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STATEMENT OF

DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

CONCERNING

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS
BUDGET REQUEST FOR FISCAL YEAR 2014

THURSDAY, 11 APRIL 2013

334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

10:00 AM

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of AMVETS (American Veterans) and our over 500,000 members, I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to share recommendations from *The Independent Budget (IB)* for fiscal year (FY) 2014. In light of the ongoing fiscal challenges facing our nation and the growing demanding for VA services, the *IBVSOs* call on Congress and the Administration to make it their priority to ensure that the VA continually receives sufficient, timely and predictable funding. It is unfortunate that the Administration's funding recommendations for VA in FY 2014, as well as, the advance appropriations recommendation for FY 2015, have been delayed by almost two months and The *IBVSOs* are greatly concerned about how VA programs funding may be impacted going forward. Additionally, the ongoing breakdown in the appropriations process is a major concern to the *IBVSOs* and it will most certainly have a negative effect on all VA operations.

In the midst of all the budget and spending woes, the *IBVSOs* hope that neither Congress nor the Administration forgets the sacred obligation they have to those who serve and protect this country. Our nation must remain steadfast and committed to ensuring that our military, veterans, their families and survivors receive their earned benefits in a timely and efficient manner. This commitment begins when an individual raises their hand during their enlistment ceremony and should never end. Among the most important parts of this commitment to veterans involves the transition process and finding post-military employment. Congress and the Administration need to ensure that veterans have every opportunity to find living-wage work when they return home, receive the health care and benefits they've earned and have the chance to get a college education through VA's education benefit programs, such as the post-9/11 GI Bill.

The FY 2014 *Independent Budget (IB)* covers a myriad of veteran related issues and makes numerous recommendations to improve veterans benefit programs and the claims processing system; however, the focus of my testimony will be limited to:

- the Transition Assistance Program (T.A.P.);
- Veterans and Post-Service Licensure and Credentials, and
- the National Cemetery Administration

Since, the Administration's budget proposal is still not available at this time; this testimony does not include any comments about the satisfactoriness or un-satisfactoriness of the upcoming budget proposal.

National Cemetery Administration (NCA)

It must always be remembered that the most important obligation of the NCA is to honor the memory of America's brave men and women who have so selflessly served in the United States armed forces. Therefore there is no more sacrosanct responsibility than the dignified and respectful recovery, return and burial of our men and women in uniform. This responsibility makes it

incumbent upon NCA to maintain our NCA cemeteries as national shrines dedicated to the memory of these heroic men and women.

The *IBSVOs* would like to acknowledge the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the NCA leadership and staff in their continued devotion to providing the highest quality of service to veterans and their families. It is the opinion of the *IBVSOs* that the NCA continues to meet its goals and the goals set forth by others because of its true dedication and care for honoring the memories of the men and women who have so selflessly served our nation. We applaud the NCA for recognizing that it must continue to be responsive to the preferences and expectations of the veterans' community by adapting or adopting new interment options and ensuring access to burial options in the national, state and tribal government-operated cemeteries.

One of the areas that NCA does a good job in is forecasting 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. This partnership will bring burial records from historic national cemetery ledgers (predominantly of Civil War interments) into the digital age making them available to researchers and those undertaking historical and genealogical research. From the 1860s until the mid-20th century, U.S. Army personnel tracked national cemetery burials in hand-written burial ledgers or "registers." Due to concern for the fragile documents and a desire to expand public access to the ledger contents, VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA) duplicated about 60 hand-written ledgers representing 36 cemeteries using a high-resolution scanning process. The effort resulted in high quality digital files that reproduced approximately 9,344 pages and 113,097 individual records. NCA then transferred the original ledgers to the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) where they will be preserved. In addition to the NCA's ledgers, NARA was already the steward of at least 156 military cemetery ledgers transferred from the Army years ago.
- awarding grant money for State and Tribal Veterans Cemeteries; and
- expanding burial options in rural areas - **The Rural Initiative**. This program provides full burial services to small rural Veteran populations where there is no available burial option from either a VA national, State or Tribal Veterans cemetery. This initiative will build small *National Veterans Burial Grounds* in rural areas where the unserved Veteran population is less than 25,000 within a 75-mile radius. VA's current policy for establishing new national cemeteries is to build where the unserved Veteran population is 80,000 or more within a 75-mile radius.
- A **National Veterans Burial Ground** will be a small three to five acre NCA-managed section within an existing public or private cemetery. NCA will

