

LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN
LEGION

JOINT HEARING
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
AND THE
U.S. SENATE
ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS
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LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN LEGION

Wednesday, October 3, 2012

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
AND U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m., in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jeff Miller [Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs] presiding.

Present: Representatives Miller and Michaud.

Senators Begich and Boozman.

Also Present: Senator Lugar.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JEFF MILLER

The CHAIRMAN. Good morning, everybody. Thank you so much for being here. We appreciate you making the trip to Washington.

I am pleased to be joined by colleagues from not only across the Capitol, but across the aisle, as well. And as I told some of you this morning at breakfast, you know the congressional schedule changed a few weeks ago, so a lot of Members are not in Washington today. Senator Boozman flew in this morning, as a matter of fact. I came in last night, got caught in the fog trying to get in.

And you probably just drove down from Maine, didn't you?

But we thank you for being here. And rest assured, all the Members will not only receive the full testimony of the commander but also from the questions that are going to be given here. We are Webcasting, as well, so folks will be able to see this streaming live. And also it will be stored on the Internet so folks can get a look and see for themselves.

And I have a full statement that I want to enter into the record, but I do want to extend a very warm welcome to your new commander—we are glad to have you; it was a pleasure to meet you this morning—the 2012-2013 National Commander, James E. Koutz.

We are proud to have you with us here today. We look forward to your testimony and learning from you where the Legion stands on your legislative agenda.

I also want to welcome the Legion's auxiliary that is here, as well; of course, my friends from Florida, who I had a chance to visit with this morning at breakfast very briefly.

But instead of me going through a complete statement, I ask unanimous consent that I can enter the full statement into the record.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MILLER APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. And, with that, I would like to go ahead and introduce—let's see—Mike, do you want to give a quick opening statement?

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MICHAEL MICHAUD

Mr. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I, too, would like to welcome the National Commander here this morning, as well as the National President of the American Legion Auxiliary also. And I want to thank both of you for your advocacy for our veterans and enduring support that the American Legion's over 2.5 million members have given for our veterans.

Before we start, I also would like to extend compliments to your Washington, D.C., staff, to let you know that the staff here in D.C.—it is a pleasure working with them, but they also are out there each and every day fighting for the American Legion's priorities. So I want to thank you, National Commander, for the excellent staff that you have here in Washington.

And I also would like to recognize and ask them to stand in the audience the folks from Maine that took the time to be here today. I think they are still out in the audience. Would the Maine American Legion members please stand up?

I would like to thank both of you for coming here today, as well. [Applause.]

Mr. MICHAUD. These Committees are charged with oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the VA's budget. And while it has been busy and frustrating, we have been able to accomplish a lot over the last couple of years.

And we must also make sure that we provide the best care and service for our veterans. And we need to, first of all, understand how the veterans population is growing, changing, and where they are located geographically. And in 2011, we had just over 22 million veterans, with 34 million dependents, and we had 450,000 survivors of deceased veterans receiving compensation.

And I was pleased to see that the VA's budget for 2013 reflects many of these changes. But they must do better to do outreach for our veterans, particularly those that live in rural areas, and to do better with the dependents.

The VA 2013 overall budget is \$140 billion, an increase from the 2012 request. And because of the hard work of many individuals here in this room, advance appropriations continue to help the VA with long-term planning. With advance appropriation, we ensure sufficient, timely, predictable funding for veterans health care.

But advance appropriation only works when we work together to pass a long-term appropriation bill, as well. Short-term continuing resolutions are not helpful in the planning process, and we have to do better as Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle.

Although Congress may disagree on a lot of things, I hope that we can agree on providing strong appropriation for the VA in a nonpartisan effort. And in that regard, I would like to thank Chairman Miller for all the effort and hard work that he has done on the House side to make sure that the Committee works in a bipartisan manner.

I was troubled by the July report from CBS News that found suicide rates for our soldiers is up 80 percent. Our veterans are returning from war with invisible wounds that need treatment but are discouraged from seeking those treatments for various reasons. And as a Nation, we can do better, and we must get this right.

And to The American Legion, I ask you to continue to help in this regard. As you lobby the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I hope you are also lobbying the Committees on Armed Services to make sure that they are dealing with this issue, as well. Care must begin with the person who is on active duty before they take off the uniform and become veterans as well.

Servicemembers—also, if you look at another area of effort we have to do better on, that is for military training. Look at jobs. Servicemembers are experienced in many different career fields that can be varied, such as electronics, medicine, air traffic control. And we have to do everything we can as a Congress to help our veterans find jobs when they come back. And I think it is important for The American Legion, with your broad outreach into all the different States, to make sure that the States are doing the same thing, as well, to make it easier for our veterans to find jobs as well.

And, with that, I would ask for the remainder of my statement to be included in the record. And I want to again thank you, National Commander, for being here today, and all the members from The American Legion. So thank you.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. MICHAUD APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Without objection, so ordered.

And Senator Boozman is going to yield his time, at this point.

Senator Lugar, I understand you have a prior commitment. And so, in keeping with your schedule, sir, we appreciate you being here today to introduce the National Commander for 2012 and 2013, Commander James Koutz. We appreciate you being here. You don't remember this, but I met you for the first time in 1977 up here in Washington. And so I have great respect and admiration for you, Senator.

The senior Senator from Indiana is recognized, sir.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR RICHARD LUGAR

Senator LUGAR. Well, thank you very much, Chairman Miller and distinguished Members of the House and Senate Veterans' Committees.

I deeply appreciate this opportunity to address this Joint Committee in order to introduce a very distinguished Hoosier, American Legion National Commander James E. Koutz, as he presents his organization's current legislative priorities to this Committee.

Over the course of my service in the United States Senate, I have had the distinct honor to spend considerable time with Hoosier servicemembers and veterans from all branches of the military. Each time, I am reminded of how fortunate we are as a Nation to have so many young men and women who are willing to step forward now to defend the ideals upon which our Republic was founded.

It is one of our duties in Congress to ensure that those who bear the considerable burden of defending our Nation in military service receive the care and support they have earned upon their return to civilian life. Since its founding in 1919, The American Legion and its members have worked closely with officials at the local, State, and Federal levels in providing that support.

I am also very proud to note that The American Legion is headquartered in my hometown of Indianapolis, Indiana. I was especially pleased to meet with Jim most recently in August during the American Legion's 94th National Convention in Indianapolis, where he was elected to serve as National Commander.

He brings a wealth of experience to this new post. This includes his own service with the United States Army in Vietnam, more than 2 decades in the private sector with Amax Coal Company, his election as a County Commissioner in Warrick County, Indiana, and his service to the veterans of our State as a member and President of the Indiana Veterans' Affairs Commission. I am confident the talent and diligence that he has exemplified have been the hallmark of his career to date, and they will continue to well-serve The American Legion during his term in office.

I would like again to thank the leadership and Members of the respective Veterans' Affairs Committees assembled here today for calling this important hearing.

I wish Jim and his wife Vickie every success in their important service to the 2.4 million veterans that make up The American Legion. And I look forward to learning much more about the American Legion's important legislative priorities and supporting those in the future.

I thank the chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Senator, for being here with us today. And we know that your schedule is tight this morning, so whenever you need to depart, please feel free to do so.

And, Commander Koutz, you are now recognized.

STATEMENT OF JAMES E. KOUTZ, NATIONAL COMMANDER, THE AMERICAN LEGION; ACCOMPANIED BY VERA JONES, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION; MICHEL HELM, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION; PETER GAYTAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE AMERICAN LEGION; AND KENNETH GOVERNOR, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION

Mr. KOUTZ. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the Senator, my Senator from Indiana, Senator Lugar, for that kind introduction.

Good morning, Chairman Miller and Members of the Committee. First, let me state how proud I am that you took on to have this POW-MIA flag and empty chair behind me. I understand this is the first time, and I hope it is not the last time. Thank you.

On behalf of the 2.4 million members of The American Legion, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you this morning.

Prior to getting into the details of my written testimony, I would like to introduce some of the national officers that will serve with

me this year. As I call their names, I ask that they stand to be recognized.

National Vice Commanders: David Hall, out of West Virginia; Glenn Hickman, Department of Ohio; James Hallie Holland from South Carolina; John Neylon from New Hampshire; and Jeanette Rae from Nevada.

Our National Sergeant-At-Arms: Al Pulido from Indiana.

Our National Adjutant: Dan Wheeler.

And our National Treasurer: George Buskirk.

Please stand and be recognized.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. KOUTZ. I would like to take a moment to acknowledge some special men in the audience who fully comprehend what I am just beginning to understand—what it means to sacrifice a year of your life to be the face of this great organization—the past national commanders of the American Legion.

Gentlemen, would you please stand and be recognized?

[Applause.]

Mr. KOUTZ. Next, I wish to introduce the leadership of the American Legion Auxiliary, the Nation's largest patriotic women's organization.

Please stand as I call your name and be recognized.

National President Peggy Thomas from Virginia; National Vice President Nancy Brown-Park from California; and National Secretary Mary "Dubbie" Buckler from Indiana.

[Applause.]

Mr. KOUTZ. We also have several past national presidents of the American Legion Auxiliary joining us today. I would like for them to stand and be recognized.

With us today is the National Commander of the Sons of The American Legion, Chris Huntzinger from Department of Pennsylvania.

Chris, please stand and be recognized.

[Applause.]

Mr. KOUTZ. In addition, several of the men present dedicated a year of their lives to serve as National Commanders of the Sons of The American Legion.

Gentlemen, would you please stand to be recognized?

Most importantly, I would like to take this opportunity to introduce and thank my wonderful wife Vickie, my best friend.

Vickie?

[Applause.]

Mr. KOUTZ. A month from now, U.S. citizens will go to the polls across the country and cast ballots in the general election. Washington will be focused on that great landscape beyond the Beltway. That is where I come from. That is where you will find The American Legion.

You will find The American Legion in rural towns of the West, helping veterans make that 4-hour trip to a VA medical center. The American Legion is promoting and hosting more than 200 job fairs throughout this Nation. The American Legion service officers are working day and night to help veterans understand their VA

claims and file applications that won't get stuck in a massive backlog.

The American Legion is in your district, your hometown, and your neighborhood. For nearly a century, this organization has fulfilled the spirit of its Federal charter in ways that can't easily be quantified. Suffice it to say that millions of volunteer hours are put in by Legionnaires; millions of real dollars are raised to help veterans and their families; and millions of lives are touched every year all through America by The American Legion.

By the end of my year in office, I will have spent more than 300 days traveling the Nation and sometimes beyond, visiting veterans, active duty troops, and patriotic Americans everywhere. I will have a rare and unique opportunity to see the faces and hear the stories of those who have sacrificed on behalf of our Nation.

They will ask me what The American Legion is doing for them today, and they will ask me what their elected officials are doing for them. They will want to know what you are doing to make things right for America's veterans, their families and communities.

They have a good reason to ask. As today's generation of troops comes home from war, they are unsure about their futures. Where will their jobs come from? What if they can't get the war out of their minds? What if they need a doctor now but they can't wait and see one in a month?

They will want to know what massive cuts in the defense budget will mean to small businesses and factories that supply defense contractors and hire veterans. Will these businesses be shut down? Will we weaken our national security because of a weakened economy?

These are tough questions. Veterans need to know that The American Legion and our elected officials are working hard to resolve these issues confronting the Nation they swore with their lives to protect and defend. These men and women have sacrificed in ways we are only beginning to understand. Their families have and will. It is truly up to us to ensure their sacrifices are rewarded with a promise of a brighter future.

That brighter future, we all know, depends on the ability to earn a decent living. In my written testimony, you will find jobs among the American Legion's list of priorities. A stronger economy and specifically improved career prospects for veterans will go a long way toward solving a number of problems facing our Nation today.

It is no secret that a large percentage of America's veterans are struggling to find work, having faced jobless rates as much as two-thirds higher than in the comparable civilian population in the past year. The American Legion has been at the forefront of efforts to combat veteran joblessness, and we all know we have an ally in this Congress.

Specifically, I speak of the progress made in the acceptance of military experience for credits toward licenses and credentials in a number of trades and career paths for veterans. It is just common sense that those who drove Humvees through firefights delivering supplies to forward operating bases ought to have a leg up when they pursue over-the-road truck-driving certification as civilians.

Medics who have saved lives on battlefields don't need to start at lesson one when they are working to become civilian EMTs.

The American Legion has been fighting this battle longer than anybody else. Since our landmark "Study of Licensure and Certification for Veterans" in 1997, we have worked with concerned parties in both the government and the private sector. We have been on the Hill, at the Pentagon, with the Department of Labor, side-by-side with representatives and Presidential task forces, and in the boardrooms across this country.

And it is bearing results. You have worked with us to make landmark strides in licensure and certification with legislation such as the recent VOW to Hire Veterans Act and the Veterans Skills to Jobs Act of 2012. We are grateful for this dedication and cooperation that Congress has shown us on this issue. Clearly, you have heard the concerns of veterans, and we appreciate everything you have done to improve the situation on the Federal level.

But we cannot let up. As The American Legion works to capitalize on these gains and increase our efforts, we need your support to keep working with the States to improve their acceptance of military training, as the Federal Government has already done. Legislation like the HIRE at Home Act can help State-level efforts to recognize military training, education, and experience.

The American Legion is now working with groups such as the American National Standards Institute and Solutions for Information Design to advise U.S. Army Training and Doctrine on credentialing to evaluate the programs of instruction being provided while these men and women still wear the uniform. We all need to recognize the top-quality education and training men and women of the United States Armed Forces receive when they are serving our country.

