mental health services. In fact, outreach to veterans from all eras needs to continue to improve.

The mental health of our service members and veterans may be one of the greatest challenges facing the VA today and while there have been improvements, there’s still a long way to go. This is especially true in the case of women veterans who not only respond to and deal with combat stress differently than their male counterparts, but also need gender-specific treatment.

There can be no doubt that the problem of military/veteran suicide is of great concern to everyone in the military community and sadly the problem continues to grow. Only recently, the military released a report showing that suicides among active duty service members reached an all-time high in 2012. The report indicated that the number of suicides among active duty personnel was almost one a day or 349 to be exact.

These numbers are especially distressing in light of the ongoing efforts of the Department of Defense (DoD), Veterans Affairs (VA) and a variety of public and private enterprises. It seems obvious that more needs to be done to uncover the complex mental and physical factors that lead military service members and veterans to commit suicide.

One significant aspect that may shed some additional light on this unacceptable situation is the possible correlation between blast injuries caused by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicide. By collecting information about the physical injuries sustained by suicide victims, we may be able to get a clearer idea of the underlying causes of military and veteran suicide.

In a war fought largely on the principals of indiscriminate violence and terror, the IED is often the weapon of choice. According to data compiled by DoD and the Global Campaign Against IEDs, between November 2011 and October 2012, over 15,000 individual IED events were experienced by coalition forces in Afghanistan. Those IED events were responsible for fully 58% of coalition casualties. In fact, IEDs are the number one cause of casualties for American service members and will be for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, IEDs are the major cause of the top 4 most prevalent injuries to veterans including:

- hearing loss and Tinnitus,
- traumatic brain injury (TBI),
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and
- vision loss

Even more significant are the alarming number of service members and veterans who experienced repetitive, low level TBI that did not require medical attention but, taken cumulatively, produce serious medical conditions years later. These conditions often exhibit symptoms that affect mood, behavior and thoughts. Many of our veterans are experiencing a complex combination of mental and physical health problems, the weight of which should be viewed as a contributing factor to the feelings of pain, hopelessness, loneliness, helplessness and depression that can lead to suicide.

IED survivors face challenges ranging from the minor to the monumental: fractures, amputations, disfigurement, cognitive and motor impairments, emboli, headaches, personality changes, visual and auditory disturbances, altered effect, hypersensitivities, and dulled judgment.

The good news is that thanks to swift triage and aeromedical evacuations and improvements in battlefield trauma medicine and surgical procedures, many more combat-wounded personnel are surviving military action. Unfortunately blast injuries by their very nature usually include vision injuries, hearing loss, and brain trauma.

The bad news is that those same individuals will likely require highly specialized neurological, psychological, and ophthalmological care, life-long mental health care, sophisticated prosthetics and other vital services. At this juncture, there is no definitive connection between IED injuries, these conditions, and veterans' suicides because this possibility has not been adequately investigated. Now is the time to do so.

It must be remembered that we are looking at an issue that will span decades. We applaud the VA for working to reduce the stigma surrounding PTSD and the increase in support services. AMVETS is committed to addressing this issue by piloting a warrior transition workshop. Our team of veterans, trainers and experts associated with Freedom and Honor have shown success since 2005; serving more than 7,000 active duty/veterans in 60,000 hours of training. We recommend that the VA consider both clinical and non-clinical treatment options when deciding how to fill the gap between need and timely access. Non-clinical mental health treatment options are readily available in most communities, are generally much more cost effective than clinical options with shorter wait times and can be an effective segment in an overall mental health treatment program. The Freedom and Honor Warrior Transition program focus' on making veterans more resilient and can be effectively integrated into the DoD and VA systems. AMVETS will have four pilot programs this year, with one being directed specifically to women veterans.

As previously mentioned, untreated/unhealed physical and mental health combat injuries play a significant role in the number of military/veteran suicides in this country. The data on these suicides are startling and they have continued to rise. This horrific trend is a national disgrace and finding effective, practical solutions should be not only a service-wide, but a nation-wide priority.

