Honorable Bob Filner, Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
335 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC  20515

Ranking Member Filner:

I respectfully submit the following responses to your additional questions from the Full Committee hearing on H.R. 2433, H.R. 1941, and H.R. 169 conducted on July 15, 2011:

1. **According to resolution #342, the Legion seeks elimination of the VA Home Loan Funding fee. How do you reconcile your support for a bill that extends the fees at a higher rate when they were going to decrease?**

   While The American Legion would like to see the elimination of the VA funding fee, there are programs that are needed and required now. Ultimately, The American Legion would like to see the elimination of the VA Home Loan Funding Fee for veterans.

2. **Since states have the biggest role to play in licensure and credentialing, what are the top 3 things that can be done to assist veterans with licensure and credentialing?**

   The lack of attainment of both state licenses and national certifications can be a significant barrier for transitioning service members and veterans. It is important to note that state licensing and national certification are two separate things and reducing barriers in these areas requires different strategies. Promoting state licensing of service members and veterans is an important policy goal, but attention should also be provided to issues related to national certification. With regard to state licensure, the top three things that can be done to alleviate barriers include:

   (1) Ensuring that states pass legislation and change regulations to allow licensing bodies to recognize equivalent military training and experience. (The states of WA, CO, UT, VA, and MD currently have legislation that does this that can serve as models for other states.)

   (2) Demonstrate to state licensing agencies (and national certification bodies) the equivalency of military training and experience by conducting gap analyses between military training and experience and state licensing requirements and reporting this information systematically to the state licensing agencies.

   (3) Encourage states to grant reciprocity for service members, veterans, and spouses who have attained licenses in the same occupation that are attained in other states. This
would allow service members and spouses to get licensed in one state during their military service and then, when they transition out of the service to a different state that license will be recognized and they will not have to attain a new license in order to practice.

It is important to note that The American Legion believes that national certification (e.g., certifications for automotive mechanics, dental assistants, IT personnel) is equally important as state licensing. Employers often require these certifications even when there is no comparable licensure requirement in the state. Moreover, civilian certifications provide concrete evidence that transitioning service members’ and veterans’ skills are on par with their civilian counterparts. However, many service members leave the military without these certifications. The American Legion recognizes that reducing barriers to certification requires a multi-faceted approach. The top three things that can be done to promote certifications are:

1. **Ensure that all service members have equal access to information on certifications (and licenses) related to their military occupations.** To date, only the Army and Navy consistently disseminate complete information on credentialing to their service members (through the Army and Navy Credentialing Opportunities On-Line or COOL initiatives). While the Air Force has a web-based tool (called CERT), it is not nearly as comprehensive as the COOL initiatives. Moreover, the Marine Corps does not have anything to disseminate information on certifications and licenses to its service members.

2. **Promote funding of certifications and licenses.** This can be accomplished in three ways:
   - **Require the military services to fund credentials for certifications and licenses directly related to the service member’s military occupational specialty.** Currently the Navy is the only service that has exercised its authority under the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2006, which authorized the expenditure of appropriated funds for service members to pay for commercial credentials.
   - **Ensure that the VA promotes the GI Bill licensure and certification benefit to service members and veterans.** Many service members and veterans are unaware that the GI Bill will reimburse up to $2,000 per test for licensure and certification exams. The VA needs to increase awareness of this benefit.
   - **Ensure that the VA publicizes to licensure and certification agencies the need to get their certifications and licenses approved by the VA for GI Bill payment.** Currently, data from the Army and Navy shows that less than 50 percent of the certifications and licenses that are related to Soldiers’ and Sailors’ military occupations have been approved for GI Bill payment.

3. **Promote Accreditation of Certification Programs.** The lack of accreditation of certification programs means that service members and veterans may spend money on certifications that do not have relevant value. Unlike in higher education where accreditation of institutions and programs is prevalent, there is currently no systematic monitoring of the quality of certification programs. Two agencies currently accredit certification programs – the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and the National Commission on Certifying Agencies (NCCA); however, the vast majority of certification programs have not been accredited. Army and Navy data show that less than
10 percent of certifications related to their military occupations have been accredited by either organization. Accreditation of certification programs is of benefit to military service members, veterans, and civilians, but it can be costly for certification agencies and there is no major incentive for them to get accredited. Therefore, The American Legion recommends that the Department of Labor seriously consider providing grants to certification agencies that elect to get accredited.

3. Is the Legion supportive of taking money from one group of veterans to pay for benefits for another group of veterans?

The American Legion supports increasing veteran’s benefits that provide valuable solutions to problems that face veterans from all eras of service. When financing a veteran’s benefit, the financing should not be taken from a current benefit in order to pay for the newly created one, instead funding should come from a direct source that does not interfere with another veteran’s benefit.

4. What are the top 5 employment barriers facing veterans today?

The American Legion has identified the following employment barriers facing veterans:

(1) Difficulty in translating military training and experience to civilian jobs. A recent Society of Human Resource Management survey determined that 70 percent of civilian hiring managers cited their inability to translate military training and experience to their civilian jobs as a major challenge in hiring veterans.

(2) Lack of attainment of civilian occupational credentials while in the military. Civilian credentials are instrumental in ensuring civilian employers that transitioning service members’ and veterans’ skills are on par with their civilian counterparts. They are also often required by civilian employers or by government agencies in order to perform certain occupations.