We are working with the United States Chamber of Commerce, Military.com, and Recruit Military, LLC, to produce hundreds of hiring fairs across this country, from big cities to small towns, from convention centers to American Legion posts. If you have not been to one of these events, I strongly encourage you to do so. There you will see firsthand the quality of these returning servicemen and women, employers who understand their value, and Legionnaires who are dedicated to improving their lives.

The men and women who fought for this country shouldn't have to fight for a job when they return home. Veterans, their families, and The American Legion will keep working to revive our Nation's economy. Efforts to improve opportunities through licensing and credentialing, through job fairs and business development, must continue in earnest.

For many newly minted veterans, the ability to get a job and earn a decent income has been diminished because of sacrifices made in uniform. That is why we simply must come up with a solution to a problem that has been with us for years, unfortunately, and has gotten worse: the VA claims backlog. I would challenge anyone this room to recall a time when The American Legion did not come before this Congress looking for answers to this worsening problem.

Among veterans in every corner of the Nation, many who wait months or even years for decisions about their claims, this is not

just some nagging bureaucratic nuisance. The claims backlog, which is now hovering at about 1 million cases, is a gathering storm of mistrust between those who fought for their Nation and those who promised them benefits if should they become disabled. Our government's failure to decide their claims on time is inexcusable.

VA's efforts to tame the backlog have not produced positive results. American Legion service officers are working around the clock to help veterans through their process, and we all know that VA has added employees to help solve the problem, but this is clearly not enough. Secretary Shinseki has promised to break the back of the backlog by 2015, and yet, with more new claims outpacing decisions, we are going in the wrong direction.

Congress can no longer simply be concerned about this problem. Congress, VA, and The American Legion must work together to solve it. And that does not mean simply rewarding processors for fast decisions regardless of quality. We have found an alarming amount of inaccuracy in claims decisions made at VA regional offices throughout the country, and that only slows down the progress.

Earlier this year, when Congress summoned American Legion service officers for a hearing about the backlog, we were encouraged. These service officers are at the front line of this battle every day. They have unique perspectives that can help VA contend with its biggest issue.

We have seen many pilot programs and promises from VA. It is time to roll up our sleeves and really fix what is wrong with this system. If the Social Security Administration and other Federal benefits programs can handle their claims in a timely manner, veterans cannot understand why the VA cannot.

In The American Legion, we have made training our service officers a top priority. It is part of the job, not something that gets in the way of the job. When we bring our service officers together for training twice a year, they make recommendations based on the complex system they must navigate on a daily basis. They are the ones who can see the flaws in the VA work-credit system that rewards quantity over quality.

There simply has to be a better way to get this done. For instance, VA could start counting claims done right as a positive and claims done wrong as a negative, so everyone could have a more accurate picture of what is really getting done in these regional offices. Veterans waiting past a realistic target date might be compensated with interest on their claims, creating an incentive for VA officers to get these claims decided on time.

There are ways to work with the mechanics of the system to make it serve the veteran and not the bureaucrats. We are willing to roll up our sleeves and work with you to find those ways. The American Legion has people in the trenches who not only understand the problems but can contribute to the solution. Veterans are tired of hearing how the government is working on ending a backlog that continues to grow.

Veterans and The American Legion want results and are willing to do whatever it takes to obtain them. Remember, we are all partners in this. Everyone knows the claims process is confusing for

veterans. The American Legion is there with free services to help navigate the system and make things easier for both the veteran and the VA personnel who have to decide their claims. Nobody gets charged a penny for this service—not the veteran, not the government.

We are out there working to put these claims in order, to help make it easier for these veterans by putting them in touch with the people who are dedicating their time and effort to make the process easier for those veterans. We work with the congressionally chartered veterans organizations to get the transitioning veterans in touch with the people who can make this system run more smoothly. If you work to hand them off to us, we will not forsake that trust. We will walk them through that transition into the proud, patriotic, and productive phase that is life as a civilian veteran.

The American Legion understands that our Nation is in a budget crisis the likes of which has not been seen in over a generation. First and foremost, our Nation's veterans are deeply concerned about national security in the face of drastic defense spending cuts.

Equally important to The American Legion is the protection of VA and veterans programs administered in other Federal agencies. Thanks to the tireless work of this Committee and especially you, Chairman Miller, Congress and the White House have reassured us that the VA will be exempt from sequestration.

Unfortunately, many programs important to veterans are funded by agencies outside the VA: Arlington National Cemetery; the American Battle Monuments Commission; the Joint Prisoners of War, Missing in Action Accounting Command; the Department of Labor's VETS Program; HUD-VASH; and others. Veterans are seriously concerned that these important government functions will be compromised or cut in order to make ends meet.

And that does not even begin to address the massive cuts that will be levied against our Nation's defense, which is poised to bear fully half of the \$1.2 trillion burden that could not be relieved by the supercommittee last winter. The Department of Defense is asked to bear this burden while U.S. servicemen and women are still at war with hostile enemies in Afghanistan and all around the world.

The American Legion has been promised that the budget would not be balanced on the backs of veterans. If cuts to the Department of Defense erode TRICARE, diminish quality of life for our troops, or put more pressure on our National Guard and Reserve components, it is clear that an unfair portion of responsibility is falling upon the shoulders of America's current and future veterans.

While the budget does not fall squarely on the shoulders of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, we urge you to work with your colleagues to find the right balance without sacrificing our Nation's ability to defend itself or to care for its protectors.

I am grateful for the work this Congress has done on behalf of our veterans. I will tell Legionnaires and their families throughout this country that their elected officials are, in fact, working with us, the stakeholders, to solve some very serious problems. I will explain to them that our voices matter in Washington and we are being heard. Now it is time for all of us to act on those voices and

make good on our promises to the men and women who have served.

I thank you for the opportunity to come before you and renew the commitment of The American Legion to work closely with Congress to ensure that we are meeting this Nation's obligations to its veterans. Since 1919, The American Legion has been there for America's servicemembers, veterans, and their families. Our organization is a voice for the hundreds of thousands of men and women serving today in the military who are unable to speak for themselves.

The American Legion is there for millions of veterans, many of whom are either too proud or too humble to demand the benefits they have earned. The American Legion is there to give you, our elected officials, a direct lane of communication with a very special breed of constituents—those who have pledged their lives to the Nation we all love.

It is much more than good political sense to address the questions, problems, and issues our Nation's veterans and their families face today; it is a sacred obligation. I think we can all agree on that.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

[Applause.]

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAMES E. KOUTZ APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Commander. We appreciate your testimony and look forward to an opportunity to ask some questions momentarily, but Senator Begich from Alaska has arrived. And since the House had an opportunity to give our opening statements prior to your comments, I would like to recognize Senator Begich.

Good to see you, sir.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR MARK BEGICH

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. I appreciate it. I will try to be brief.

And, first, Commander Koutz, thank you for being here. Thank you for your testimony and being part of this. And all the Members that are here today.

I know, as Congress, the Senate is out. But there are a couple of us here. We wanted to make sure the Senate is well-represented. We care deeply about what is going on with the veterans and the issue of our veterans community, not only in the Nation, but all across that—in our State, for example.

And, also, I want to make a note of past national commander Jimmy Foster. I caught a glimpse of him over here.

Thank you for traveling all the way from Alaska to be here. You and Hawaii, if there is someone from Hawaii here, get a special award for traveling the distance. So thank you very much for being here.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for once again having this joint meeting.

It is always important for us here in Washington to hear from all of you of what we need to be doing, how we are doing, what job improvements we need to have with regard to our veterans, as well as—and I know at times we talk about our active military, too, and I know you have lots of ideas in that arena, so please don't hesitate.

As you know, this summer, the Congress passed a pretty significant piece of legislation, the Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012, which really helped improve many fronts, enhancing specially adapted housing programs for disabled veterans, improving the VA's ability to end homelessness among veterans, providing health care for veterans, family members exposed to toxic drinking water at Camp Lejeune, removing several inefficiencies in the claims process—but, honestly, as we all know, more to be done there, with regard to moving our claims forward—and expanding critical health care for our veterans.

And a special thank you to the VA. I know we are always trying to hold them accountable, and we are doing a good job at times. Sometimes we have to push them a little bit extra. But there was one thing they did for rural Alaskan veterans which was critical, and I want to thank your organization for helping support this effort.

And that is, the VA and Indian Health Services, in a historic act of cooperation, are now ensuring that veterans who are in rural Alaska—which, in some cases, 80 percent of our communities are not accessible by roads. So they can't get into the veteran van and go down to the clinic, because there is no van to take them to the clinic because there is no road to take them to a clinic. You have to fly. At the end of the day, it could be \$1,000 or more.

But the VA, through the Indian Health Services, and our clinics throughout rural Alaska are now in a cooperative effort to ensure that veterans, no matter where they live, in any rural part of Alaska, they are going to get access to quality health care. And that, to me, is a huge step for our thousands of veterans in Alaska.

So thank you to your organization to help support that effort. And thanks to the VA for being a little innovative in their efforts.

So thank you all very much for being here, and I will just listen to the continued testimony.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Senator.

I would also like to recognize my friend from Arkansas, Senator Boozman.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN BOOZMAN

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It really is good to be with you and Congressman Michaud.

Many of you know that I served in the House for a number of years and served with these guys for a long, long time. And there is nobody that puts veterans first, you know, in regard to these two.

You guys do a great job. Not only you, but it is also a pleasure to be with your staffs on both sides, both the Senate and House staff.

This is kind of a unique fraternity, serving in the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the House or Senate. This is an area where we really do work and get along and do things in a very, very bipartisan manner, which is so important.

Senator Begich, it is great to be with you.

Senator Begich is a new friend. He and I have worked together on a number of bills having to do with women's issues, having to do with the Transition Assistance Program, and things like that.

Congratulations. Thank you for being here, Commander. We appreciate you so much. Your testimony was great.

I also want to thank Peggy for all that you do. We know who really does the work amongst the group. I have a wife and three daughters, so I am very, very aware of that. But we do appreciate all that you do.

And then, also, I thought it was so nice, you know, mentioning your wife, your partner and friend and things. And my dad did 20 years in the Air Force. And I think, you know, it was representative of her help through the years, but, also, it is so representative of that when you are in the military, it is not just an individual thing, it takes the whole family. And so we appreciate her being here and representing that also.

I want to recognize our folks from Arkansas, and our State commander, Mary Irvin, is here.

Where are you, Mary? Very good. Thank you for being here.

And then, also, R.D. Kenzie and Steve Gray. And, again, we appreciate you all so much and all that you do to work so hard for our veterans in the State of Arkansas. And we have a number.

Certainly, this is a very critical time for our Nation's veterans, and it is so important that the Legion—you know, it is so important that you are here. Don't ever underestimate how important it is here, again, telling your Congressmen, your Senators, their staffs—which sometimes is even more important, telling their staffs—how important these things are as we move forward.

I know that all Americans are very concerned about employment security, but veterans, in particular, are struggling with meaningful employment and careers. This is certainly a very difficult economy. You mentioned, Commander, the VOW to Hire Heroes Act and the Veterans Skills to Jobs Act. As you said, you know, certainly these are a step in the right direction, but—and, again, everyone deserves credit in a very bipartisan way for moving that forward. Yet there are still a number of things that we can do and will do in that area.

On the other hand, we have to be careful. You know, certainly, we want to do these efforts; we can't do those by mortgaging the futures of our children and grandchildren by borrowing money from people like China. So we owe this, again, to our veterans, in the sense of their honor and sacrifice. But we can do that. Like I say, we can get that done and will get it done.

The failure of the Joint Deficit Committee has left us with the looming arbitrary cuts. Those have been mentioned, you know, both from up here and down there. I am pleased that the House, you know, essentially passed a bill that said, no, these impending cuts aren't going to affect military families. And, certainly, I think that

is all of our's position. We would like for the administration to clarify better, you know, that that is set in concrete.

So, again, certainly, as you said, Commander, we must make it perfectly clear that under no circumstances—we cannot and will not balance the budget or solve our fiscal problems on the backs of our men and women in uniform and our veterans.

[Applause.]

Senator BOOZMAN. I though you all were napping. That is a deafening applause. And, again, the good news is that I think that we are all on board.

Thanks for your efforts with suicide prevention. You know, that is something that we are working on very, very hard here. There is just a number of things, you know, in regard to that.

The other thing that I am concerned about is military voting. You know, that is something that—if anybody has a right to vote, it is the men and women that are serving overseas. And so, again, I think in a very bipartisan way, we are working to ensure that, you know, that is not going to be a problem. And so we are going to press on forward in that front, and we appreciate your all's efforts also in doing likewise.

So, again, thank you for being here.

And now let's go ahead, Mr. Chairman. I know we have some questions for the panel.

[THE PREPARED STATEMENT OF SENATOR BOOZMAN APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Senator. We appreciate your comments.

And, again, because we have two House Members and two Senators, we may dispense with the typical 5-minute question period. I would probably ask a question and then turn to Mr. Michaud or to Senator Begich, so we can kind of have a little bit more of a free-flowing discussion than we normally would in a process like this.

I do want to draw attention to the fact that you congratulated or thanked the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for the job fairs that they are holding around the country. I had the opportunity, a week ago Monday, or Tuesday I guess it was now, to be in West Palm Beach with Allen West, down there attending a job fair and function. And they have been all over this country. For some reason, they haven't been to my district yet; we will see if we can fix that.

But your organization and theirs have been working collaboratively. And we know that because the unemployment rate is so high among our returning veterans that something has to be done. We see a lot of the corporations around this country, and small businesses as well, that are joining together to make sure that we can use the talents that our military men and women have when they come home and transition back to civilian life.

And that is something that, again, you have helped us get that word out to many of the States' Governors around the country, that, in fact, their jobs that they had in the military certainly should transition well into the private sector.