Veterans' Benefits

AMVETS believes in the solemnity of the promises made to our military members and veterans when they agreed to leave their homes and families to go fight in our stead. In addition to providing physical and mental healthcare to millions of veterans, the VA is also the primary federal agency providing a variety of benefits to our nation's veterans including: disability compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation, pensions, retirement, education benefits, home loans, ancillary benefits for service-connected disabled veterans, life insurance and burial benefits. It is crucial, that veterans' benefits become a national priority, as they had been following earlier conflicts, and they must be viewed in the context of the service and sacrifice performed by our men and women in uniform. These benefit programs however must not only be maintained, they need to be carefully monitored and constantly improved so they maintain their value and effectiveness.

Like every other VSO, and no doubt every member of these committees, AMVETS is appalled by the seemingly insurmountable disability claims backlog problem, however, since everyone is already so aware of the need to deal with this issue, I will not do more than acknowledge the problem and our commitment to carefully monitoring developments and assisting as appropriate.

As far as the issue of concurrent receipt is concerned, AMVETS firmly believes that all military retirees should be permitted to receive their full, earned military retirement as well as any and all VA disability compensation they may be entitled to; in other words there should be **no offset** between full military retired pay and VA disability compensation. Each form of compensation is individually earned, in its own right, by the veteran and other federal employees are not unjustly penalized this same way when in an identical situation. AMVETS strongly urges Congress and the Administration to enact legislation to repeal this inequity faced by so many American Veterans.

Women Veterans and Service Members

It is a fact, that every woman who ever served in the military in America did so as a volunteer! Their history of service to this country is long and proud even though their service prior to the Civil War was strictly unofficial; they have been involved in every battle, one way or another, going back to the Revolutionary War. Today, women comprise between 17% – 20% of the U.S. military and they are fully integrated into the combat zones around the world. In the near future women will be allowed to serve in direct combat roles and may be required to sign up for selective service both of which suggest we are entering a new era for women in the military. One can only imagine how these decisions will affect the generations of women to come. VA is already so far behind in meeting the needs of current women service members and veterans that AMVETS is gravely concerned about VA's ability to meet increasing future needs.

Among the most critical issues facing women veterans today are: homelessness, employment, military sexual trauma (MST) and the lack of gender specific health care. These three issues are the trifecta of degradation and deprivation for women veterans. They are also somewhat of a 'Catch-22' in that each issue overlaps and effects the other two, making it that much more difficult to escape this negative cycle. How can we as a nation allow some of our most vulnerable veterans, many of whom also have children, to be living on the streets of our cities? Why is it that a woman should have to fear for her personal safety, not only from foreign enemies, but from her comrades-in-arms simply because she made a conscious decision to serve in the military? All veterans, by their very service to their country, should be guaranteed some basics: shelter, any necessary physical and mental health care, food, job training or education, and an opportunity to support themselves and their children upon exiting the military.

Some of these veterans are already victims of MST and PTSD while on active duty and now they are faced with the dangers and lack of appropriate physical and mental health care inherent in being

homeless. These veterans are often unable to locate temporary housing at local homeless shelters because many of these facilities are not set up to house to accommodate the specific safety and privacy needs of women, not to mention their children. It's a sad fact that homeless individuals are not infrequently involved in the criminal justice system for a variety of offences, including crimes against women and children. This situation is truly a national disgrace and must not be allowed to continue.

A new report from the Government Accountability Office shows that the number of homeless women veterans doubled between 2006 and 2010, with 3,328 women veterans unable to access shelter. Of these women, "almost two-thirds were between 40 and 59 years old and over one-third had disabilities." The numbers are not encouraging and they are expected to get worse. With tens of thousands of troops leaving military service and more slated over the next year, for women veterans with families, it's especially difficult to find work and housing. As of December 2011, The Veterans' Administration estimated that of the roughly 68,000 homeless veterans, more than 5,000 were women. To combat the problem, the VA is training many of its 7,000 case managers to deal with issues specific to women.

