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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **Legion calls on Congress to work more closely with VA to reduce backlog**

WASHINGTON (Oct. 3, 2012) -- The American Legion's national commander, James Koutz, warned Congress today that the huge disability claims backlog at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) "is a gathering storm of mistrust between those who fought for their nation and those who promised them benefits if they should become disabled."

Testifying before a joint session of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees, Koutz called the federal government's failure to decide the claims of veterans in a timely manner "inexcusable."

"Congress can no longer simply be concerned about this problem," Koutz said. "Congress, VA and The American Legion must work together to solve it. And that does not mean simply rewarding (claims) 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 process."

The Legion suggested that veterans could be compensated with interest on their claims if they had to wait longer than a realistic target date to get them processed. Koutz said such an arrangement would create an incentive for VA offices to decide claims more quickly. "There are ways to work with the mechanics of the system to make it serve the veteran and not the bureaucrats. We're willing to roll up our sleeves and work with you to find those ways."

Turning to the topic of sequestration, Koutz reminded the committees that "Congress and the White House have reassured us that the VA will be exempt from sequestration."

Yet many programs beneficial to veterans lie outside the VA budget and are vulnerable to automatic budget cuts in January: Arlington National Cemetery, the American Battle Monuments Commission, the Joint Prisoners of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command, and the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service.

"Veterans are seriously concerned that these important government functions will be compromised or cut in order to make ends meet," Koutz said. "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."

Another top legislative priority for The American Legion is to continue working with Congress to provide more employment opportunities for veterans. The Legion's efforts have already helped to produce laws such as the VOW to Hire Heroes Act and the Veterans Skills to Jobs Act.

"The American Legion has been at the forefront of efforts to combat veteran joblessness, and we know we have an ally in this Congress," Koutz said. "Specifically, I speak of the progress made in the acceptance of military experience for credits toward licenses and other credentials in a number of trades and career paths for veterans.

"The American Legion has been fighting this battle longer than anyone else. Since our landmark 'Study of Licensure and Certification for Veterans' in 1997, we've worked with concerned parties in both the government and private sector."

In closing, Koutz told the joint session that addressing issues that face America's veterans "is much more than good political sense .... It is a sacred obligation. I think we can all agree on that."

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