I have said it many times. I have a good friend that is a homebuilder. He said, "Give me somebody that has been in the military, that knows how important it is to show up to work every day on

time, has good critical skills, decision-making skills, and I can teach him how to build a house. But bring me somebody that knows how to build a house and is absent of those skills, it is very difficult for me to be successful.” And it is very, very true.

With that, I want to focus a little bit—

Senator BOOZMAN. Can I just add to that, Mr. Chairman?

The CHAIRMAN. No. No.

Senator BOOZMAN. Please?

[Laughter.]

Senator BOOZMAN. Very shortly.

You know, the Chairman was talking about, you know, these jobs skills. Last night I got up at 4 o'clock. I had a 6 o'clock flight, so I was at the airport at 5 o'clock. So I was up at 4:00. But before that, I was riding with the Little Rock Police Department, you know, throughout the different areas, you know, just trying to get a feel for how we could be helpful to them.

But one of the things they mentioned was how desperately they need policemen and how much they liked returning servicemen and women, you know, the great job that they do.

One of the things that they mentioned was the training process is so—you know, it takes a long time. And it just goes to, you know, what we have talked about, getting certificates in the military so that a military policeman, once he completes his training, he is given a certificate. They can take certificates from other training States, you know, and things like that, but they don't have the ability to do that there.

So it just highlights, you know, what you are talking about, how we can do some of these things, again, to very quickly put some men and women in the workforce.

The CHAIRMAN. Very true. Because it is also a process of putting them together. The folks that are looking for people who want to work and getting the people who want to work—and that is where Military.com and Monster.com and a lot of other organizations have done a great job. Although the job has yet to be finished, but they are helping put those folks together.

But I want to hone in, if we can, for just a minute on the claims backlog. Because I think, you know, obviously, that is a huge issue that is out there that everybody in this room is concerned about. Congress is concerned about it; Department of Veterans Affairs is concerned about it. But it doesn't seem to be getting any better.

Secretary Shinseki has already said several times—you quoted it in your opening statement—that by 2015, that, you know, within 125 days, the idea was that everybody would have their claims adjudicated at 100 percent. Well, it isn't happening.

And, unfortunately, we had a hearing just a couple of weeks ago where we kind of took a status check with VA, where are you? Their focus was more on what they were turning out, which is exactly what you talked about. And that is important: a million claims being adjudicated. But the backlog is growing. And if you are not keeping up with that backlog, it is certainly not going to assist and fix the problem.

So, again, I would like to hear from you, if you would, your perspective on, what are the things that can be done? What can Congress do legislatively, if you will, to assist the problem?

We all talk about the electronic medical record, but that is years away from being able to truly have that seamless transition. We are moving in that direction, but we have folks, you know, today that are waiting 1, 2 years in order to have their claims adjudicated.

And we have put dollars forward, we have put bodies forward; it does not seem to fix the issue. So I would like to hear what you think.

Mr. KOUTZ. Well, Mr. Chairman, I think one of the things that we could do is do more hiring of adjudicators, do more hiring of the processors.

As you probably know, a lot of these claims that are coming back, they are not completed. They need to be fully developed claims. You know, I believe like any other business, if you are in a backlog, then the only way to get that backlog taken care of is to hire more people.

And I understand in the VA, being a former—or a still commissioner of the Indiana Department of Veterans Affairs, that it takes time to train an adjudicator or a claims processor. So that will take time. But maybe we can—and I don't really know how much overtime they are working, if they are working overtime.

But I think that they got to do these claims more accurately. Because when they come back, the first thing that we see is mistakes. Then that claim goes right back to the regional office, and we are starting all over again from step one.

So I think that is the biggest thing, is maybe get the accuracy, which the Secretary said that he would like to have a 98 percent accuracy. If we get to that number, then I think you will see the backlogged claims be reduced.

The CHAIRMAN. Do you know the percentage of the claims that your service officers put together that are adjudicated complete? I mean, they may not necessarily get the rating that they are asking for, but the percentage of packages that are completed?

Mr. KOUTZ. I don't know, but Peter Gaytan, the Executive Director of our Washington office, probably has an answer for you.

Mr. GAYTAN. Thank you, Commander.

Mr. Chairman, The American Legion takes very seriously the quality of our work and our training of our service officers. Twice a year, we put our service officers through rigorous training to ensure that they have the qualifications, knowledge, and skills to not only to produce quality, fully developed claims that we submit to the VA but also to help reduce the backlog. Because it is going to be a team effort to do that. We are going to have to have, as the commander said, qualified, well-trained service officers to do this work.

Now, your specific question on the number that The American Legion adjudicates—

The CHAIRMAN. Or percentage.

Mr. GAYTAN.—I would like to defer to our VA&R Director, Verna Jones, who handles that area.

Ms. JONES. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, we actually received a report from the VA just last week, and I can tell you the number of claims. The American

Legion handles 244,000 claims, annual. That is our number this year, 244,000.

Now, I am not sure of the exact percentage, but the number is 244,000 for The American Legion nationally.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. If you would, just for the record, if you could let us know just the percentage.

[THE ATTACHMENT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. I am trying to get a handle, you know, on how many claims are being done by the veterans themselves, obviously using the veterans service officer. You know, the assumption, from my standpoint, was it would be better to go through a service officer in order to file your claim, but I just—I am interested in knowing, for no other reason than I think folks up here on the dais would like to hear it.

Mr. Michaud, do you have a question?

Mr. MICHAUD. Yes, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I also would like to thank Senator Boozman for his very kind and generous remarks. I am very glad to see that you haven't forgotten the House that you came from and you are willing to come back over here on the House side. And I really enjoyed working with you and continue to work with you.

Once again, I would like to thank you for coming here today to put forward your ideas of what The American Legion would like to see Congress do and some of the concerns that you currently have out there. And The American Legion is a strong advocate for our veterans and for all those who have served, and that is known throughout the halls of Congress.

I want to take this opportunity, however, today to discuss an issue that is really important to our troops and for our country. We all remember the outrage this summer when it was discovered that our Olympic athletes were wearing uniforms made in China. Well, I think we should be as equally outraged by the fact that our troops are not wearing 100-percent-American-made uniforms. Our soldiers put their lives on the line for us. They should fight in uniforms that they can trust, uniforms made in the USA.

Next week, I will be going to a funeral for a soldier that died over in Afghanistan in Maine.

When you talk about uniforms made in the USA, I read an article—and I left you a copy; I know you haven't had a chance to read it yet. But I am not the only person who is upset with what is happening with our military today. I was reading an article in the Air Force Times where it says, "Master sergeant says 'no' to Chinese-made boots."

He was issued a pair of Chinese-made boots. He made a stink about it. He ultimately did get American-made boots. He was sent to Afghanistan, and over in Afghanistan he was given a uniform, the Army Operation Enduring Freedom camouflage uniform. He asked for a pair of required boots, the tan boots. Well, guess what? He was issued a pair of Chinese-made boots once again.

In the article, you will see where the master sergeant, at the end—and I would like to quote it, what the master sergeant said. And I quote, "This is about patriotism. This is about following the Berry amendment set forth over 60 years ago. This is about Amer-

ican soldiers wearing our country's uniforms made by Americans." And I couldn't agree more with the master sergeant.

At a time when our Nation is divided and the discourse in Washington, D.C., is extremely negative, it seems to me, with the outrage for our athletes wearing Chinese-made uniforms, that this is one issue we all can agree on. Even both candidates who are running for President of the United States are criticizing one another about not being tough on China. And both campaigns are talking about making sure more things are stamped with "Made in the USA."

Well, there is a way we can get tough on China: increase things made in the USA and to make sure that our American soldiers are not treated as second-class citizens, that they have the best. That is what they are fighting for, this country, United States of America.

And I find it extremely concerning because this issue is not an issue that needs Congress to act, it is not an issue that we need a regulatory agency to address; it is an issue that is already the law.

So my question to you is, what is the American Legion's position? Do you believe that our soldiers that are putting their lives on the line each and every day for us, should they be wearing clothing made in the United States of America?

Mr. KOUTZ. The answer is yes. The American Legion believes that—

[Applause.]

Mr. KOUTZ. I am sure The American Legion and the American people believe that all equipment should be made in the United States of America.

And there you go again; we are talking about jobs. Put the Americans to work making these boots. That will provide jobs here at home.

Mr. MICHAUD. Well, I want to thank you very much, National Commander.

And just for the record, I know Congressman Duncan Hunter, who is a Republican colleague from California, he and I are writing a letter—we encourage our colleagues to sign that letter—to the administration, requiring them to comply with the intent of the law. And it is unfortunate we have to do that. And hopefully we will see some changes in that regard.

Thank you very much. I yield back the balance of my time.

[Applause.]

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Begich?

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much.

Just a couple questions, but I wanted to mention also, in March—for Jimmy, this is for you also—that we are going to hold a jobs fair for veterans.

And it is an interesting thing. When you do these jobs fairs, there is an incredible amount of folks that come out. And I just met this morning—why I was late here was I was meeting with franchisors, a few franchise businesses, restaurants, so forth. They have a new initiative to help veterans get into that business. And so we are very excited about what is happening with the small-business community regarding our veterans.

Let me, if I can—Ms. Jones, you mentioned 244,000, give or take, claims you have processed. Do you keep track of the acceptance rate? And what I mean by that is, you submit them; how often do they, kind of, make it through the system successfully? What is that percentage?

Ms. JONES. Thank you, sir.

Because it takes so long for those claims to travel through the system, it is almost impossible for us to keep an accurate accounting of how many of them are awarded, how many of them denied. But I will tell you that at our Board of Veterans' Appeals we keep track of the amount of claims that are overturned. And right now we are at 76.6 percent of claims that have been adjudicated in error and overturned by the Board of Veterans' Appeals.

Senator BEGICH. Uh-huh.

Ms. JONES. The VA puts out an annual report that breaks down how many claims they adjudicate every year and how many of them have been awarded, how many of them have been denied. But they don't break them down by POA, or by the power of attorney, for each veterans service organization.

Senator BEGICH. It would be an interesting—maybe it is something we can ask the VA to do on a regular basis. Because there would be good—because my bet is your officers are doing a great job. And that is my bet. And, you know, if it is working so successfully, maybe there is an opportunity to streamline it even more. So if you are already having a very high success rate in acceptance of these claims, then maybe there is a way to look at the process and slim it down a little bit on the VA side.

Because your rate of success and doing the claims as successfully as you are doing them should be a benefit to you all and also, obviously, the veterans who are receiving that benefit. So maybe there is a little opportunity there if we measure the success rates there.

Ms. JONES. Absolutely, sir. As a matter of fact, we asked the VA for those numbers just yesterday.

Senator BEGICH. Oh, good.

Ms. JONES. We expect to receive them shortly, and we will make sure that you get a copy of that.

Senator BEGICH. Will you share with us individually or through the two Committees? I think that would be helpful. Because that would help us, I think, make the case of why your services officers can process these very successfully.

And, therefore, maybe there is—again, I know the VA duplicates some of the work once you do all this. It is like, well, maybe we can cut some of that out, make it a little faster, and base it on your past success rate.

Ms. JONES. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. So let's take a look at that.

The second thing, I guess, Commander, maybe you can answer this or maybe give some comment on it with regards to mental health services. And I know it is a big issue. You know, we are struggling, I know, in the Armed Services Committee, which I also sit on. We have been successful in now getting mental health service providers in the battlefield, at that level. Rather than waiting for folks to come home and then try to figure out what to do at that point, we are trying to step it up on the front end.

And it has been very successful, to some degree. But I know the VA is agreeing to hire more providers and services, but the challenge is getting more in the pipeline. So maybe you could give some thoughts there.

I know in the bill we passed earlier I had an amendment, which was successful, which ensured that if you use mental health services through telemedicine, which is proving to be very successful, no co-pays are required anymore, which I think is a huge step in getting better access.

But do you have some thoughts or innovative ideas of how we can get more mental health service providers and veterans access to those folks?

Mr. KOUTZ. Well, hiring more mental health services and providers—with the percentage of these troops coming home with traumatic brain injury and PTSD, we know that that is going to increase. It is going to increase immensely. So I think we are going to have to get to where we can train these people so that we can take care of these soldiers when they come home.

Senator BEGICH. Uh-huh.

Mr. KOUTZ. I don't know if the rate—I think, from what I am understanding, the rate is maybe 50 percent, if not more, of these returning soldiers coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq that are having these two problems with TBI or PTSD. I think the sooner that we can get this job done, the better off we are going to be, so we can take care of these soldiers when they come home.

Senator BEGICH. Very good.

Let me—Mr. Chairman, I have just one quick question.

I caught most of your testimony because I came in just as you were starting. And I just wanted to ask, I didn't hear you mention the GI Bill. And I am just wondering if there are issues, or the success of the GI Bill, or are there things that we should look at to improve.

I know we made one improvement these last couple years, and we are getting a lot of use of the GI Bill. But are there any thoughts you want to add on that issue while you are here?

Mr. KOUTZ. The GI Bill is in good shape right now. The only thing, I think, that The American Legion is concerned about is that we need to keep watching and see how things are going with the GI Bill in case we need to improve it.

Senator BEGICH. Good.

Mr. KOUTZ. You know, there is always room for improvement in the GI Bill. But right now we have no major issues with the GI Bill.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Boozman?

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Commander, you know, you can have great benefits, but if you can't access them, it is a real problem. And I know that you all have been working hard for our rural veterans, you know, trying to ensure that the accessibility is there. We have been working with Senator Franken and actually passed a bill in Committee that would require the Office of Rural Health to put out a specific strategic plan, you know, as to how to do that.