National Guard & Reserve Service Members

AMVETS fully supports H.R.679, the Honor America's Guard-Reserve Retirees Act introduced for the 3rd year in a row by Rep. Walz (thank you, Sir!) which would grant Veteran Status for National Guard and Reserve members with 20 years or more in service. This cost neutral legislation would **not** bestow any new or unearned benefits, it would simply provide career Reserve Component (RC) members the honor of being recognized as a veteran for their many years of service and sacrifice. This bill would also provide an opportunity for Congress and the Administration to show their support for America's military retirees.

What is a military retiree? A military retiree is what a National Guard or Reserve Component member, who has completed a 20(+) year career, is designated upon retirement. If these individuals have never served on active duty (Title 10) orders for other than training purposes for a specified number of days, they are not legally considered veterans. Mind you, they are entitled to virtually all the same retirement benefits as their Active Component brethren, but they are not considered veterans under the law. This unjust situation is not widely known among members of Congress (outside of these committees) or even among members of the RC themselves.

This legislation would authorize Veteran Status under Title 38 for National Guard and Reserve members of the Armed Forces who are entitled to a non-regular retirement under Chapter 1223 of 10 USC but were never called to active federal service during their careers – through no fault of their own. As an example, the service of our National Guard members now serving on Operation Noble Eagle on our Southwestern border on Title 32 orders would not qualify them to earn the status of "Veterans of our Armed Forces" because it is technically a "training" status.

Currently, the Code of Veterans' Benefits, Title 38, excludes from the definition of "Veteran" career reservists who have not served on Title 10 active duty for other than training purposes. Drill training, annual training, active duty for training, and Title 32 duty are not qualifying service for "Veteran" status. It does not make sense that an individual can serve three years on active duty, during a time of war or not and upon leaving the military they are considered a veteran; however, a National Guard or Reserve member who has 20(+) years of service but has not called to federal service is not considered a veteran –even though they wear the same uniform and receive similar benefits.

Homeless Veterans

We as a country have failed many veterans who now find themselves mentally or physical ill, alone, unemployed and homeless. AMVETS urges the committees to consider the importance of supportive housing facilities for homeless veterans, many of which are situated on VA property and/or owned and operated by the VA. One of the first steps that need to be taken to break this chain of poverty is to get our veterans, men and women, off the streets and into supportive housing. Consistent with Secretary Shinseki's goal of eliminating homelessness among veterans by the year 2015, these facilities are vital to the scores of homeless veterans – including those from Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom – that rely upon them for shelter, health care, and other services.

AMVETS appreciates the support that the committees have shown for programs to mitigate the scourge of homelessness among veterans. The VA's "housing first" approach – which has largely been carried out via a combination of increases in HUD-VASH vouchers, enhanced funding for the grant and per diem program, and support for outreach coordinators – has, in recent years, allowed the VA to make important progress toward its goal of eliminating veterans' homelessness.

Even as this progress continues, AMVETS encourages the committees and the VA to prioritize the construction or repurposing of facilities on VA property to be used for supportive housing for homeless veterans. The shortage of such housing is particularly acute in the Los Angeles region, where approximately 8,000-10,000 veterans remain homeless. This represents an approximate 10 percent share of all homeless veterans nationwide. Remedying the homeless veterans' problem in Los Angeles is essential to meeting Secretary Shinseki's goal of elimination.

Mortuary Affairs

There is no more sacred responsibility than the dignified and respectful recovery, return and burial of our men and women in uniform. With this in mind, we need to remember that NCA's most important obligation is to honor the memory of America's service members. AMVETS is pleased with the fact that NCA continues to meet its goals thanks to the dedication and commitment of Under Secretary Muro and his staff.