provide a full range of burial options and control the operation and maintenance of these lots. These sections will be held to the same National Shrine Standards as VA national cemeteries. Over the next six years VA plans to open eight *National Veterans Burial Grounds* in: Fargo, North Dakota; Rhinelander, Wisconsin; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Laurel, Montana; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Cedar City, Utah; Calais, Maine; and Elko, Nevada. This option will increase access to burial benefits to rural veterans and will help NCA to reach its strategic goal of providing a VA burial option to 94 percent of Veterans within a reasonable distance (75 miles) of their residence.

The *IBVSOs* also believe it is important to recognize the NCA's efforts in employing both disabled and homeless veterans, which is another area that NCA leads the way among federal agencies. Programs include:

- **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 (VRs) 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.

Veterans Cemetery Grant Programs

The Veterans Cemetery Grants Program (VCGP) complements the National Cemetery Administration's mission to establish gravesites for veterans in areas where it cannot fully respond to the burial needs of veterans. Since 1980, the VCGP has awarded more than \$482 million to 41 states, territories and tribal organizations for the establishment, expansion or improvement of 86 state veteran cemeteries. For example, the NCA can provide up to 100 percent of the development cost for an approved cemetery project, including establishing a new cemetery and expanding or improving an established state or tribal organization veterans' cemetery. New equipment, such as mowers and backhoes, can be provided for new cemeteries. In addition, the Department of Veterans' Affairs

may also provide operating grants to help cemeteries achieve national shrine standards.

In FY 2012, with an appropriation of \$46 million, the VCGP funded 15 state cemeteries and one tribal organization cemetery. These grants included the establishment or ground breaking of one new state cemetery and one new tribal organization cemetery, expansions and improvements at ten state cemeteries, and six projects aimed at assisting state cemeteries to meet the NCA national shrine standards.

In fiscal year 2011, NCA-supported Veterans cemeteries provided nearly 29,500 interments. Since 1978 the Department of Veterans Affairs has more than doubled the available acreage and accommodated more than a 100 percent increase in burial through this program. The VCGP faces the challenge of meeting a growing interest from states to provide burial services in areas not currently served. The intent of the VCGP is to develop a true complement to, not a replacement for, our federal system of national cemeteries. With the enactment of the "Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 1998," the NCA has been able to strengthen its partnership with states and increase burial services to veterans, especially those living in less densely populated areas without access to a nearby national cemetery. Through FY 2012, the VCGP has provided grant funding to 88 state and tribal government veterans' cemeteries in 41 states and U.S. territories. In FY 2011 VA awarded its first state cemetery grant to a tribal organization. This is an extremely cost effective program which will need to continue to grow in order to keep pace with ever increasing needs.

Veteran's Burial Benefits

Since the original parcel of land was set aside for the sacred committal of Civil War Veterans by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, more than 4 million burials, from every era and conflict, have occurred in national cemeteries under the National Cemetery Administration.

In 1973, the Department of Veterans' Affairs established a burial allowance that provided partial reimbursement for eligible funeral and burial costs. The current payment is \$2,000 for burial expenses for service-connected deaths, \$300 for non-service connected deaths and a \$700 plot allowance. At its inception, the payout covered 72 percent of the funeral costs for a service-connected death, 22 percent for a non-service connected death and 54 percent of the cost of a burial plot.