(3) Lack of a centralized database of veterans’ resumes. It is often difficult for employers to locate/identify qualified transitioning service members and veterans to fill their job vacancies. Employers – particularly small business - often see the cost of using a private sector recruiter that specializes in hiring of ex-military as too prohibitive. A publicly funded talent bank that is heavily promoted to veterans and employers would help match qualified veterans with civilian jobs.

(4) Deployments. The multiple deployments of veterans have taken them out of the job market and networking opportunities, which amounts to tremendous difficulties with obtaining and/or sustaining meaningful employment. Due to the recession, there are limited amount of jobs with heavy competition to fill them. Employers are skeptical to say the least in hiring veterans (National Guard and Reservists), because of the inevitable deployments, which has a major impact on business productivity, particularly small businesses. Furthermore, the longer a veteran is out of work, it becomes more of a challenge to find gainful employment, due to the private sector tending to assume that the veteran’s skills have considerably diminished.

(5) Stigma of PTSD & TBI (invisible wounds). There is a significant portion of combat veterans who have been diagnosed with PTSD and/or TBI. These invisible wounds have been well-documented since the two wars have progressed, which has caused an immediate concern to the private sector regarding the capability of combat veterans with
these diagnoses in a civilian work environment. Currently, these invisible wounds are being researched/studied to provide employers and the public more details regarding how these mental disabilities effect veterans’ work habits and ability to be productive in a work and/or family dynamic. Additionally, due to the fact that employers have a modest understanding about veterans’ benefits, they have serious concerns regarding healthcare costs of hiring veterans with PTSD and TBI, along with other physical disabilities. These invisible wounds have set tremendous obstacles for veterans who are seeking employment.

5. **Should the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) be completely contracted out?**

The American Legion is supportive of making the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) mandatory; similar to the way the United States Marine Corps requires their troops to attend the TAP program. The TAP program is undergoing significant changes that have not been implemented. The American Legion has been advocating for an innovative and comprehensive TAP program, conducted by trained and effective leaders. At this time, The American Legion does not have a position on whether or not TAP should be contracted out; however, we’re strongly recommending sweeping changes to be made to the TAP program that benefits service members who are reintegrating into civilian life.

6. **The government provides programs to help separating veteran’s transition back into their communities. How long should the government continue to provide such services after service members separate from the military?**

The American Legion strongly believes that the government should provide assistance and/or services for these transitioning service members as long as they require help. The government along with the private sector should be focused on providing the most proficient programs that provide education, training, employment and business opportunities, so veterans can productively move onto their next phase in life without incurring severe difficulties. It is the obligation of the government and the service member, in partnership with entities such as The American Legion, to create objectives and strategies which will significantly assist veterans with their journey to a seamless and successful transition. This is not a one-topic issue but, as we have learned, this is a multi-faceted issue which if not properly addressed can bring about: high unemployment rates, homelessness and other transitional issues. The American Legion will continue to support and advocate for effective government programs that enhance the employment and business opportunities for service members as they transition from the Armed Forces.

7. **Section 203 and Section 4114 of H.R. 2433 direct the Department of Labor to use funds made available for the State grant program. Are you concerned that this directive may reduce funds to the states to provide direct services for veterans?**

The American Legion supports conducting the research, analysis, and reporting required in H.R. 2433 related to the Transition Assistance Program (Section 203) and credentialing (Section 4114) and is not concerned that it will take away funds for providing direct services to veterans. The American Legion recognizes the importance of funds for direct services to veterans; however, we also recognize the importance of conducting periodic evaluation and review of existing programs and identifying new methods of reducing employment barriers for transitioning service members and veterans. If this type of research is not conducted, it is difficult to ensure that the existing services provided meet the needs of today’s veterans.
8. If DOD needs to share information with NASWA does your Organization have any privacy or security concerns?

The American Legion does not have a position or resolution on this topic, therefore will decline comment.

9. The pilot program, established by H.R. 2433, authorizes 25 percent of state funds to be used by states to enter into grants with the ten states with the highest unemployment which would essentially mean a 25 percent reduction in funding for Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialists (DVOPS) and Local Veterans’ Employment Specialists (LVERS). Do you support this reduction to the states with the worst unemployment and how helpful do you think this will be?

The American Legion does not support this reduction. DVOPs and LVERs play an important role in providing direct assistance to veterans who are disabled and/or other eligible veterans seeking employment. The American Legion seeks legislation that will transfer all DVOPs and LVERs from the State Agencies to DOL-VETS for supervision and oversight in order to ensure that the individuals employed to serve veterans are not used for other programs.

10. In your testimony you mention that older veterans have great financial responsibilities and often have families. Do you think that younger veterans may be in the same position?

Yes. The context was not only to look at the younger generation who are searching for jobs and who might have education eligibility or other forms of federal financing, but to also look at the population of older veterans who are in a forced transitional phase. These older veterans might have been working at a job for 10-20 years and have had to reinvent themselves to gain a new job skill or vocation. Typically an older veteran tends to have a wife, children, a home and possibly greater debt. Veterans of all ages are serving in the war, but those who have come before the younger generation are not to be forgotten when discussing the employment of veterans.

Thank you for your continued commitment to America’s veterans and their families.

Sincerely,

Robert Madden, Assistant Director
National Economic Commission

cc: Chairman Stutzman