NCA does a good job of looking ahead in anticipation of the future needs of our veterans by:

- securing land for additional cemeteries, including two new national cemeteries in Florida and working in CO & NY;
- getting the word out on burial benefits to stakeholders. Including developing new online resources for Funeral Directors;
- making it easier for family members to locate and chronicle loved ones by partnering with Ancestry.com to index historic burial records;
- awarding grant money for State and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries; and
- expanding burial options in rural areas (National Veterans Burial Grounds)

NCA is also a leader among federal agencies in veteran employment programs including:

- The Homeless Veteran Supported Employment Program (HVSEP) provides vocational assistance, job development and placement, and ongoing supports to improve employment outcomes among homeless Veterans and Veterans at-risk of homelessness. Formerly homeless Veterans who have been trained as Vocational Rehabilitation Specialists (VRSs) provide these services;
- VA's Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) Program is a national vocational program comprised of three unique programs which assist homeless Veterans in returning to competitive employment: Sheltered Workshop, Transitional Work, and Supported Employment. Veterans in CWT are paid at least the federal or state minimum wage, whichever is higher; VA's National Cemetery Administration and Veterans Health Administration have also formed partnerships at national cemeteries, where formerly homeless Veterans from the CWT program have received work opportunities; and
- The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) VetSuccess Program assists Veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare for, find, and keep suitable jobs. Services that may be provided include: Comprehensive rehabilitation evaluation to determine abilities, skills, and interests for employment; employment services; assistance finding and keeping a job; and On the Job Training (OJT), apprenticeship, and non-paid work experiences.

Does this mean that there are no areas needing improvement at NCA – absolutely not. From October 2011 through March 2012, NCA conducted an internal gravesite review of headstone and marker placements at VA National cemeteries. During that review a total of 251 discrepancies at 93 National cemeteries were discovered which included:

- 218 misplaced headstones;

- 25 unmarked graves;
- 8 misplaced veteran remains

While these incidents were corrected in a respectful, professional and expeditious manner, the internal phase of the NCA review failed to identify, and therefore to report, all misplaced headstones and unmarked gravesites. These additional discrepancies came to light thanks to the diligent oversight of Chairman Miller and the HVAC which had tasked the Inspector General (IG) with conducting an audit of the internal NCA review. The IG report highlighted several concerns and made corrective recommendations. Based on those recommendations, the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs developed an appropriate action plan and AMVETS recommends continued oversight to ensure the carrying out of all corrective actions.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Cleve Geer of Orlando, Fla., was elected to serve as AMVETS National Commander for 2012–2013 during the 68th annual AMVETS National Convention in Daytona Beach, Fla. Geer served in the Army for three years and received an honorable discharge. He earned an Associates of Arts degree from Valencia College in Orlando, Fla., and furthered his education at the University of Alabama's School of Business Administration. He previously served as AMVETS First Vice Commander where his responsibilities included membership outreach and representing AMVETS National Headquarters at veterans' events around the country.

Geer is a life member of Florida AMVETS Post 17, and served as commander of Post 30 in Orlando, Fla., Department of Florida Commander, Department NEC, National District III Commander, deputy VAVS representative, and Junior AMVETS Coordinator. Geer was also elected as the President of the AMVETS National Service Foundation, and has also served nine years as NSF trustee. He was named Department of Florida AMVET of the Year and nominated for AMVET of the Year in 2004–2005. In 2010, he received the President's Award for Voluntary Service to our country.

Geer has been married for 49 years to Delores Geer, a life member of the AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary, and is the father of Omar Geer, a member of Sons of AMVETS.

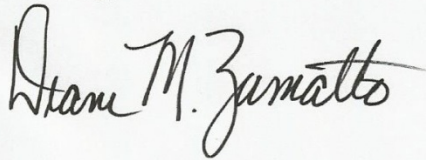
4 March 2013

The Honorable Representative Jeff Miller, Chairman
U.S. House of Representatives, Veterans Affairs Committee
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Miller:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program relevant to the upcoming 6 March 2013, Joint Veterans Affairs Committee hearing on the legislative priorities of AMVETS.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane M. Zumatto". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "D".

Diane M. Zumatto, AMVETS
National Legislative Director