Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Filner and distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the 2.4 million members of The American Legion I thank you for this opportunity to submit The American Legion’s views on the legislation being considered by the Committee today. We appreciate the efforts of this Committee to address the different needs of the men and women who are currently serving and those who served during past conflicts.

**H.R. 2433: Veterans’ Opportunity to Work Act of 2011**

*To amend title 38, United States Code, to make certain improvements in the laws relating to the employment and training of veterans, and for other purposes.*

With the growing unemployment numbers facing both our younger and older generations, it is imperative that our great nation gives back to the men and women who have given much to this country. Younger veterans currently face an unemployment rate of approximately 13.3 percent, the number of unemployed veterans aged 35-60 is far greater in terms of raw numbers. While unemployment seems to remain relatively steady for the general population, America’s veterans face unemployment that has continued to grow for the past several years. As the largest veterans’ service organization serving veterans from all eras, The American Legion applauds the Committee for seeking to restore employment and training opportunities to veterans of all eras. We understand the struggles that veterans from all ages face when either returning to work after military service or just getting back to work after being eliminated from their past employment. It is well documented that veterans who have any sort of education generally have lower unemployment rates as opposed to those who do not possess any higher education.

Recent transitioning service members are provided with a robust education benefit, which earns them up to 36 months of tuition and fees, a housing allowance and a books stipend, based on their eligibility. Yet older veterans who have fallen on tough times are forced to fend for themselves seeking alternative employment. These veterans often have families and greater financial responsibilities. Additionally, these older veterans are not eligible for most education benefits like the new generation of veterans possess. These groups of veterans are reviewing ways to re-define themselves and their employment. Factory jobs that were eliminated during
the economic recession might not return and these veterans are faced with an obsolete vocation and need to transition into thriving career fields.

H.R. 2433 also seeks to provide all service members with the specific transitional training when leaving military service. The American Legion has supported, now and in the past, a policy of the service branches making Transition Assistance Program (TAP) mandatory for all service members exiting the military. With the Departments of Labor, Defense and Veterans’ Affairs making the much needed changes to the TAP program, we believe this provision is essential to give all transitioning service members the tools and resources they need to successfully integrate into the civilian workforce.

America’s service members are the most skilled and highly trained individuals of any other nation, yet when they are transitioning most of their military training is not properly equated to its civilian counterpart. In general, they must either return to school to get their civilian credentials or choose a different career path. These employment barriers exist for transitioning service members who seek employment in line with their military occupational specialty (MOS). Surely a truck driver who drove convoys through the deserts of Iraq is qualified to drive the roads of the American Midwest; or the corpsman who patched up wounded in remote provinces of Afghanistan should be recognized as capable of performing as an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) in any American city.

The American Legion commends the Committee for seeking to perform a formal study not only to identify the top 10 MOS’s, but to analyze initiatives that are currently available to service members while in service and how to use those initiatives for all service branches; consequently, impacting a wider range of men and women. In addition, The American Legion recommends that all MOS’s that have a civilian counterpart be included in this formal study. Expanding credentials to service members creates a more professional workforce and is aligned more fully with recruiting and retention of service members. By improving the knowledge and skill of service members, we will give them improved chances for employment after exiting the military and incentives/reasons should they chose to stay in the service.

The American Legion also supports the re-enactment of the credentialing work study group. Previously, the credentialing work group provided federal agencies with support and guidance on how to move in promoting employment for transitioning service members. The credentialing work group would help in fostering new ideas in the area of credentialing and provide options for overcoming barriers to employment.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R.1941

Hiring Heroes Act of 2011-Amends the Wounded Warriors Act to extend until January 1, 2015, the authority of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide the same rehabilitation and vocational benefits to members of the Armed Forces with severe injuries or illnesses as are provided to veterans.
H.R. 1941 accomplishes many of the same tasks as H.R. 2433. The goal of this legislation is to: reduce unemployment for recently transitioned service members and place them in training; expand Vocational Rehabilitation programs for those who have exhausted their unemployment benefits; follow up on employment status after rehabilitation training, making Transition Assistance Program mandatory; provide grants to non-profits for veterans training, mentoring and placement; create a study to examine the employment barriers that transitioning service members face when acquiring civilian credentials; and utilize a direct hire for veterans who have recently transitioned from service with an honorable discharge.

Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are facing double digit unemployment figures; this bill’s goal is to eliminate some of the employment barriers that exist for recently returning service members. With less than 1 percent of the population currently serving, H.R. 1941 provides a valuable tool and resource for those who are exiting the military and are trying to return to a “normal” state of life, including the number one issue they face: employment. As stated previously, the unemployment figures for recently returning service members have been steadily increasing. This trend says that as a country, we should be providing every tool available to knock down those barriers that exist. Education Rehabilitation is one of the sharpest tools available to help veterans, active duty, Guard and Reserve components search for and locate employment. In almost every situation, education gives a leg up against the competition to veterans and civilians alike. With the employment climate being competitive, providing additional training resources is critical in drastically reducing the unemployment rates for returning veterans.

The American Legion supports the idea of utilizing Vocational Rehabilitation for those who have exhausted their unemployment benefits, but sees a potential problem of the number of counselors available to meet this new demand. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment counselors already carry a heavy workload with the current case load. The addition of new veterans would need to be counteracted with the hiring of new, qualified counselors to meet the fresh demand. In addition, The American Legion supports the bolstering of follow-up on participants in the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program. In too many cases, veterans exit the program before finishing, thereby mandating a re-visit on a veteran’s case, the metric of success would guide the overall program into a new direction.

The American Legion’s policy regarding Transition Assistance Program has been to recommend the program be made mandatory. The American Legion commends the Committee for proposing this legislation.

Service members exit the military fulfilling a certain Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) then return to their home of residence to find out, despite their duties and qualifications in their respective MOS, they are not qualified to provide the same support in a civilian counterpart. This problem is systemic from what is provided at the military training centers to what additional training a veteran might need in order to receive the civilian credential. Providing individual assessments at the TAP program might provide the veterans with additional resources, but we need to examine how we can bridge the credentialing gap between the military and civilian divide to better improve the employability of transitioning service members.
The American Legion commends the Committee for proposing a study of 10 MOS’s to identify employment barriers, but would suggest a comprehensive study of all MOS’s that have a civilian counterpart. This expansion will make a great impact in identifying the employment and credentialing barriers that exist for transitioning service members.

The American Legion further commends the Committee on bringing a non-competitive way to bring recently transitioned veterans into the federal workforce. However, we are concerned that if this provision makes it through the legislative process, it would have to be properly communicated to those who are transitioning through TAP.

The American Legion supports this bill.

H.R.169

To require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to include on the main page of the Internet website of the Department of Veterans Affairs a hyperlink to the VetSucess Internet website and to publicize such Internet website.

Helping our wounded warriors and service connected disabled veterans is and should maintain a high priority for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Giving them the proper tools and resources gives this group of veterans a way to gain an education and then enter a job market that fits their ability to perform. On too many occasions, The American Legion is informing service connected or wounded warriors about the benefits available through the VetSuccess program. This legislation would enable one more way for veterans who visit www.va.gov to find the information about the VetSuccess program and then make an informed decision about their education and employment path.

The American Legion once again commends the Committee for aggressively taking on the issue of veterans’ unemployment. Veterans facing unemployment rates at two-thirds higher than the national average is a national tragedy; it is clear from the work of this Committee that this issue needs to be resolved. The American Legion urges Congress to act swiftly to pass this legislation to help put our American heroes back to work. Furthermore, The American Legion reminds Congress of the essential role veterans’ groups and Congressional oversight will play in ensuring that once this legislation is signed into law, it is implemented as intended and actually works to benefits those deserving veterans.