I know you all have been very, very active in that regard. Can you elaborate on some ways that you feel like we can do a better job in serving our rural veterans?

I know, also, you know, there is a move to expand the Census Bureau definition. Again, if you could elaborate a little bit, that would be helpful.

Mr. KOUTZ. Well, The American Legion believes that to take care of this rural health care problem we have that we need to add more clinics, more outpatient clinics, more doctors, so we can take care of this. As you heard me, probably, in my opening statement, I said some veterans are driving up to 4 hours.

Senator BOOZMAN. Right.

Mr. KOUTZ. And then when they get there, they probably can't get in. So the problem is that we don't have enough staff, doctors, the medical equipment. So if we maybe add staff, add more clinics to take care of the rural veteran, I think that would be a big asset in helping these veterans.

Senator BOOZMAN. And telemedicine? Vans?

Mr. KOUTZ. Sure.

Senator BOOZMAN. Things like that. Very good. Well, we do appreciate your efforts in doing that.

You know, it is interesting. We are working with Senator Franken, you know, and he is a—you know, you have some large cities, you know, in his State, but it is a very rural State, you know, as is Arkansas and so many of the places that we represent.

I mentioned the licensing, you know, and how it came up, you know, with the police. I know you all are really on the cutting edge of that. I think you had, you know, a summit. Can you tell me a little bit about how that went and some of the suggestions perhaps that you have in that area?

Mr. KOUTZ. I didn't understand your question.

Senator BOOZMAN. The credentialing, making it such that—

Mr. KOUTZ. Licensure and—

Senator BOOZMAN. Yes, sir.

Mr. KOUTZ. Well, and just like the Veterans Skills to Jobs Act, you know, as I said in my statement, that if you are a Humvee driver over in Iraq or Afghanistan, dodging IEDs and land mines, then when you come home, you ought able to be a truck driver. Or if you are a medic, you ought to be able to come home and not have to go through step one of being an EMT in civilian life.

So I think, you know, that credentialing and—I think you are working in the right direction and we are working in the right direction to make this better for our veterans and our servicemembers when they come home.

Senator BOOZMAN. The Congressman, the Chairman, you know, mentioned what is on all of our minds, you know, the backlog and the stuff, how can we be helpful. Can you describe in a little bit more detail the Claims Coach mobile phone—the app, you know, what that is going to be about, how that is going to be helpful?

Mr. KOUTZ. I would let Verna from VA&R, Verna Jones, answer that question.

Senator BOOZMAN. Sure.

Ms. JONES. Thank you.

Our Claims Coach mobile app is set up to help veterans download this application on their mobile phones that will direct them to a veterans service officer. It will help the veteran sort out what they need to gather—information, documents, what documents they need to bring in. And it will even help them put in their ZIP code and determine which veterans service officer is closest to them to help them with that.

So the mobile app is going to set the veteran up so that when they walk into the veterans service officer's office, they are more able to have a fully developed claim, which we know is supposed to go through the system more quickly. So we are excited about the mobile claim app and hope that more veterans will download that claim app to help them get ready to file their claim.

Senator BOOZMAN. Yeah. Very good. That is excellent. I think that will be very, very helpful.

Just one last thing, Commander. Can you elaborate on your comment regarding the VA health care system, that growing numbers of female veterans in a system that has traditionally catered to men, must adapt to meet the unique needs of today's veterans population, you know, with us having so many more females in the military?

And, I guess, if you could elaborate on that and really tell us how you feel like the Department can improve the delivery of care and benefits to an increasing number. Not only do we have a large number now, but we have an increasing number of female veterans in need of VA services.

Mr. KOUTZ. Well, with the 20 percent of our military force being females nowadays, we believe that we must have better medical care; we must get the doctors that can take care of our female veterans in these VA clinics.

You know, from what our understanding is on a survey that we took, there was only 25 percent of the female veterans that felt that the VA medical system was better than going to their own. So I think that we need to just maybe do a better job in taking care of our females.

What I have been trying to do is trying to get a woman veterans coordinator in every department in The American Legion.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good.

Mr. KOUTZ. And once we get all that Committee together—that I am hoping that The American Legion will get these female coordinators together, and then they can tell us the needs that they need to have, and then we can relay it to you.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Thank you, Commander.

Mr. Chairman?

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much.

You were talking about the GI Bill and some of the education benefits. One of the things that the Legion can help us with, as we have just changed into a new fiscal year, and that is with the VRAP program, or the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program. I think we did 45,000—we, Department of Veterans Affairs, 45,000—or Labor—45,000 applications approved. There were many that were in the queue that were waiting.

We actually authorized 99,000 total. As of today, the numbers that I have, there are 63,844 applications, of which 50,000 of them

were approved. So there is still, you know, roughly, another 36,000 folks out there that can access these benefits for retraining.

So I would like to ask for your help, with the Legion's help, in getting the word out to those individuals. You know, we focus a lot on the younger returning veterans, but, obviously, this is focused on 35- to 60-year-old folks, to get them retrained to come into the workforce.

And so I just bring that to your attention. You had talked about the VOW to Hire Heros Act. That was part of it. So we would like to ask for your assistance with getting the word out on that.

Also, we were talking about mental health. I would like to ask a question. And anytime you talk about going outside the norm, we get some visceral responses. But we had a roundtable discussion with some of the veterans service organizations recently here, in talking about mental health and how do we get the patient to be able to get to the provider as quickly as possible. And it takes VA so long to hire somebody, especially somebody that is accredited with some type of a medical degree, whether it is a nurse or a physician, psychologist, psychiatrist, optometrist—whatever it may be.

And there has been some discussion about opening TRICARE, to give the option for folks to either stay in the traditional VA track or go into the TRICARE system, still being managed—their care being managed by VA. We could double the amount of providers overnight if we were able to do something.

Does the Legion have a position? Are you willing to look at these options to help solve what literally is a crisis in this country? Our mental health backlog out there is something not to be proud of.

We have to provide it quickly to those that are in need, wherever they may be. And some of them are in rural areas, and it is very difficult. And it is very difficult to do a lot of it via telehealth, which—Senator Begich has talked about telehealth and the great success, but mental health may be somewhat different, especially in the very, very beginning.

So I would like to ask what the Legion's position, if any, on exploring the opportunity.

Mr. KOUTZ. Well, just let me say a few words before I turn it over to our Executive Director, Peter Gaytan.

But we understand that is a big issue. We understand there are problems there, and we understand that we are going to have to train the people to take care of these mental health—you know, a lot of these mental health people probably don't even want to come to us. They want to stay in the back. But I think, with your help and our help, that maybe we can go to those people and get them out and come and get the help they need.

So, with that, I will turn it over to Peter, our Executive Director. Mr. GAYTAN. Thank you, Mr. Commander.

And that is a real issue, what you are bringing up, beginning with the access to mental health. The access to mental health right now is efficient. You mentioned telehealth. The VA is utilizing other resources, like telehealth. And it is going to be a growing problem, in terms of mental health care.

But specifically with the suggestion of opening up TRICARE and utilizing TRICARE, The American Legion was at that roundtable, and we appreciate the invitation. It is something we are taking

under consideration to consider. We would like to see the reality of that being in effect. How much will it improve our veterans' access to mental health care that they need?

Because when we are looking at the new demographics of returning veterans—and we have talked about rural health care, and The American Legion published a report earlier this year focusing on rural health care. We in this Nation are at a time where we are relying more and more on our Guard and Reserve servicemembers, not only to serve, but to serve in combat zones. They are returning to rural areas. They are returning to areas that aren't supported with military treatment facilities, areas that may not have a VA facility close by.

And they are not just coming back to the support of a military base and the unit that they know; they are thrown back into the civilian world. And that time between the pressure of combat to the time they are walking down Main Street, USA, is short.

So those individuals are the ones we need to capture and utilize new ideas like TRICARE, telehealth, even contracting out specialized mental health care when appropriate. Not a blanket statement that we can allow our veterans to go down the street, but in specific areas, in specific cases where we know that we can reach that veteran in a timely manner to protect them and hopefully reduce the suicide rates, those are the things we need to look at.

So I think the TRICARE discussion—and I appreciate that opportunity—that TRICARE discussion is just part of a larger equation of how can we develop as many options as possible to reach these returning veterans who have these very dire mental health care needs.

And, yes, VA is getting overwhelmed. And, yes, VA does take a long time to hire, train, and utilize new employees. And this is an area that we need to concentrate on. And I think—I can tell you that the TRICARE issue brought up—The American Legion is studying, considering, and talking to you and your staff to better understand those options.

But I think you and we have an obligation to realize how much that TRICARE opportunity will help the situation and what else needs to be added to that, so we can improve mental health care access and reduce the effects that our combat troops are coming back and dealing with.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Mr. Michaud?

Mr. MICHAUD. Thank you. Don't want to get too comfortable here with this gavel here next to me.

[Laughter.]

Mr. MICHAUD. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to actually follow-up on that same line of thinking. When you look at a State like Maine, we are a very rural State, and access is an extremely important issue. And when you look at what we are seeing in the military today, with the increase in suicide rates, as well as within our veterans population, our female veterans—I just saw a movie, documentary just the other day, "The Invisible War," with sexual assaults and some of the problems that our female veterans have. So access is extremely important.

First of all, I would like to thank The American Legion once again for putting out "A System Worth Saving." I think that is definitely a very good document that I enjoy reading every year because it really highlights some of the issues out there in the VA system.

Following on the same train of thought that Chairman Miller brought up, when you look at access, whether it is TRICARE, whether it is utilizing our federally qualified health care clinics, I can understand some of the concerns that the veterans might have. And I, too, do not want the VA just being an insurance agency where, you know, VA will pay for services outside because I think there is a very important role for the VA to play.

But, also, I believe that we, and you, we have to do everything that we can to make sure that our veterans get the health care that they need when they need it. And when you look at the fact that the mental health—Secretary Shinseki has agreed to hire 1,900 mental health and associated workers. With that, the problem being there are already 1,500 vacancies that he has had, some over a year, in the mental health area.

So I am very glad that you are looking at the TRICARE system, and I think it is very important that we look at everything that we have to, to make sure they get the care that they need.

But I guess my question would be, in that same vein, is if you look at rural States, such as Maine, when you look at uniqueness, whether it is Alaska or some States that have a lot of islands, and veterans trying to get the health care that they need when they need it, would you also be willing to look at, in the rural areas, if they do not have TRICARE services in those particular areas, if there might be some collaborative effort that we could utilize, federally qualified health care clinics or rural hospitals, to get those types of services?

And, once again, I am not advocating that the VA sends everything out, because I don't think they should. But I do think that there have to be some medium ways where we can look at the veterans as getting the care that they need, at the same time making sure that the VA medical facilities are still a primary focus for our veterans.

Would you want to comment on that?

Mr. KOUTZ. Well, we are willing to probably work with you on anything to be sure that we get our veterans taken care of. The main thing is that they get the proper health care, and especially the mental health area, getting veterans taken care of. Because, you know, as you talked about the suicide rate, that is something that we have to be sure that we get that nearly stopped. There is way too much suicide going on, and it is not just the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. There are still Vietnam veterans that are doing it every day.

I don't know what the answer is, but I wish there was an answer that we could take care of these servicemembers that are doing this, and the veterans. But, yes, we are willing to work any way we can to take care of it.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Begich?

Senator BEGICH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just have a couple quick more questions. And I apologize, I may have to depart here. But I want to follow up on the mental health issue.

And I know, as just mentioned, the amount of mental health providers the VA is moving forward into hiring. The challenge is their process of hiring and also making sure there is a supply line. And I hate to be so crass about it, but, you know, you have to have enough people in the pipeline who want to take those jobs in a very huge and growing field nationwide, not just for our veterans.

So we have a huge challenge. So we may have to be more creative in ensuring that we get mental health providers working for the VA, or at least in cooperation with the VA, and also recruiting. Because the mental health services that our veterans will need will not go away after a few months. They are going to be around for many, many, many years, and we need to have those services available.

So we may want to think about how we incentivize folks to get into this field of mental health services who then work for the VA and/or work with the VA. And so that is something, maybe a little thought that we should think about and maybe some suggestions back from you folks.

The other piece is—and I know the big issue when we dealt with utilizing our Indian Health Services, which are actually run by the Alaska Native Tribal Consortium, for health care delivery within our rural parts of Alaska was the quality of care. The veterans want to make sure that, whatever happens, that they get quality care. No matter where it is, they want quality care. And the concern was always that the VA offers a certain level, and would these other agencies offer less? And that was the big concern.

What we found, what our veterans have found, and their organizations have found, that our Tribal Consortium delivers equal or better care than the VA. But we never take the choice away from the veteran. The veteran can go to the VA hospital or the VA clinic or utilize this service. And we think it is going to increase capacity.

So I think there are innovative ways to ensure the core of the VA is strong, stable, and growing, but also making sure we utilize some other arena that we put and pour in a lot of Federal dollars in delivering health care systems in very remote, rural areas. And I think that is a great way to ensure that we keep equal or better quality for our veterans.

So I think as you look at this, I think we are all going to be very interested in this and your suggestions.

Along with that, we were able to put into the defense authorization bill language for active military—we need to do the same thing for veterans—and that is, if you are a veteran and you are getting, say, mental health services here in Washington, D.C., but then you go home to Alaska and you want to get that same mental health service provider to provide for you, if they are not licensed in Alaska, it is not going to happen.

In the active military, we have put some language in, in an amendment I put in, to ensure that no matter where you go you can still access that doctor. Because with mental health services, it is a little different than a physician who may be taking care of—maybe you had a hand injury or something of that nature. Mental

health providers is all about a relationship that you are building with the provider. And so it is critical that that veteran continue to have that care from whoever they need and want from wherever they are in this country. And we have to think about that.

