

2019-2021 National Commander Jan Brown's testimony before a Joint Veterans Affairs Committee | March 2021

Chairmen, Ranking Members, and honorable members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, I appreciate the opportunity to present you with AMVETS' 2021 legislative priorities and policy recommendations.

To say the past two years have been challenging is an understatement. As the Commander of the largest organization representing **all** of America's veterans, I can tell you first-hand it has been tough. I have lost friends and comrades to COVID, and I have watched our incredible AMVETS family step up to the plate to do everything within their power to do the right thing.

The spirit of the American Veteran is a proud one. A spirit founded in the notion of service. Service to our nation. Service to our comrades who need a hand up. Service to our families and communities.

Our veterans, when empowered, represent the best of our community. They have stood the watch and are ever vigilant to continue that service. I was proud of our AMVETS during this pandemic. They brought that spirit and served again. We applaud the VA and its many employees for stepping up during these trying times. Keep up the good work, let's get shots in arms, and we implore Congress to get them everything they need.

When I reflected upon the many years of testimony I have seen presented to Congress, it often tends toward a laundry list of needs. I also noted at the core of these needs is a lack of a vision and strategy. **Where are we going, whom do we want our veterans to be in American society, and how do we empower them to become the bedrocks of our community by helping them become their best selves?**

My ideal VA frames me as the **strong American female veteran that I am**. A VA that proactively helps me chart my career goals, assists me with my education to achieve those goals, proactively helps me understand the components of living a happy and healthy life. A life of meaning, a life of purpose, a life of service.

My ideal VA helps me understand my inner warrior. They help me maintain a state of physical readiness while teaching me the components of being mentally healthy. They help me understand financial success, develop and maintain meaningful and positive relationships, and discuss the impact of substance abuse.

Our VA today is disjointed and reactive. If I do not contact the VA, well, I probably wouldn't hear from them.

We have a mental health system focused on treating veterans who have spiraled for years following their military service transition. We have unemployed veterans who could have used career advice decades ago. We have veterans struggling with addiction and broken relationships.

We need to get out of the business of simply reacting. And into the business of building our ideal VA. A VA that results in veterans living happy, healthy, financially stable **lives worth living.**

Our American veterans are counting on you this Congress. **We need a bold vision for the future.**

Part of that vision needs to focus on addressing VA's largely ineffective approach to mental health. There is nothing particularly proactive about spending billions of dollars on programs that most veterans participate in once or twice, never to return.

Congress made a tough but necessary stride in the 116th Congress by acknowledging that VA mental healthcare alone, and pharmaceuticals were not providing their promised outcomes.

The investment for new and novel approaches represents one quarter, of one percent, of the mental health budget. That's not enough. We need a game-changer.

The mental health and pharmaceutical industries have failed us for two decades. We need new voices, we need new approaches, and we need a new strategy. We won't get there if you do not act.

Our Congressionally Chartered 501 c-19s also need your help. We need a law passed that allows all congressionally chartered 501-c-19 non-profit organizations to receive tax-deductible donations. Current law prohibits non-profits like ours from accepting tax-deductible donations because less than 90% of our members are wartime veterans.

An issue that is close to my heart is the treatment and respect of women and minority veterans. We must recognize their service and address their unique needs.

Our Veterans in all of their color, gender, and sexual orientation deserve the VA's respect, admiration, and support in helping them become the best version of the exceptional individuals they are.

AMVETS is honored and thankful for your invitation to present our views to the 117th Congress, and this concludes my statement.