STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
"A REVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT'S FISCAL YEAR 2016 BUDGET REQUEST FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF LABOR'S VETERAN EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE (VETS)"

FEBRUARY 12, 2015

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Takano, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, On behalf of our National Commander, Michael Helm, and the 2.4 million members of The American Legion, we thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding The American Legion's thoughts on the President's Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) budget and on the recommendations offered by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC) regarding DOL-VETS.

MCRMC Recommendations

The MCRMC report is a project that has been in the making for just over two years. Authorized by the 2013 NDAA, the Commission's mandate was to examine the benefits necessary to "ensure the long-term viability of the All-Volunteer Force"[1], to include "health, disability, survivor, education, and dependent support programs of the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)".[2] Among the fifteen recommendations offered in the report was a recommendation to "Better prepare Service members for transition to civilian life by expanding education and granting states more flexibility to administer the Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program [JVSG]" (Recommendation 12).

Here, the report offers ways to improve the Transition GPS portion of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), and DOL-VETS JVSG program. Specifically, it offers three recommendations for improvement – two for Congress, and one for the Department of Labor (DOL). It further recommends that Congress "require a one-time joint report from DoD, VA, and DOL to the Senate and House Committees on Armed Services and Veterans' Affairs regarding the challenges employers face when seeking to hire veterans."

[1] Public Law 112–239
[2] Ibid.

The recommendations for improvement state that Congress should "require DoD, VA, and DOL to review and report on the core curriculum for Transition GPS to reevaluate if the current curriculum most accurately addresses the needs of transitioning Service members," should "amend the relevant statutes to permit state departments of labor or their equivalent agencies to work directly with state Veterans Affairs directors or offices to coordinate implementation of the JVSG program" and should "encourage One-Stop Career Centers to have employees attend Transition GPS classes, to ensure personal connections between veterans and One-Stop Career Centers. The Congress should require DOL to track when and where its employees attend Transition GPS classes, and the number of veterans they interact with and follow up with after separation." Additionally, it is recommended that DOL "require One-Stop Career Centers to track the number of job fairs their employees participate in and the number of veterans they connect with at each job fair." These latter two also recommend that DOL include the information in Labor's annual report to Congress.

The American Legion believes that these recommendations are good, common sense ideas, and would further the goal of ensuring that servicemembers are able to transition smoothly and successfully into civilian lives and careers, and that veterans are well cared for should they require employment assistance. We would, however, recommend that Congress consider adding the Department of Education (DOE) and the Small Business Administration (SBA) to those who review the TAP curriculum, given that they contribute important content to the curriculum, and they maintain expertise in those areas covered by that content.

Furthermore, while The American Legion wholly agrees with the recommendation that Congress amend the relevant statutes to permit state departments of labor to work directly with state veterans affairs, we would add that those departments should work together to meet or exceed the federally mandated priority of service for eligible veterans. This would entail ensuring that current practices incentivize DVOPs and LVERs to increase the level of service they provide, rather than getting bogged down in processes or manipulating numbers. We find that the model employed by Texas – consolidating veterans' employment services within a state veterans' commission – is effective in addressing the needs of veterans. Texas currently enjoys the lowest unemployment rate for veterans of any state in the union. We feel that this is demonstrative of what is possible when there is a single point of entry for veterans' benefits and services administered by a state agency, and would encourage Congress to examine that model and to consider touting it as an example to other states that are looking to effectively serve their veteran population.

FY 2016 VETS Budget

Bluntly stated, we were very disappointed when we examined the budget request offered by the administration on behalf of DOL-VETS. We were even more disappointed when we compared the request with the request on behalf of VA. The latter represented a nearly 8 percent increase from the previous year, while the former represented a miniscule increase over previous years – with JVSG and the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) receiving *no* increase in funds.[3]

[3] FY 2016 Department of Labor Budget in Brief, p. 67 http://www.dol.gov/dol/budget/2016/PDF/FY2016BIB.pdf

Additionally, VA has been pumping its own money into programs designed to assist veterans in finding employment, such as the Veteran Employment Center, which offers such tools as a military skills Translator, a resume builder, and a searchable veteran's job bank.

Furthermore, SBA's veteran program budget has increased over 400 percent since FY 2013.

In stark contrast, the DOL-VETS budget requests have been nearly flat lined, even as other portions of the DOL budget requests have increased. This indicates to us that DOL is either unwilling or unable to fight to secure the money needed to properly fund its programs.

Because of this and other issues that will be discussed below, The American Legion has recently changed its position regarding VETS regarding its location in DOL. In October 2014, we passed a resolution entitled *Expanding Veterans Employment and Homeless Services Within the Department of Veterans Affairs*.[4] That resolution calls for The American Legion to "support legislation that calls for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the state workforce agencies to share responsibilities for all Title 38 veterans employment services" and "that VA be fully funded to administer the Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG), establish standards and collect performance data, and the state workforce agencies administer the programs and report directly to VA".

The American Legion has long supported DOL-VETS, because we believe that when it comes to employment no one has more expertise and experience. For our efforts, we have been rewarded with ongoing program management problems, a lack of accountability and oversight, an agency too truculent to make sensible policy changes, and a veterans' office within the agency that fails to view Veteran Service Organizations as partners in the work of improving federal employment services for veterans. It has become painfully clear to us that the agency with the monumental task of keeping America gainfully employed is unable or unwilling to give the requisite attention to veterans' employment issues that we know our constituents deserve.

In short, The American Legion believes that the best way to improve DOL-VETS is to transfer the JVSG and HVRP portions of the program to VA. Though we continue to believe that there is a place for VETS in the Department of Labor, we have come to believe that these two programs would be better served if they were located in VA.[5]

Conclusion

The American Legion believes that the recommendations of the MCRMC are good steps toward improving the TAP Transition GPS, and the DOL-VETS Program. Ultimately, we desire to see veterans receive the best resources possible, and we believe that these recommendations move toward that end.

Unfortunately, we no longer have full confidence in DOL to best administer the JVSG and HVRP portions of VETS, and we believe that they stand to be improved by transferring them to

[4] Resolution No. 13, Fall Meeting of the National Executive Committee of The American Legion

[5] Resolution No. 317: *Oppose the Transfer of Veterans' Employment and Training Service to the Department of Veterans Affairs*, 2014 National Convention

VA.

We look forward to continuing to work with DOL to ensure that servicemembers' civilian employment is protected when they are serving on active duty through USERRA, and to ensure that servicemembers receive the tools they need to successfully transition from active duty to the civilian world.

We also look forward to continuing to work with this Subcommittee to ensure that veterans receive the economic opportunities they earn through their service to the nation.

Questions about this testimony may be directed to The American Legion Legislative Division at (202) 263-5752 or srieley@legion.org