And so I think there is an effort—we need to do like we did in Armed Services with veterans, the same kind of language to ensure that, no matter where you live, you can access that.

Now, I know I will get in trouble with every State, with their medical boards and jurisdictions and all that gobbledygook that gets in that. But at the end of the day, if we have a veteran who is receiving great care, they should get it wherever they move and be able to access that person. That is why we did the telehealth medicine. No co-pays anymore because we think that is a great access point.

So I just want to put that on, so as you are thinking about these things, please help us here.

The other one, on the TAP program, as you know, this has been a challenge, the TAP program. And I know it is being piloted now, a new one, by VETS at the Department of Labor. I don't know if you have any feedback yet from how that is working or not working, and I don't know if anyone can comment on that.

But, as you know, when I first came here 4 years ago and they told me it was 160 or 170 slides in a PowerPoint, I said, are you kidding me? I wouldn't even pay attention to that, and we read a lot of material around here. It was a dysfunctional element to transition our folks back into civilian life.

So does anyone have any comments on this pilot program that is working or at least started now?

Mr. GAYTAN. We actually had staff attend the first new TAP pilot program.

Senator BEGICH. Yeah.

Mr. GAYTAN. And it was mixed information that we received. We sat in with the briefings. We were impressed with some of the information that was delivered. We were very impressed that it is going to be mandatory, which it should have been a long time ago.

What we are doing is giving our feedback back to the VA—

Senator BEGICH. Excellent.

Mr. GAYTAN.—and letting them know where we think not only where they can improve in their delivery of information, but where they can utilize organizations like The American Legion to express to these individuals how we can help them when they transition.

In fact, The American Legion has taken the initiative to author letters to the Secretary and others to ask if we can work together in a more collaborative way for you to share—for DoD and VA to share the information on these transitioning veterans so we can help them before they take the uniform off. And when they come back to their rural communities, where The American Legion lives and exists, we can provide that much-needed help that they may need to access the VA, to understand the VA.

These troops don't know the VA. We know the VA because we live and breathe it every day. But when they are coming back and they are taking the uniform off and they are going in a direction in their lives they didn't consider before, be it injured or leaving

the military, The American Legion has a track record since 1919 of helping those individuals.

VA and DoD should recognize that and allow us to help at the level we can help. And that comes through collaboration, acceptance of what we can do by sharing the information of those transitioning veterans. And that is what our organization asks for.

So with the TAP program, it is a great approach. We are part of improving it. In fact, I am going to be going down to Norfolk on Friday to promote our claims app. We are actually going to show it down at the TAP program in Norfolk.

Senator BEGICH. Excellent.

Mr. GAYTAN. So we, as an organization, are part of the process to improve the TAP program. So we are grateful that they want to look and improve it and they are recognizing it needs to be improved. Just let The American Legion be a big part of that.

Senator BEGICH. Well, thank you very much for that comment. And I think—I hope I speak for the rest of my colleagues here: Anything we can do to help make sure you are at the table, especially in the redevelopment of that TAP program, if there is information you are sending that you think is valuable and maybe the listening isn't happening on the other end at times, you have to let us know.

Because we think—what I have always heard is the program, originally, was just problematic. I am trying to be polite here. But having you involved is critical. Veterans being the test pilot, in essence, on this is critical to make sure this works for veterans, not just administrators to process it, but for veterans who need that information. So I thank you for that.

If I can ask one quick question of Ms. Jones, and then I will cease at that point, if that is okay, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Jones, I know we talked a little bit about women veterans and what is happening. You know, I know it is a critical issue in what we are doing. And it is more of almost a wraparound service in a lot of ways, from not only the health care necessary, but also child care and other things.

Can you tell me maybe the one or two or three top items that women veterans are saying to you that I wish we could do, you know, fill in the blank? Can you do that for me?

Ms. JONES. Yes. Thank you.

You know, in 2010, The American Legion, as I told you, did a women veterans survey. This is the first national women veterans survey done since 1985, when the VA conducted a survey. We know a lot of things have changed since 1985.

We held a survey for over 30 days, for about 30 days, and 3,012 women responded. We asked them 67 questions measuring 10 attributes. And what these women told us is what they want boils down to quality health care, affordable medications, and fair and equitable compensation, just like our male counterparts. Women want to be able to walk into the VA health care system and receive the gender-specific health care that we deserve.

Recently, I was in the hospital, in February. I stayed in the emergency room for 15 hours because they didn't have a room for a woman veteran—15 hours, with a life-threatening condition, because they needed to find a room for me. Women veterans deserve

to go into the VA health care system, into the hospitals, and get treatment as quickly and as efficiently as our male counterparts.

What women want is it to be understood that there are some gender-specific differences, that we want medical professionals to understand that women need particular things. Mammography is one of them. All of the mammography, or the mammograms, are outsourced. So we go out on a fee basis to get our mammograms. But it takes a long time to receive the results. What we want is for the VA to understand that, while we of gender-specific differences, we still deserve the same timeliness as they give to, in some ways, our male counterparts.

And what we are asking for is not a separate facility to walk into; we want to go into the VA health care system, a system that is provided for veterans, that is built for veterans, that understands veterans, to include female veterans. But maybe a separate waiting room, especially for women veterans who suffer with PTSD specifically due to military sexual trauma.

When the law was reduced, the standards reduced for men for PTSD, they left out military sexual trauma. They failed to reduce the standards. And women, or largely in part women, providing the burden of proof for women on proving their claims for military sexual trauma. We want to be included in that liberalized law for PTSD.

So what they told us is that we want fair treatment, and we want the VA to understand that women are a large part of our military, and when we come home, we want to be cared for, just like our male veterans.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator BOOZMAN?

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I really don't have any more questions.

I appreciate your comments. And especially coming from somebody, you know, that can relay their personal experiences, it is very, very important. And I appreciate you sharing, you know, your particular ordeal. And that is certainly something I know that the Committee on both sides, you know, are going to be working hard to try and remedy. There is simply no excuse for that.

Thank you, Commander, for being here. And we just appreciate your service, appreciate everyone's service so much, all that you all represent. And, again, we look forward to working with you in the next Congress. And, again, just appreciate all of your efforts.

Mr. KOUTZ. We thank you. And just let me say that The American Legion is always here. We want to work with you to do the best we can for the veterans of this Nation.

The CHAIRMAN. I would ask unanimous consent that all Members would have 5 legislative days to revise or extend their remarks or include any extraneous materials for today's hearing.

Without objection, so ordered.

[THE ATTACHMENT APPEARS IN THE APPENDIX]

The CHAIRMAN. And let me finish, Commander, again, by saying thank you so much for being here, being willing to spend your time helping us understand more what The American Legion's perspective is.

And I can clearly say that without your help the job would be a whole lot harder. So I look forward to working hand-in-hand with you as we move down the road together and try and solve the issues that are there.

We look forward to having another VSO roundtable early in the next legislative session, which is right around the corner. We know we have an election in just a few weeks and a lame-duck session, and then we will be returning for the 113th Congress.

So I appreciate you being here. I appreciate everybody being here for your session in Washington.

And, with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:35 a.m., the Committees were adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Prepared Statement of Chairman Jeff Miller

Good morning.

Thank you to all who have joined us. I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues from both sides of the Capitol, but I regret that changes to the Congressional calendar have prevented many Members from attending today. However, we are live streaming this hearing on our Web site at Veterans.House.Gov so that your members and our Members can watch online. We will also have the hearing available on our Web site for future reference, so that the public can always come back and view these proceedings.

The American Legion's annual legislative presentation before these committees helps us shape policies and address issues impacting current and former servicemembers around the country. We value your input, and today provides us another opportunity to discuss solutions to problems and ensure the effectiveness of programs that work well for veterans.

With a membership of nearly 2.4 million, the American Legion represents veterans from many different conflicts and all regions of the Nation and the world. The diversity of your membership is reflected in the numerous activities in which the Legion engages, not just in its tireless work here in Washington. Whether through working with families and youth organizations, such as the Boy Scouts, mentoring a future servicemember, aiding a veteran with a claim, or providing funeral honors for a veteran who has been called home, the Legion's positive impact is felt every day.

I want to extend a warm welcome this morning to the American Legion's 2012–2013 National Commander, James E. Koutz. We look forward to hearing your testimony, and thank you for sharing your legislative agenda with our committees and Congress.

I also want to welcome every member of the American Legion and its auxiliary here today, including a special welcome to the national president of the Auxiliary, Ms. Peggy Thomas, of Richmond, Virginia. Thank you, Ms. Thomas, for the fine work the Auxiliary does. We must all remember that family members also sacrifice in support of our warriors. Thanks to each of you for your service and for traveling from across the country to be with us today.

Like many of you, I am proud to call the Sunshine State home, and would ask those who have made the trip from Florida to please stand or wave and be recognized.

Before we begin, I would just like to say that this week hasn't been VA's finest. With the release of the report from the Office of the Inspector General on VA conference expenses, it is apparent we have a leadership void at VA. Without strong leadership at VA, I am concerned that some of the best ideas we put forth will never realize their full potential. VA is facing major obstacles – a backlog that continues to grow exponentially, a mental health care crisis, bureaucracy, and now this latest report that VA employees went on a spending spree with veterans health care funding. Not only did senior leadership fail to ensure effective planning for this large event, they also failed to ensure sound stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

Disappointed is a polite word to describe my thoughts about this. I am disappointed that it has taken an OIG investigation to bring this lavish spending to light. I am disappointed that VA failed to take corrective action earlier. And I am disappointed that, in light of these findings, we are hearing the same thing we always hear from VA – “we will change, we have put safeguards in place, we don't condone this behavior.” We've heard this tune before, but rarely do we see results or any substantive change. VA leadership must always hold itself accountable for providing veterans the best care and services possible and never gamble with our veterans, especially for some employees to have fun at a conference. That is a gamble VA leaders should never have taken.

In addition to ensuring strong, consistent oversight and leadership at VA, another ongoing challenge we strive to address is servicemembers' transition, not just from DoD to VA but also to civilian life, including the workplace. Veterans' unemployment is of great concern to these Committees, and we have made great bipartisan strides in improving that situation during the 112th Congress.

I am glad that VA approved the maximum 45,000 applications for the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program for Fiscal Year 2012, an important step toward helping veterans get back into the workforce. The opportunity for 54,000 more veterans to participate in this new fiscal year will sustain that momentum. The American Legion has been a valuable partner in VRAP's success, and outreach through your Web site and mailings can further the success.

As we continue working toward job growth in the private sector for veterans, there are other issues which also command our attention.

It was over a year ago that I communicated to this Administration that veterans funding should not be affected by sequestration. After receiving conflicting and vague responses during that time, we finally have a long-overdue answer that veterans funding will not be touched.

To the members of these Committees, and I'm sure to many Legionnaires, it is puzzling why such a common-sense answer took so long, but it is also the right answer and one I am glad to finally have.

As your written testimony discerns, significant challenges remain with disability claims processing. The backlog of claims continues to grow, despite input, including the Legion's, on ways to improve accuracy within the process without compromising veterans' benefits.

We all know of the number of servicemembers returning home and what effect that will have on VA's claims backlog. In order for the backlog to be eliminated, it first must decrease. However, VA's own statistics show that the backlog has doubled in the past several years – a significant increase, not decrease. Although VA continues to reiterate its goal to eliminate the backlog by 2015 and to process claims with 98% accuracy, the agency fails to provide clear benchmarks and timelines as to how the backlog will decrease, let alone be completely eliminated.

The assistance your veterans service officers provide in filing claims is invaluable in guiding servicemembers through a difficult and time-consuming process. Helping veterans with over one-hundred fifty thousand claims a year is no small feat, and the expertise provided helps each veteran receive care and benefits in a timely fashion. Still, we both know that VA must do its own part, and I look forward to continuing to work with your organization and my colleagues in the House and Senate to get VA moving in the right direction – more claims processed, in less time, with a higher accuracy rate.

VA also is not treating veterans with the invisible wounds of war quickly enough. More than half of veterans seeking mental health care – and these are VA's statistics – wait an average of 50 days for an initial evaluation. Not treatment, an evaluation. That statistic is a national shame. While VA may talk about processes and numbers and percentages, it must remember that its purpose is serving people, veterans who put themselves in harm's way to protect freedom for those of us back home. Veterans should be able to receive help when they seek it, not the next day, week, or month. Any delay in providing this treatment is unconscionable. We must look at ways to expand VA's mental health care capacity. This is a matter of life and death. So, I am open to ideas on how we can save 18 veterans a day, and I look forward to having a productive discussion on this issue today.

The mandatory Transition Assistance Program participation enacted under the bipartisan VOW to Hire Heroes Act is another way we can reach out to individual servicemembers at a personal level. So, too, is the outreach that the American Legion provides, both through its national efforts here in Washington as well as through the nearly fourteen thousand American Legion posts throughout the world.

You have my assurance that our committees will continue to work together with you to provide and improve services for our veterans. We have seen some major accomplishments together, but we all know there is much more to be done, and I look forward to even greater achievements for our veterans.

Commander, thank you- not just for being here today but for everything you do and your organization does. The American Legion makes a positive difference every day in the lives of many, and I know it will continue to do so for many years to come.

Prepared Statement of Hon. Michael Michaud

I'd like to welcome the newly elected National Commander of The American Legion, James E. Koutz.

I would also like to welcome the National President of The American Legion Auxiliary, Peggy Thomas. Thank you both for your advocacy for veterans and the enduring support of The American Legion's 2.5 million members.

