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Veterans seen as vital to jobs bill

Commander supports Obama's plan to deploy veterans in the battle to revive America's economy.

WASHINGTON (Sept. 8, 2011) – Pressing Congress to pass the American Jobs Act, which aims to reduce unemployment and stimulate U.S. productivity, President Barack Obama told a joint session of Congress Thursday evening to look to the nation's veterans, who have fought with their lives to defend our country. "The last thing they should have to do is fight for a job when they come home," he said.

The president's words in a Thursday evening address to the nation echoed what he said Aug. 30 at the 93rd National Convention of The American Legion in Minneapolis when he announced a plan to offer tax credits to companies that hire veterans. There, he told about 10,000 Legionnaires and their families that he was calling on every state "to pass legislation that makes it easier for our veterans to get the credentials and the jobs for which they are so clearly qualified. This needs to happen, and it needs to happen now."

American Legion National Commander Fang A. Wong said the president's plan to get more Americans back to work falls in line with the Legion's ongoing efforts to reduce veteran unemployment, especially among those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Far too many of our young veterans are returning home to find they can't get back into the workforce – is that a proper way for our country to reward these men and women who have served us so well overseas?" Wong said.

According to a Joint Economic Commission report to Congress last June, the

unemployment rate for male veterans aged 18 to 24 stood at 27 percent.

“We sponsor more than 100 job fairs per year for servicemembers and veterans,”

Wong said. “We press federal agencies to hire more veterans. We show veteran-owned small businesses how to get more federal contracting dollars. So

The American Legion heartily welcomes the jobs plan initiatives pertaining to veterans announced by President Obama, especially since they reinforce the White House’s commitment to get more veterans employed.”

In the address, Obama said the American Jobs Act will “provide a jolt” to an

economy that is now stalled. He pinpointed education, transportation and small

business as areas that can make an impact in the recovery. He told lawmakers

that the measure will make it easier for small businesses to procure federal

contracts. The American Legion is now working with the government to improve

compliance with a federal law mandating that no less than 3 percent of federal

contracts be awarded to businesses owned by service-disabled veterans.

Obama also spoke of the power the GI Bill poses to stimulate the economy, as it

did after World War II. “Millions of returning heroes, including my grandfather,

had the opportunity to go to school because of the GI Bill. Where would we be if

they hadn’t had that chance?”

Earlier in the day, the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee passed the Veterans

Opportunity to Work Act (known as the VOW Act), sponsored by Rep. Jeff Miller of

Florida. The bill would improve transition counseling for servicemembers leaving

active duty, and also help veterans to obtain licenses or certificates for

skills they learned in the military.

“Military training and experience needs to be recognized by civilian employers.

This is an issue The American Legion has taken to the White House and Congress

many times,” Wong said. “Now we are seeing some results – in the president’s new

initiatives to get more veterans hired, and in the VOWS Act that is making its

way to a vote on the House floor.

“We have got to convince the private sector to recognize the full value of

military service. Taxpayers invest a lot of money in their training. Such a huge

investment must not be wasted,” Wong said.

The American Legion has been pushing Congress and the private sector for wider

recognition of military skills and experience. The Legion’s Economic Division is

planning to host a conference early next year on licensing and certification

issues for veterans.

Telling Congress that “we are tougher than the times we live in,” Obama echoed

his Aug. 5 speech at the Washington Navy Yard. Before a largely military

audience, he outlined four proposals to reduce the jobless rate among Post-9/11

veterans, including tax credits for firms that hire veterans who are unemployed

or have service-connected disabilities.

“The president has challenged the private sector to hire or train 100,000

jobless veterans by the end of 2013,” Wong said. “We join the president’s call

to action, but would like to up the ante. The American Legion is challenging

America to bring veterans unemployment below the 5-percent mark before Election

Day of 2012. Hiring veterans is one of the best ways to honor their service.”

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