Burial allowance was first introduced in 1917 to prevent veterans from being buried in potter's fields. In 1923 the allowance was modified. The benefit was determined by a means test until it was removed in 1936. In its early history the burial allowance was paid to all veterans, regardless of their service connectivity of death. In 1973, the allowance was modified to reflect the status of service connection.

The plot allowance was introduced in 1973 as an attempt to provide a plot benefit for veterans who did not have reasonable access to a national cemetery. Although neither the plot allowance nor the burial allowance was intended to cover the full cost of a civilian burial in a private cemetery, the recent increase in the benefit's value indicates the intent to provide a meaningful benefit. The *IBVSOs* are pleased that the 111th Congress acted quickly and passed an increase in the plot allowance for certain veterans from \$300 to \$700 effective October 1, 2011.

However, we believe that there is still a serious deficit between the original value of the benefit and its current value. In order to bring the benefit back up to its original intended value, the payment for service-connected burial allowance should be increased to \$6,160, the non-service connected burial allowance should be increased to \$1,918 and the plot allowance should be increased to \$1,150. The *IBVSOs* believe Congress should divide the burial benefits into two categories: veterans within the accessibility model and veterans outside the accessibility model.

The *IBVSOs* further believe that Congress should increase the plot allowance from \$700 to \$1,150 for all eligible veterans and expand the eligibility for the plot allowance for all veterans who would be eligible for burial in a national cemetery, not just those who served during wartime. Congress should increase the service-connected burial benefits from \$2,000 to \$6,160 for veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$2,793 for veterans inside the radius threshold.

Additionally, the *IBVSOs* believe that Congress should increase the non-service connected burial benefits from \$300 to \$1,918 for all veterans outside the radius threshold and to \$854 for all veterans inside the radius threshold. The Administration and Congress should provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the National Cemetery Administration's mission and to fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully.

Finally, the *IBVSOs* call on Congress and the Administration to provide the resources required to meet the critical nature of the NCA mission so that it can fulfill the nation's commitment to all veterans who have served their country so honorably and faithfully.

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 initial phase of NCA's internal review failed to identify, and therefore to report, all misplaced headstones and unmarked gravesites. Additional discrepancies came to light thanks to the diligent oversight of Chairman Miller and the HVAC which had tasked the 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 the *IBVSOs* recommends continued oversight to ensure the carrying out of all corrective actions.

Veterans and Post-Service Licensure and Credentials

Perhaps some of the reasons for the persistently high unemployment rate among veterans may be found in a June 2012 study conducted by the Center for New American Security. The report entitled, *'Employing America's Veterans: Perspectives from Businesses'*, examined the effect of military service on former service members as it relates to their employment opportunities. While there were many positive reasons for hiring veterans noted in the report, twenty-five out of the thirty companies involved in the study reported some specific challenges associated with hiring veterans, including:

- difficulty in skill translation;
- negative stereotype;
- skill mismatch;
- possible deployments (National Guard & Reserve members);
- difficult acclimation process; and
- difficulty finding veterans

In considering the many challenges facing transitioning veterans, it appears that perhaps the toughest barrier to breach is employment. It is abundantly clear that transitioning veterans seeking employment, especially those with health issues, face some unique obstacles, including the process of securing the licenses and credentials required by some professions.

The issue of veteran licensing and credentialing continues to be of concern to those within the military and veteran communities and is made especially difficult for veterans due to: its highly parochial nature; the complexities within the civilian credentialing system itself; the fact that each of the military services has its own unique training and credentialing programs; the need to overcome real or perceived gaps in military training, education and experience; the ambiguity about which of the roughly 4,000 different credentials are most important to civilian employers; and perhaps most significantly, many military occupations, unlike their civilian equivalents, have no credential requirements.