Before we start, I would like to extend my compliments to your Washington staff and to tell you, Commander, what a pleasure it is to work with them.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize those in the audience who traveled here from Maine. If there are any Legion members here from Maine today, would you please raise your hand?

These Committees are charged with oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the VA's budget. And while this has been a busy and frustrating year in many regards, we must look forward to how we can best serve veterans in 2013.

To provide the best care and services, we need to understand how the veteran population is growing, changing and located geographically.

In 2011, we had just over 22 million veterans with 34 million dependents and we had 540,000 survivors of deceased veterans receiving compensation.

I was pleased to see that the VA's budget for 2013 reflected many of these changes. But they must do better outreach to eligible veterans and dependents to make sure they all get the services and compensation they have earned.

The VA 2013, overall budget is \$140 billion, an increase from the 2012 request. And because of the hard work of many individuals in this room, advance appropriations continue to help the VA with long-term planning.

With advance appropriations we ensure sufficient, timely and predictable funding for veterans' health care.

But advance appropriations only works when we work together to pass year-long appropriations bills. Short term continuing resolutions are not helpful for planning purposes and hurt the ability of the VA to provide health care services.

Although Congress may disagree on a lot of things, I hope we can always agree that providing strong appropriations for the VA is a non-partisan effort that must be done each year.

I was troubled by a July report from CBS news that found suicide rates among soldiers is up 80 percent.

Our veterans are returning from war with invisible wounds that need treatment but are discouraged from seeking this care for a variety of reasons. As a Nation, we can do better – we have to get this right.

To The American Legion, I ask for your help on this issue. As you lobby the Committee on Veterans Affairs, I hope you also lobby the Armed Services Committee for early intervention.

Care must begin when the person is on active duty. We must do more to help our veterans go on to live long and productive lives.

One of our efforts has been to make it easier for veterans to get credit for their military training.

Service members are experienced in many career fields that can be as varied:

- as electronics,
- medicine,
- avionics,
- mechanical and
- air traffic control.

These individuals have received first class training and experience, but unfortunately this top notch training rarely leads to a similar civilian career.

More must be done on the state and Federal level to ensure that these skills translate into the civilian world.

If a servicemember can get credit for military training then each State will be better served by capturing this talent and increasing productivity.

With the American Legion's extensive network of state departments, your organization will be critical in working with us to move this issue forward at the state level.

On the Federal level, we must also be looking at how we help servicemembers transition back into civilian life. The Department of Defense and the Department of Labor must ensure that their employment and transition assistance programs are providing valuable and practical skills.

We must solve the disability claims problem at the VA. This has been an ongoing problem now for many, many years.

If the current system is not working, we need to be honest with ourselves, admit the failure, and look for new solutions.

If more money and more people have not solved the problem, we should look to other models to find improvements that could be beneficial for the VA.

And it is not enough to process claims faster. We need to have an equal focus on accuracy so our veterans get the correct benefits the first time around and so that the VA doesn't end up doing twice the work because of appeals.

We all must continue to work together to provide our veterans with the quality health care and benefits that they require, and that they have earned.

I thank you all for being here today, and Commander, I look forward to hearing the Views and Estimates of The American Legion.

Prepared Statement of Senator John Boozman

Thank Commander James Koutz

Thank the National Commander of the Auxiliary, Peggy Thomas

Recognize the Arkansas members in attendance

- State Commander Mary Erdman.
- RD Kinsey
- Steve Gray

Thank all members in attendance for coming to Washington on behalf of our Nation's veterans

This is a very critical time for our nation's veterans, so it is more important than ever for the Legion, and all of our veterans to be engaged with their representatives on the issues that are affecting them. I also appreciate the Commander's testimony and look forward to working with them on many of their higher level goals that include economic opportunity for veterans, improving veterans' healthcare and ending veterans homelessness, addressing looming budget cuts that could impact veterans and military families, and improving care for mental health care and treating TBI for our returning veterans.

All Americans are concerned about employment security, but our veterans in particular have been struggling to find long-term meaningful employment and careers. While we are going through the worst economic recovery since the Great Depression, Republicans and Democrats alike should put politics aside and work together to find common ground in providing our veterans with the tools they need to accomplish this goal. I agree with the Legion testimony that the "Vow to Hire Heroes Act" and the "Veterans Skills to Jobs Act" are steps in the right direction, and the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee leadership and their staff deserve credit for their bi-partisan work in achieving those accomplishments. Yet there is more that we can do in a non-partisan manner, and even in these difficult times we can pay for those efforts without mortgaging the futures of our children and grandchildren by borrowing money to pay for it from countries like China. We owe this much to our veterans to honor their service and sacrifice.

That being said, the failure of last year's Joint Deficit Committee has left us with looming arbitrary cuts to our National Defense, as well cuts to programs that support veterans and their families. The Constitution is clear that Congress's primary obligation is to defend our nation. I am pleased that the House has passed legislation to avoid these impending cuts to national security and to provide certainty to our military families. The administration could also do more to clarify that sequestration will not hit veterans' programs or negatively impact the delivery of veterans' benefits. Unlike other government programs, we must always keep in mind that veterans' benefits and programs are part of a sacred contract that guarantees these benefits for our veterans and their families in return for their selfless commitment and immeasurable sacrifice to protect this nation and its ideals.

We must make it perfectly clear that we cannot, and will not, balance the budget and solve our fiscal problems on the backs of our men and women in uniform and their families!

We also need to make sure that the VA has the tools, policies, and resources to see that our veterans are receiving their benefits, accurately determined, in a timely manner that provides our military families with the treatment and certainty they need to thrive and succeed. The current backlog of claims at the VA is a black-eye

on this nation, and doesn't do justice to our appreciation for our veterans and their sacrifice. We are working to make progress on all fronts. On September 12th, the Senate Veterans Committee unanimously passed bi-partisan legislation to improve mental health care and suicide prevention for our veterans, and I appreciate Chairwoman Murray and Ranking Member Burr for their leadership and hard work on that legislation. This is particularly important for our veterans in rural areas, and I appreciate them for including language from legislation that I have been working on with Senator Franken to improve the VA's Office of Rural Health to form a more strategic plan for improving access and quality of health care for veterans in rural areas. Also included in that bill was a provision that reflected work that Senator Begich and I have been doing to ensure that female veterans fleeing domestic violence have access to Veterans' Homeless services. I appreciate the inclusion of this provision as well, and appreciate the Legion's work to serve as a voice for the increasing number of female veterans who will be relying on the VA for a variety of issues when they return from the battlefield. We're also working on bipartisan legislation to improve the Transition Assistance Program and improve other VA programs, and I am confident that Chairman Miller, Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and all members of Congress are committed to working together in a non-partisan manner to ensure that we uphold all of the promises that have been made to our servicemembers and their families.

I am very concerned about some of the reports we are receiving about military voter registration and participation. Recent Comments from General Dempsey, coupled with the failure of this administration and DoD to comply with the legal requirements of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, which requires on-base voter registration assistance at every military installation, are very concerning to me. Then-General George Washington is noted for saying "When we assumed the soldier, we did not lay aside the citizen" and we must do everything in our power to ensure that every servicemember is encouraged, and has the ability, to exercise our most fundamental civic duty that they have risked their lives to defend. With the leadership of Senator Cornyn, 21 of my Senate colleagues and I sent a letter on September 20th to General Dempsey expressing these concerns, and we are eager to receive a response.

Finally, the Senate should pass legislation to ensure that our disabled veterans receive a COLA, and ensure that COLA is not delayed. The House passed their legislation to address this issue back on July 9th. This is not something that should be left for the last minute to be garbled up with a bunch of other bills in the eleventh hour before Senators leave to go campaigning. Reports of a 'secret hold' or a filibuster on this bill are inaccurate, and it is cleared for passage any time Senator Reid wants to bring it up. We should pass this legislation as soon as possible.

We have never, and should never, use our veterans as political footballs. With so much going on that divides us in Congress, doing good work for our veterans is something we have always supported in a non-partisan manner. With much work to be done, with strong non-partisan leadership from Chairman Miller, Chairwoman Murray, and Ranking Member Burr, I am confident that Congress will put the needs of our veterans first and we will get done what-needs-to-be-done, to ensure that we are upholding all of the promises that have been made to our servicemembers, our veterans, and their families.

Prepared Statement of Commander James E. Koutz

Messr. Chairmen, Chairwoman and Members of the Committees:

Issues & Opportunities

Members of the U.S. Armed Forces, veterans, families and communities nationwide stand at a crossroads of history as the 112th Congress draws to a close. Troops are coming home from war, looking for education, jobs and business opportunities worthy of their sacrifices. Defense spending has been targeted for drastic and potentially dangerous cuts. Veterans are waiting in greater numbers than ever for decisions about their VA benefits. Families are trying to adjust to new lives with loved ones who have come home seriously wounded, psychologically changed, or both. And the flag America flew so proudly after 9/11 remains unprotected against those who would burn it in hatred of the freedom it symbolizes.

The American Legion Family, made up of more than 4 million patriotic citizens of this nation, looks to Washington for leadership during this critical period. The American Legion, largest of all veterans service organizations, however, does not ex-

pect Washington to act without guidance from the stakeholders of our government's decisions.

The following pages contain that guidance. Included are top issues identified by The American Legion. Thoughtful, effective work by lawmakers and the administration can convert these issues into opportunities, not just for veterans and the military community but for the entire nation.

Protect Defense and VA from Sequestration

Where we are

Last year's failure of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction means that automatic spending cuts, known as sequestration, are scheduled to take effect in January 2013 unless Congress finds other options to reverse the deficit. Cuts in military spending are projected not only to compromise our national security but also increase unemployment by as much as an entire percentage point nationwide. The American Legion is deeply concerned about military spending reductions during a time of war. The Legion is equally wary about the budget and its potential effect on the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Although the administration has stated that VA programs—including health care, benefits and education—are exempt from sequestration, The American Legion questions the integrity of such promises when so-called “federal administrative expenses” have already been targeted. As recently as July, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki was unable to clearly define “administrative expenses,” leaving the door open to interpretation and possible crippling cuts in VA's ability to serve our nation's veterans.

Hundreds of thousands of men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan now rely on VA for health care. They enter our nation's VA medical centers, clinics and nursing homes at a time when veterans of previous wars are reaching advanced ages, in need of VA's services. These are services they earned, deserve and were promised. No veteran should have to wait weeks for appointments nor travel hundreds of miles to see providers. Female veterans should have health-care services that meet their needs. Cities such as Orlando, Denver and New Orleans should not have to wait years for the construction of long-overdue hospitals.

The pressure on VA will only mount as defense budget cuts drive down force sizes and more of our military personnel re-enter civilian life. DoD and VA must work in harmony to ease the transition and help the influx of new veterans get the help they need, including timely benefits, access to high-quality health care and careers that match their skills.

Many key veterans programs require coordination with government departments such as Labor, and Housing and Urban Development, which enjoy no protection of any kind from sequestration. Veterans programs within those departments must be protected if they are to succeed.

Where we want to be

The American Legion wants Congress to ensure that national security and veterans programs in VA and other departments are not sacrificed in the budget battle. Previous legislation, such as the Balanced Budget and Emergency Deficit Control Act of 1985 and the Statutory Pay as you Go Act of 2010, included language specifically protecting VA programs from cuts. As the budget deficit widens, similar and specific protections are necessary today.

What we are doing

Last year, a special American Legion task force met with members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction – the so-called “supercommittee” – as it deliberated in futility over the ailing federal budget. The American Legion is aggressively pursuing a compromise to ensure our nation's ability to protect itself from harm, provide decent quality of life for members of our armed forces and maintain the necessary level of care for those veterans who have answered the country's call in its times of need. The Legion understands the importance of sound fiscal management, but neither the soldier nor the veteran caused the deficit, and neither should be required to shoulder an unfair portion of its reduction.

Reverse the VA Claims Backlog

Where we are

When speaking to The American Legion National Convention in August 2010, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki declared VA would “break the back of the backlog by 2015” by committing to 98 percent accuracy, with no claim pending longer than 125 days. Over the past two years, VA has gone backward, not forward, in both of these key areas.

According to VA's own figures, over 65 percent of veterans with disability benefits claims have been waiting longer than 125 days for them to be processed. In contrast, when Secretary Shinseki made his promise, only 37.1 percent of claims had been pending longer than 125 days. The American Legion has found through its field research that the problem varies greatly by regional office. While some regional offices may have an average rate of 76 days per claim, others take 336 days—a troubling inconsistency.

Unfortunately, accuracy is also a problem, according to Legion site visits and field research. VA has been reluctant to publicly post accuracy figures in its Monday Morning Workload reports, but VA's own STAR reports for accuracy place the rate in the mid 80s. The American Legion's Regional Office Action Review (ROAR) team typically finds an even higher error rate, sometimes up to two thirds of all claims reviewed.

VA is hopeful that the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS) will eliminate many of the woes that have led to the backlog, but electronic solutions are not a magic bullet. Without real reform for a culture of work that places higher priority on raw speed than accuracy, VA will continue to struggle, no matter the tools used to process claims.

Where we want to be

While VA's stated goals of "no claim pending longer than 125 days" and 98-percent accuracy are admirable, many veterans would settle for their claims being initially processed correctly in a timely manner. The American Legion draws on the extensive experience of its service officers nationwide who work within the claims-benefits system every day; they are best qualified to define a new plan for fixing inadequacies of the existing system to adjudicate veterans' claims.

The American Legion has long argued that VA's focus on quantity over quality is one of the largest contributing factors to the claims backlog. If VA employees receive the same credit for work, whether it is done properly or improperly, there is little incentive to take the time to process a claim correctly. When a claim is processed in error, a veteran must appeal the decision to receive benefits, and then wait for an appeals process that may take months to resolve and possibly years for delivery of the benefit.

The American Legion believes VA must develop a processing model that puts as much emphasis on accuracy as it does on the raw number of claims completed. Nowhere does VA publicly post its accuracy figures. America's veterans need to have confidence in the work done by VA, and that requires transparency.

The VBMS system could allow VA to develop more effective means of processing claims, such as the ability to separate single issues that are ready to rate, starting a flow of relief to veterans while more complex medical issues are considered.

Veterans service organizations such as The American Legion are important collaborators with VA in developing solutions to claims-system problems. Only with open lanes of communication, in which the input of VSOs is received, acknowledged and utilized in long-term planning, will the VA-VSO partnership be able to deliver a system that serves needs quickly and accurately.

What we are doing

The American Legion's network of more than 2,500 accredited service officers across the nation provides free assistance to veterans seeking their benefits. Training of these service officers is a top priority; knowledge of the VA system is essential to successfully navigating the complicated claims process. The American Legion Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission conducts annual training schools in Indianapolis and Washington, D.C., bringing in service officers from across the country for multi-day intensive education sessions.

Every year, American Legion service officers assist veterans on more than 850,000 benefits claims and an additional 150,000 death benefits claims, at no cost to the veteran. American Legion service officers help secure more than \$885 million in earned compensation and pension benefits a year for veterans, and more than \$110 million in survivor benefits for servicemembers' widows and widowers.

Improve Medical Transition Process

Where we are

Problems with the processing out of active-duty military personnel continue since the closure of Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, in 2010, when care for seriously injured patients was moved to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. These problems have been identified at Warrior Transition Unit facilities nationwide, as well.

As of January 2012, approximately 24,000 servicemembers were participating in the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) across all branches of service, including National Guard and reserve units.

Where we want to be

The American Legion urges improvements in the medical transition process, including:

- Better oversight to ensure DoD is adhering to the VA rating system, rather than simply using it as a guideline.
- More uniform implementation of the system across all services and all geographic regions.
- More clear and concise explanations of the IDES systems for servicemembers and their families, along with implementation of a single point of contact for families.
- Better use of the Physical Evaluation Board Liaisons, with better-defined responsibilities and scope for those employees.

What we are doing

The American Legion's Medical Evaluation Board/Physical Evaluation Board coordinator is responsible for assisting servicemembers at Washington, D.C., military installations, and has representatives on site at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., under the supervision of the MEB/PEB coordinator. These representatives act as service officers for transitioning servicemembers with medical or physical conditions.

Treat All Veterans Exposed to Hazardous Chemicals

Where we are

The American Legion applauds VA for processing nearly 230,000 claims through June 2012 that involved the three newest Agent Orange-related conditions. The recent expansion of conditions presumed to be linked to Agent Orange exposure certainly created additional work for VA, which already faces a heavy claims backlog, but VA Secretary Eric Shinseki argued correctly that it was the right thing to do. Decisions about treating and compensating veterans exposed to deadly toxins must never be motivated by whether or not the road will be challenging or costly, but whether or not the veteran has suffered and requires treatment because of the exposure.

The American Legion supports the establishment of a unified policy to deal with the consequences of exposure to hazardous materials in the military.

Where we want to be

The American Legion urges continued study of all environmental hazards and their effects on servicemembers and veterans. New challenges, such as burn pits, must be addressed. Evidence suggests more than 227 metric tons of waste have been burned in conjunction with JP-8 jet fuel, releasing countless carcinogens into the air that servicemembers have breathed. At the very least, a full accounting of exposed veterans through a burn-pit registry or similar means would be an important step forward.

Agent Orange remains a concern, as thousands of veterans exposed to the toxin are left behind when it comes to vital treatment and benefits. The American Legion remains committed to ensuring all veterans who served in areas of exposure receive recognition and treatment for conditions linked to Agent Orange. Time is running out for those veterans not designated as having "boots on the ground" during the Vietnam War. Studies indicate "Blue Water Navy" veterans may have experienced higher exposure rates to Agent Orange than those who were on the ground, due to water desalination systems on the ships; this never has been satisfactorily addressed by VA. The time is now to recognize all Vietnam veterans for their exposure to Agent Orange, not just those who had boots on the ground.

The American Legion urges VA to work with DoD to finally complete the list of exposure locations outside Vietnam, including the C-123 K transport aircraft, Thailand and other supporting areas of the Vietnam theater, as well as Korea.

The American Legion urges continued close scrutiny by the Institute of Medicine into Agent Orange, Gulf War illness and other concerns. When problems are identified, VA must act swiftly to ensure current compensation and treatment are based on the most recent scientific findings.

What we are doing

The American Legion believes in treating the veteran first, funding the necessary research, and ensuring that service members are not exposed to chemical hazards

again. The American Legion will continue to publicly support, and keep abreast of, ongoing DoD and VA research related to environmental hazards and exposures due to deployment, such as the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center's study on the effects of deployment as they relate to cardiopulmonary function and the medically unexplained autonomic functions of Gulf War veterans.

Improve VA Health Care

Where we are

The Veterans Health Administration manages the largest integrated health-care system in the United States, with 152 medical centers, nearly 1,400 community-based outpatient clinics, community living centers, Vet Centers and domiciliaries serving more than 8 million veterans every year. The American Legion believes those veterans should receive the best care possible.

The needs of veterans continue to evolve, and VHA must ensure it is evolving to meet them. The rural veteran population is growing, and options such as telehealth medicine and clinical care must expand to better serve that population. Growing numbers of female veterans, and a system that has traditionally catered to men must adapt to meet the needs of male and female veterans, regardless whether they live in urban or rural areas.

An integrated response to mental health care is necessary, as the rising rates of suicide and severe post-traumatic stress disorder are greatly impacting veterans and active-duty servicemembers alike.

Where we want to be

If veterans are going to receive the best possible care from VA, the system needs to continue to adapt to the changing demands of the population it serves. The concerns of rural veterans can be addressed through multiple measures, including expansion of the existing infrastructure through CBOCs and other innovative solutions, improvements in telehealth and telemedicine, improved staffing and enhancements to the travel system.

Patient concerns and quality of care can be improved by better attention to VA strategic planning, concise and clear directives from VHA, improved hiring practices and retention, and better tracking of quality by VA on a national level.

VHA's budget must be protected in order to ensure improved quality. Critical need areas such as construction and ongoing maintenance are already facing reductions, which will prove disastrous and more costly to VA in the long run. The American Legion supports sound investment in the infrastructure of VA to best meet the needs of a changing veteran population.

What we are doing

The American Legion's System Worth Saving Task Force regularly travels across the country to evaluate VA medical facilities and ensure they are meeting the needs of veterans. This past year, the task force focused on rural health care and patient satisfaction.

From November 2011 to February 2012, the task force conducted 25 site visits to VA medical facilities and coordinated with VA's Office for Rural Health VA's Veteran Integrated Service Networks (VISNs) 1, 15, 18 and 19; VISN Rural Health consultants; Project Access Received Closer to Home (ARCH); and VA community-based outpatient clinics.

The American Legion System Worth Saving Task Force emerged from its field work with several concerns, including:

VA's definition of "rural veteran" is derived from the U.S. Census Bureau and may not accurately reflect the needs of veterans who must travel long distances through rural areas to receive health care. The American Legion recommends VA expand the U.S. Census Bureau definition to incorporate access and driving times to VA facilities. The American Legion also recommends that VA medical centers implement a veterans transportation department that would coordinate all transportation programs for hospitals and their catchment areas.

Quality of care, as always, was carefully studied by the task force. From April 2012 to June 2012, the task force conducted site visits at 25 VA medical centers and conducted 24 veteran town hall meetings in American Legion posts near the VAMCs to assess patient satisfaction and quality of care. The task force examined three categories: patient safety, clinical performance, and access and satisfaction. Although VA has made many improvements in care, many challenges remain, including recruitment and performance of staff, personal and electronic communication, and delivery of female-specific services. The American Legion will publish a detailed report of the care-quality findings this fall.

Better Care for Female Veterans

Where we are

A 2011 American Legion study revealed several areas of concern about VA health-care services for women. Today, VA still struggles to fulfill this need, even though women are the fastest-growing segment of the veteran population. Approximately 1.8 million female veterans make up 8 percent of the total veteran population, yet only 6 percent use VA services.

VA needs to be prepared for a significant increase of younger female veterans as those who served in the war on terrorism separate. Approximately 58 percent of women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are ages 20 to 29, and they require gender-specific expertise and care. Studies suggest post-traumatic stress disorder is especially prevalent among women; among veterans who used VA in 2009, 10.2 percent of women and 7.8 percent of men were diagnosed with PTSD.

The number of female veterans enrolled in the VA system is expected to expand by more than 33 percent in the next three years. Currently, 44 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan female veterans have enrolled in the VA health-care system.

What we want

The American Legion recommends VA conduct a comprehensive study of military sexual trauma, in conjunction with the Department of Defense if possible, to develop a better plan to counteract the problem.

VA needs to develop a comprehensive health-care program for female veterans that extends beyond reproductive issues. Provider education needs improvement. Furthermore, as female veterans are the sole caregivers in some families, services and benefits designed to promote independent living for combat-injured veterans must be evaluated, and needs such as child care must be factored into the equation. Additionally, many female veterans cannot make appointments due to the lack of child-care options at VA medical centers. Since the 2011 survey, The American Legion has continued to advocate for improved delivery of timely, quality health care for women using VA.

What we are doing

The 2011 survey revealed concerns that have led to the establishment of a new American Legion Women Veterans Outreach Program whose coordinator is tasked with identifying best practices to improve services for female veterans and work with Legion departments to establish state coordinators to oversee female veterans programs at that level.

The Women Veterans Outreach Program aims to educate veterans and communities that support them; to collaborate with local, state and federal agencies that can provide needed services; and to provide continued oversight of VA's execution of benefits and services. The American Legion's advocacy efforts seek to ensure that the identified needs of female veterans are being met, and, more importantly, that veterans are informed on the issues that affect their lives.

Many states have coordinators and have vibrant programs while other states have not yet identified coordinators. Coordinators will be trained and educated on their responsibilities and provided the necessary assistance to get their programs up and running.

Repair Problems in Mental Health

Where we are

Post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury are the signature wounds of today's wars. TBI is defined as a blow or jolt to the head, or penetrating head injury, that disrupts brain function. PTSD is a disorder resulting from exposure to a traumatic event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury. Both conditions are increasing in number, particularly among those who have served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom.

A 2011 Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs survey of 319 VA mental health staff revealed that services for veterans coping with mental health issues and TBI are lacking. Among the findings:

- New mental health patient appointments could be scheduled within 14 days, according to 63 percent of respondents, but only 48.1 percent believed veterans referred for specialty appointments for PTSD or substance abuse would be seen within 14 days.
- Seventy percent of providers said their sites had shortages of mental health space.
- Forty-six percent reported that a lack of off-hours appointments was a barrier to care.

- More than 26 percent reported that demand for Compensation and Pension (C&P) exams pulled clinicians away from direct care.
- Just over 50 percent reported that growth in patient numbers contributed to mental health staff shortages.

VHA and, at the request of Congress, VA's Office of the Inspector General have studied the problem since the survey was conducted. On April 23, 2012, the VAOIG released the report, "Review of Veterans' Access to Mental Health Care." It found that VHA's mental health performance data was neither accurate nor reliable. In VA's fiscal 2011 Performance and Accountability Report, VHA grossly over-reported that 95 percent of first-time patients received a full mental health evaluation within 14 days. However, it was found that VHA completed approximately 64 percent of new-patient appointments for treatment within 14 days of their desired date, but approximately 36 percent of appointments exceeded 14 days. VHA schedulers also were not following procedures outlined in VHA directives, and were scheduling clinic appointments on the system's availability rather than the patient's clinical need.

During a congressional hearing on April 25, VA announced that it would hire an additional 1,600 mental health clinicians, as well as 300 support staff across the country to address three major areas of improvements: mental health access, staffing and quality. VA has developed a hiring and tracking task force to monitor and speed up the staffing effort. The task force also is assisting in the recruitment and filling of another 1,500 vacancies in mental health VA had prior to announcing the new positions. VHA's plan is to have most of these new positions filled by fiscal 2013's second quarter.

Where we want to be

The American Legion believes VA must focus on head injuries and mental health without sacrificing awareness and concern for other conditions afflicting servicemembers and veterans. As an immediate priority, VA must ensure staffing levels are adequate to meet the need. The American Legion also urges Congress to invest in research, screening, diagnosis and treatment for PTSD and TBI. As with any increases to funding, increased oversight also is necessary to ensure the money is going directly to the needed programs.

What we are doing

The American Legion Ad Hoc Committee on PTSD/TBI has closely examined issues related to these conditions and has begun assembling a set of recommendations for VA and DoD. The committee consists of mental health experts, dedicated senior Legion service officers and past national commanders of The American Legion. The committee has found that various alternative treatments may be effective but are not recognized by VA, and that some prescription drugs—such as Risperidone, which is not approved by the FDA for the treatment of PTSD—are often over used. The committee continues to meet to better understand the issue, present findings to American Legion groups and share concerns with VA.

Turn Military Experience Into Careers

Where we are

Servicemembers and veterans have attended and graduated from some of the finest technical and professional training schools in the world. Many have experience in health care, electronics, computers, engineering, drafting, air-traffic control, nuclear energy, mechanics, carpentry and other fields. Many of their skills require some type of license or certificate to qualify for civilian jobs. In too many cases, this license or certificate requires schooling already completed through military training programs. Unfortunately, the agencies that issue the licenses or certificates do not recognize military training or experience. For example, a medic who treated gunshot wounds in Operation Enduring Freedom is qualified as a medic but will not be certified as an emergency medical technician in the civilian workforce without additional, redundant schooling.