Due to its very nature, the problem of credentialing cannot be resolved solely by the Federal government and its agencies. The National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) and the National Governors Association (NGA) as two of the chief players in the credentialing game should also have a substantial role to

play and especially since licensure and certifications are handled at the state-level in most cases. Military service and training are provided at both the state-level for members of the National Guard or the federal-level for active duty and Reserve personnel. In light of this, a massive collaboration between DoD, VA and DOL as well as the Department of Education (DoED), and the individual states will be required. In an ideal world, all proposed legislation or regulations dealing with the credentialing issue would be initiated by NCSL and NGA in order to provide the basic structure for linking military skills, training and service to the requirements and opportunities within each state.

As an invested player in the area of veteran credentialing, VETS is engaged in: sponsoring major conferences to bring together the important players in the licensing and credentialing field; publicizing this specific barrier to employment; identifying on-going difficulties and helping to develop veteran-friendly policies to overcome those challenges; helping to bridge the gap that hampers veterans needing credentials through the involvement of its staff members on a number of national certification advisory boards, committees and regulatory bodies; and by providing grants to a variety of Workforce Investment credentialing projects.

The *IBVSOs* applaud the fact that the Administration has offered its support to ensure that servicemembers leave the military career-ready by proposing the following: increased veteran and service-disabled veteran tax credits; a challenge to private sector firms to commit to hiring or training 100,000 unemployed veterans or their spouses by the end of 2013 (this challenge has led to a public private partnership to develop a 'Troops to Energy Jobs' program and a 'Veterans on Wall Street' program; both of which seek to help support, educate and recruit military veterans and their families as they transition to the civilian workplace); 'A Career-Ready Military' which calls for DoD and VA to lead a joint task force with the White House economic and domestic policy teams and other agencies to develop proposals to maximize the career-readiness of all servicemembers including a 'Reverse Boot Camp'; and an initiative to deliver enhanced job search services to transitioning veterans through American Job Centers, including improved TAP workshops. Adequate funding is the key to the protecting these kinds of programs from fiscal jeopardy in the future.

The *IBVSOs* recommend that Congress continue to monitor and hold accountable DOL's ongoing implementation of the VOW to Hire Heroes Act provisions, including: mandating that DOD, VA, and DOL work together to identify equivalencies between military and civilian occupations and the credentialing, licensing, and certification so military training meets civilian certification and licensure requirements in each state; the design and implementation of a 'skill equivalencies' study; and the development and execution of the required multi-state demonstration project in order to determine the best way to prepare veterans for transition into civilian employment as well as ways to accelerate their attainment of civilian credentials.

The IBVSOs further recommend that the demonstration project mentioned above must include the development of a clear process so that wherever a veteran

chooses to reside after military service, that state will grant an expedited licensure or certification for the civilian equivalent job he or she held while in the military.

Additionally, we recommend that the DOD and other federal agencies tasked with assisting transitioning service members should reach out to and educate private sector employers on the value of their employing veterans. This outreach must include engaging all employers including federal agencies, for-profit and non-profit corporations as well as small businesses.

Congress should engage in a national dialogue, working closely with the Administration generally, and the DOD, VA, and DOL specifically, as well as State Governors and Adjutant Generals, employers, trade and professional associations, and licensure and credentialing entities at all levels, to establish a process so military training meets civilian certification and licensure requirements for states in which veterans choose to live once they leave the military.

Transition Assistance Program (T.A.P.)

The IBVSOs feel it is imperative that Congress ensure proper funding for transition assistance programs and that the programs themselves need to be continually updated and monitored to meeting the ongoing needs of servicemembers repatriating from overseas deployments.

he Transition Assistance Program (TAP), an interagency program, pursuant to section 502 of the "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991" (P.L. 101-510), was established as a partnership between the Departments of Defense, Veteran Affairs and Labor to provide resources and expertise to assist and prepare Veterans and Service Members to obtain meaningful careers, maximize their employment opportunities, and protect their employment rights. DOL/VETS continues to provide wide-ranging services to meet the ongoing employment and training needs of transitioning veterans, especially those injured or disabled, and to bring together employers and qualified veterans to fill open positions. A brief overview of some of the programs/initiatives under the auspices of DOL/VETS, according to their FY 2011 Report to Congress (see the full report at <http://www.dol.gov/vets/media/FY2011AnnualReportToCongress.pdf>. includes:

- the Jobs for Veterans State Grant (JVSG) program distributes funding to states for Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists who work with veterans experiencing the most significant barriers to employment and Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER) staff, whose main task is work with employers to cultivate employment opportunities for veterans. These individuals provide concentrated case management services to veterans and encourage the hiring of veterans through direct marketing and outreach activities with employers (FY 2013 budget request \$170,049,000);
- the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) has as its noble goal the reintegration of homeless veterans into both society and the workforce. In FY 2011, the HVRP helped place thousands of previously

homeless veterans on the road to recovery and integration FY 2013 budget request \$38,185,000);

- the Recovery & Employment Assistance Lifelines (REALifelines) initiative, focuses on services to those transitioning Service Members and Veterans wounded and injured in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- the Veterans' Workforce Investment Program (VWIP), pursuant to P.L. 105-220, Section 168, provides resources for the training necessary to prepare Veterans for meaningful employment and to encourage effective implementation of services for eligible Veterans facing significant barriers to employment; and
- the focus of this article, the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Employment Workshops provide critical assistance to Service Members and their spouses by giving them the tools necessary for a successful transition from military to civilian life (FY 2013 budget request \$12,000,000). See full VETS budget request at <http://www.dol.gov/dol/budget/2013/pdf/cbj-2013-v3-05.pdf>)

The Department of Labor's (DOL), Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS), which originally began providing TAP employment workshops in 1991, provided more than 4,200 TAP classes to nearly 145,000 participants around the world in FY 2011 and those figures are expected to increase in 2013 to 5,700 TAP classes provided to over 200,000 participants worldwide. The total budget request submitted by VETS for 2013 was in the amount of \$258,870,000 of which \$12,000,000 was designated to fund the TAP program.

The need to fully fund ongoing TAP classes cannot be underestimated due to the importance and complexity of transitioning to civilian life. Both the TAP and the Disabled Transition Program (DTAP) will, generally, be mandatory thanks to the "VOW to Hire Heroes Act" (P.L. 112-56) and will result in the program becoming an even greater benefit in meeting the needs of separating service members as they transition into civilian life. The VOW to Hire Heroes Act:

- Directs the DOD and DHS to, generally, require the participation of members of the armed forces being separated from active duty, and their spouses. Waivers of participation would be permitted for those whose participation is not, and would not be, of assistance since such members are unlikely to face major readjustment, health care, employment, or other challenges associated with transition to civilian life; and for those with specialized skills who are needed to support imminent deployment;
- Requires the DOL to conduct a study and provide a report to Congress to identify any equivalencies between the skills developed by members through various military occupational specialties and the qualifications required for various positions of civilian employment. These skills equivalencies will be published on the Internet and updated regularly;
- Directs the DOD to ensure that each member participating in TAP receives an individualized equivalencies assessment and to make each assessment available to VA and the DOL;
- Requires VA to contract, within two years, with appropriate contractors to provide members being separated from active duty, and their spouses, with appropriate TAP services. Retirees may begin TAP classes 2 years prior to

retirement and non-retiree service members may begin TAP classes 1 year prior to separation;

- Authorizes the DOL, VA, the DHS, and the DOD, in carrying out TAP, to contract with private entities that have experience with instructing members on relevant topics on job training and job searching, including academic readiness and educational opportunities;

- Authorizes the DOD and DHS, as part of TAP, to permit an eligible member to participate in an apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship program that provides them with the education, training, and services necessary to transition to meaningful employment;

- Directs the Comptroller General to conduct a review of TAP, and to submit review results and recommendations to Congress;

- Treats an individual as a veteran, a disabled veteran, or a preference eligible for purposes of appointments to federal competitive service positions if the individual meets all other qualifications except for the requirement of discharge or release from active duty under honorable conditions, as long as such individual submits to the federal officer making the appointment a certification that he or she is expected to be discharged or released under honorable conditions within 120 days after submission of the certification. Requires the director of the Office of Personnel Management to (1) designate agencies to establish a program to provide employment assistance to members being separated from active duty and (2) ensure that such programs are coordinated with TAP; and

- Requires the inclusion of TAP performance measures in annual DOL reports on veterans' job counseling, training, and placement programs.

As noted above, as part of the first major redesign of the TAP program in 20 years, eligible members will be allowed to participate in an apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship program that provides them with education, training, and services necessary to transition to meaningful employment. These new TAP classes will also upgrade career counseling options and résumé writing skills, as well as ensuring the program is tailored for the 21st century job market. Currently, TAP consists of the following five components:

- pre-separation counseling conducted by the respective military services;
- employment workshops presented by the Department of Labor;
- veterans benefits briefings conducted by VA;
- DTAP facilitated by VA; and
- personalized coaching and practicum.

Since 2005, TAP classes have been offered to eligible, demobilizing Reserve Component members (upon their return from mobilization of 180 days or more). These TAP classes are designed to address the following four areas:

1. transition counseling—mandatory and conducted by the military services;
2. “Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act” (USERRA) briefing (normally conducted by the DOL);
3. veterans benefits briefings—facilitated and sponsored by VA; and
4. DTAP facilitated and sponsored by VA

Efforts to improve both TAP and DTAP are under way. The scope of the changes was noted in DOL testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Committee of June 2, 2011:

- redesign both TAP and DTAP to assess each individual's readiness for employment, and their interests;
- updating the content of the employment workshop, to include workshops on employment readiness;
- providing skilled contract facilitators who are trained using newly developed program standards;
- providing an online, e-learning platform that will serve as a comprehensive resource for all service members, veterans, Reserve component members, wounded warriors, and spouses.
- providing customized coaching by phone or online for 60 days after participants attend the workshop; and
- performing metrics and satisfaction surveys after program completion, during the job search phase, and once employment has been obtained.

The Independent Budget Veterans' Service Organizations (IBVSOs) understand the plan is to begin piloting the redesigned workshops starting in January 2013 and to roll out the new workshops to all CONUS DVOP/LVER facilitated TAP sites by the end of FY 2012 and to the remainder of the overall sites by Dec. 31, 2012. We look forward to the fielding of the improved TAP and DTAP whose classes are often the only opportunity a service member, or qualifying family member, has to receive the critical information vital to sustaining their quality of life after the military.

The transition from a military career to a civilian and corporate sector career involves a major cultural shift. Veterans not only need employment but often need assistance in making this life-changing adjustment as well. This time of transition is one of the most stressful and challenging times experienced by many veterans. After spending years becoming part of a military culture, service members who leave the military face a new unknown culture when they step into a civilian role or corporate career. This transition is often complicated by injuries they received, both visible and invisible, while serving their country. As battlefield medicine continues to save more lives, VA and the DOD, DOL, and DHS must be ready to adapt and change their current transition and education programs to meet the needs of today's veterans.

Service members leaving the military with service-connected disabilities are offered DTAP, a program that includes the normal three-day TAP workshop, plus additional hours of individual instruction and advice to determine employability and to address their unique needs related to disabilities. DTAP provides important information to wounded service members and their families at a critical nexus. Often these individuals are hospitalized or receiving medical rehabilitation away from their regular units during their military service discharge periods. Because these individuals are no longer located on or near a military installation, they are often forgotten in the transition assistance process. In this respect, DTAP has not scored the level of success that TAP has achieved, and it is critical that coordination be closer between the DOD, VA, and Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) to reduce this disparity for these severely disabled service members.

The IBVSOs believe Congress, the DOD, VA, and the DOL should provide increased funding for TAP and DTAP to support mandatory attendance for all personnel being discharged.

The IBVSOs have also been concerned with the large numbers of reserve and National Guard service members moving through the discharge system with only the benefit of the abbreviated TAP as opposed to the more comprehensive program attended by active component members. Neither the DOD nor VA seems prepared to handle the large numbers and prolonged activation of reserve forces for the global war on terrorism. The greatest challenge with these service members is their rapid transition from active duty to civilian life. If service members are uninjured, they may clear the demobilization station in a few days, and little if any of this time is dedicated to informing them about veterans' benefits and services. Additionally, the DOD personnel at these sites are most focused on processing service members through the sites. Lack of space and facilities often restricts contact between demobilizing service personnel and VA representatives. To ensure full participation in this important program, the IBVSOs have long recommended making participation in the more comprehensive TAP mandatory for all discharging service members. The VOW to Hire Heroes Act should finally bring closure to this issue.

The IBVSOs recommend the following:

- All Transition Assistance Program (TAP) classes should include in-depth VA benefits and health-care education sessions and time for question and answer sessions;
- The Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, Labor, and Homeland Security should design and implement a stronger Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) for wounded service members who have received serious injuries, and for their families;
- Chartered veterans service organizations should be directly involved in TAP and DTAP or, at minimum, serve as an outside resource to TAP and DTAP;
- The DOD, VA, DOL, and DHS must do a better job educating the families of service members on the availability of TAP classes, along with other VA and DOL programs regarding employment, financial stability, and health-care resources;
- Increase the funding for DVOPs to ensure that there are enough to meet the expected demand, with special focus on rural areas;
- Establish an incentivized Grant process for any innovative programs utilizing improved methods of meeting the needs of veterans; and
- Improve internal audit system capabilities in order to monitor compliance with appropriate rules and regulations.

Congress and the Administration must provide adequate funding to support TAP and DTAP to ensure that all transition service members, whether Active or Reserve Component, receive proper services during their transition periods.

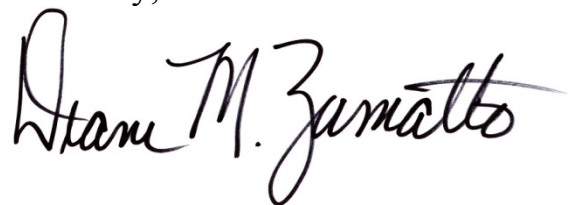
9 April 2013

The Honorable Representative Jeff Miller, Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
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 11 April 2013, House Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing on the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2014.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane M. Zumatto". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Diane M. Zumatto, AMVETS
National Legislative Director

Biographical Sketch

Diane M. Zumatto of Spotsylvania, VA joined AMVETS as their National Legislative Director in August 2011. Ms. Zumatto, a native New Yorker and the daughter of immigrant parents decided to follow in her family's footsteps by joining the military. Ms. Zumatto had five great-uncles in military service during WWII, while her father and an uncle served during the Korean War.

Ms. Zumatto is a former Women's Army Corps (WAC) member who was stationed in Germany and at Fort Bragg, NC. Ms. Zumatto was married to a CW4 aviator in the Washington Army National Guard and is the mother of four adult children. Two of Ms. Zumatto's children chose to carry on the family tradition by volunteering for military service.

Ms. Zumatto has more than 20 years of experience working with a variety of non-profits in increasingly more challenging positions, including: the American Museum of Natural History; the National Federation of Independent Business; the Tacoma-Pierce County Board of Realtors; the Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs; Saint Martin's College; the James Monroe Museum; the Friends of the Wilderness Battlefield and the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States. Diane's non-profit experience is extremely well-rounded as she has variously served in both staff and volunteer positions including as a board member and consultant.

Ms. Zumatto, who received her B.A. in Historic Preservation from the University of Mary Washington in 2005, has had a life-long passion for historic architecture, history and historic cemeteries.

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