The American Legion is a leading voice in advocacy for the unique job skills veterans bring to the table. In 1997, The American Legion commissioned the report "Study of Civilian Licensure and Certification for Veterans," which detailed the problem while focusing on the areas of aircraft maintenance and health care. In the past, barriers to this effort have included resistance from military and civilian sectors alike, but top defense officials now offer support on Capitol Hill for the idea of transferring military experience for credits.

This subject has grown more important as the veteran unemployment rate exceeds that of civilians and has been as high as 30 percent for the youngest veterans. For veterans, who have already sacrificed so much in service to the country, the additional stresses and strains of unemployment, and the financial hardship that ac-

companies joblessness, can become almost unbearable, and contribute to already-high rates of depression and PTSD.

Where we want to be

The American Legion is fighting for a major overhaul of the licensure and certification policies as they relate to military job skills, on the national and state levels alike. As demand for qualified workers in a diverse range of occupations continues to grow, veterans offer skills, training, dedication and discipline that translate well into specialized fields and trades.

The American Legion is working with credentialing and licensing agencies to help veterans receive credit for their experiences, maximize their abilities and move quickly into productive careers. While the VOW to Hire Heroes Act and the Veterans Skills to Jobs Act of 2012, are important steps that The American Legion strongly supported and helped shape, they are only a good start in a long march to improve career opportunities for those who have served in uniform.

What we are doing

For over a decade, The American Legion has been a leading voice in the argument to provide veterans the opportunity to transfer military experience into credits toward licenses and certification. The case has been made to VA, the Department of Labor, DoD, through legislation, and at least one presidential task force. The Legion's efforts enthusiastically continue with the momentum of legislation passed in 2012.

The Legion's strategy going forward includes:

- Working with and counseling government agencies about the value of a workforce with military experience.
- Working with the American National Standard Institute and Solutions for Information Design to advise the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine and identify 10 credentialing agencies to evaluate their instruction programs.
- Lobbying successfully for an industry credentialing amendment to the fiscal 2013 National Defense Authorization Bill.
- Working closely with Congress on "The Hire at Home Act," which would amend Title 38 to require – as a condition to receive selected veteran employment and training funds – that the state ensures that training received by a veteran while on active duty is taken into consideration in granting certain state certifications or licenses.

The American Legion will continue to work with the National Governors Association, the White House, the National Conference of State Legislatures, government agencies such as the departments of Defense, Transportation, Energy, Labor, and others, as well as congressional representatives, military training commands, credentialing boards and the private sector. The American Legion is in the process of creating toolkits to assist Legionnaires in advocating on a state-by-state basis to address the issue of credentialing.

Expand VETS Program

Where we are

The Department of Labor's VETS program offers employment and training services to eligible veterans through its Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program. The American Legion is eager to see this program grow and would like greater expansion of entrepreneurial-based, self-employment opportunity training. Adequate funding is necessary to allow the programs to increase staffing to provide comprehensive case-management job assistance to disabled and other eligible veterans.

Where we want to be

For the program to succeed, it needs to:

- Implement recent reforms to the Transition Assistance Program so veterans can be better informed on education, employment and business opportunities as they transition into the civilian workforce.
- Expand outreach efforts with creative initiatives designed to improve employment and training services for veterans.
- Provide information about military occupations that provide qualifying training for required licenses, certificates or other credentials at the local, state or national levels.
- Eliminate barriers to recently separated servicemembers and assist in the transition from military service to the civilian labor market.

The American Legion believes staffing levels for DVOPs (Disabled Veterans Outreach Programs) and LVERs (Local Veterans Employment Representatives) should match the needs of the veteran community in each state and should not be based solely on the fiscal needs of the state government. VETS should remain a national program with federal oversight and accountability. The American Legion seeks legislation that will transfer all DVOPs and LVERs from the state agencies to VETS for supervision and oversight to ensure that the individuals employed to serve veterans are not used for other programs.

What we are doing

The American Legion is working closely with VA and the Department of Labor to ensure this program receives the attention it needs to assist veterans, and continues to grow and thrive through changes and improvements to the programs involved. The American Legion also continues to work with state departments of veterans affairs to improve the delivery of benefits at that level.

Help Veterans Start Businesses

Where we are

Small business is the backbone of the U.S. economy. It has been the mobilizing force behind America's past economic growth. It will continue to be a major factor as our nation moves through the current recession. Reports show that businesses with fewer than 20 employees account for 90 percent of all U.S. firms and are responsible for more than 75 percent of all new jobs. There are 27 million small businesses in the U.S., and 99.7 percent of all firms are small businesses.

Where we want to be

The American Legion urges Congress to establish a direct lending program through the Small Business Administration that would offer low-interest loans to otherwise healthy veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses (SDVOSB) having trouble obtaining credit for necessary operating expenses or expansion. In addition, The American Legion seeks and supports legislation to require a 5-percent goal, with set-asides and sole-source authority for federal procurements and contracts for businesses owned and operated by service-disabled veterans, and businesses owned and controlled by veterans. This includes small businesses owned by reserve-component members who have been, or may be, called to active duty, or may be affected by base closings and reductions in our military forces.

Pressures on the federal contracting community likely will result in greater use of the General Services Administration's Federal Supply Schedule Program, and while this program holds a higher contracting preference than the small business programs, it unfortunately does not allow set-asides for any small-business group. The American Legion agrees that expanded use of this program will further diminish opportunities for small businesses, especially those owned by veterans. The American Legion makes the following recommendations:

- Service-disabled, veteran-owned small business set-asides should be allowed under the Federal Supply Schedule Program. Without this change, SDVOSBs will be limited in their quest for opportunities to compete for federal contracts.
- Implementation of a coordinated standardized training program for procurement staff that focuses on SDVOSB procurement strategies in their respective agencies.
- President Obama should reissue Executive Order 13-360, "Providing Opportunities for Service-Disabled Veteran Businesses," to increase federal contracting and subcontracting opportunities for veterans, and require that its tenets be incorporated into SBA regulations and standard operating procedures.
- SBA needs to emphasize Executive Order 13-360 and establish it as a procurement priority across the federal sector. Federal agencies need to be held accountable by the SBA for implementing the executive order, and SBA needs to establish a means to monitor agency progress and, when appropriate, establish a report to identify those that are not in compliance and pursue ongoing follow-up.
- To achieve the mandates of Executive Order 13-360, SBA must assist federal agencies in developing a strategic plan that is quantifiable and will assist them in establishing realistic reporting criteria.
- The House Small Business Committee should embrace and promote development of stronger policy and legislative language that champions the utilization of veteran-owned small business joint-venturing as a ready solution to the small-business spending requirements of the stimulus spending initiative.

- Agency leadership must be held responsible for meeting the 3 percent congressionally mandated goal. The American Legion recommends the committee schedule a hearing with all federal agencies that consistently do not meet their federal procurement goals with SDVOBs.

What we are doing

The American Legion continues to work closely with business leaders and government authorities to help veteran-owned small business and increase the roles of veteran-owned businesses in communities around the world. Veterans know the value of veteran employees better than anyone else, and veteran-owned small businesses are one among the best employers of veterans.

End Veteran Homelessness

Where we are

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has promised to devote resources necessary to end veteran homelessness by 2015. To fully implement that pledge, VA is going to have to work closely with Congress to continue making responsible investments in affordable housing and supportive service programs to help more veterans and their families. Current estimates put the number of homeless veterans at approximately 76,000 on any given night, down from 2010 numbers of 131,000 or more.

Where we want to be

The American Legion recommends providing funding for a broad range of appropriate and effective interventions, including:

- Appropriation of funds for the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program. SSVF funds have been used effectively by community organizations to prevent many veterans from becoming homeless and to quickly assist veterans who need nothing more than short-term rental assistance and limited case management to get back on their feet. SSVF funds also can be used to pay for employment services, utility assistance, child care costs and other housing-related expenses.
- Congressional support for the homeless veterans Grant and Per Diem transitional housing program. This program provides short-term housing help to homeless veterans, allowing them to get connected with jobs, supportive services and more permanent housing, ultimately allowing them to become self-sufficient. Promising new models for using Grant and Per Diem funds – including allowing veterans to remain in their GPD housing units once support from the program ends – and new programs focused on women veterans are helping to ensure that GPD continues to meet the ever-changing needs of returning veterans and their families.
- Congress should provide 10,000 new HUD-VASH vouchers designed to serve homeless veterans (and in many cases their families) who need long-term housing, intensive case management and supportive services. Since 2008, 37,975 vouchers have been awarded, contributing substantially to major reductions in veteran homelessness.

What we are doing

The American Legion continues to lead communities by volunteering, fundraising, and advocating for programs and resources to help homeless veterans. In addition, The American Legion directly provides housing for homeless veterans and their families, including facilities in Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Connecticut. One of the goals of The American Legion is to help bring federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, faith-based institutions and other stakeholders to the table to discuss best practices, along with funding opportunities, so homeless veterans and their families can obtain the necessary care and help to properly transition from the streets and shelters into gainful employment and/or independent living.

Ease the Military-to-Civilian Transition

Where we are

Successful adjustment from military service to civilian life is a complicated process. It involves culture shifts, career changes, government paperwork to obtain benefits, health-care services that must be understood, and much more. How well a veteran makes the adjustment often determines the rest of his or her life.

Unfortunately, this transition has been hampered in past years by poor communication and coordination between DoD and VA. Efforts have been made to correct the process, which is improving, but too many veterans still slip through the cracks

and fail to receive the benefits they earned and deserve or the support they need to restart their lives.

Transition Assistance Programs (TAP) are now mandatory across all branches of military service, a change The American Legion commends. While TAP will require much fine tuning to accurately deliver what veterans need, implementing the program universally already is a major improvement.

Current DoD policy requires new inductees to enroll in the eBenefits portal, which will help all future generations of veterans. While VA and DoD still try to iron out differences in electronic data systems necessary to make the Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record (VLER) effective, the eBenefits portal holds great promise. VLER delays are deeply troubling to The American Legion because the program has been a major focus of veterans groups, lawmakers and the federal government for several years.

What we want

Fast-tracking the VLER program to ensure seamless transfer of medical records must be a top priority, and necessary funds must be allocated to fulfill it. The delays that have plagued this program are inexcusable. The American Legion urges Congress and the administration to work together to put the program back on track.

While The American Legion is encouraged by the progress made in TAP, the program is still new and will require dedicated oversight and attention to ensure it is meeting the needs of the servicemembers it is designed to help.

What we are doing

The American Legion is reaching out to servicemembers as they transition into the civilian world. American Legion service officers offer free guidance and assistance to any veteran who needs to understand or file for VA benefits.

During the past year, The American Legion has developed a “Claims Coach” app for smart phones and other mobile devices to help veterans better understand the disability claims process and compile the necessary data to file complete claims for benefits. The American Legion is working to ensure transitioning veterans have access through TAP or other means, such as the Claims Coach app, to successfully navigate the transition process and better integrate into the next phase of life.

Protect the U.S. Flag

Where we are

Since the American Revolution, countless men and women have proudly defended this nation under the Stars and Stripes. There is hardly a more poignant image of the sacrifices made by America’s heroes in defense of this nation than a U.S. flag draped over a coffin, the last full measure of respect to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. However, since the 1989 U.S. Supreme Court 5–4 decision in *Texas v. Johnson*, the American people have been denied the ability to make laws protecting from desecration this great symbol of our nation.

Where we want to be

Surveys have shown that over 80 percent of American citizens support passage of a constitutional amendment that would protect the flag, but Congress has repeatedly fallen short of the 66-percent Senate supermajority needed to pass it.

The House of Representatives has passed the amendment six times by supermajority, only to see it fall short in the Senate—by just one vote the last time it made it to the floor.

Congress must unite in respect of the patriotic will of the American people and pass a flag-protection amendment to the Constitution that will once again allow the people to live under such laws as they deem prudent and to show proper respect and reverence for their flag.

What we are doing

Together with the American Legion Auxiliary, The American Legion founded the Citizens Flag Alliance, Inc., to garner and focus grass-roots support for the amendment. The CFA now includes 109 member organizations and more than 30 million Americans. Through this organization, The American Legion will continue to fight for passage of the flag-protection amendment.

The American Legion is also dedicated to promoting positive flag-related activities, such as promoting education about the U.S. Flag Code, flag etiquette, proper disposal and sharing information through a growing email network.

CONCLUSION

The American Legion is the conscience of a patriotic nation. It is made up of men and women who have served in uniform. Its family extends to spouses and parents

who have known the fear and uncertainty of deployed loved ones. The American Legion, the American Legion Auxiliary, Sons of The American Legion and all their supporters are connected by a love of country that cannot be compromised.

Through more than 13,000 local posts around the world, The American Legion Family wraps its arms around four pillars of service: Veterans, Defense, Americanism and Youth.

To learn more about what The American Legion does every day in support of those pillars, visit www.legion.org or “like” The American Legion National Headquarters on Facebook. The American Legion can also be found on Twitter and in mobile media. Those who really want to help veterans, their families and communities are urged to join The American Legion Family, where they can go to work every day on behalf of the nation they love.

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Preamble to The American Legion Constitution

FOR GOD AND COUNTRY WE ASSOCIATE OURSELVES TOGETHER FOR THE FOLLOWING PURPOSES:

To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. To maintain law and order

To foster and perpetuate a one hundred percent Americanism

To preserve the memories and incidents of our associations in the Great Wars

To inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state and nation

To combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses

To make right the master of might

To promote peace and goodwill on earth. To safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy

To consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness.