STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VBA OUTREACH EFFORTS

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present The American Legion's view on the effectiveness of Veterans Benefit Administration's (VBA's) outreach efforts. The American Legion commends the Subcommittee for holding a hearing to discuss the importance of benefit outreach to veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), in the last several years, has improved its outreach efforts, especially its efforts to reach and inform active duty service members preparing to leave the military. The American Legion remains concerned, however, that many transitioning service members, especially those returning from Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF) are not being adequately advised of the benefits and services available to them from VA and other Federal and state agencies. This is especially true of Reserve and National Guard Units that are often demobilized at hometown Reserve Centers and National Guard armories, rather than active duty demobilization centers.

VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) have made strides toward improved outreach. The number of Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) and other military services briefings conducted by VBA has steadily increased since 2003, as has the number of service members attending the briefings. VA also mails all recently separated or retired service members a "Welcome Home" package that includes both a pamphlet summarizing available VA benefits, and a veterans' benefits timetable.

Unfortunately, VA's efforts regarding TAP are hampered by the fact that only one of the services, the Marine Corps, requires its separating members to attend these briefings. This flaw in the system did not escape the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission (VDBC) and resulted in the recommendation that Congress mandate TAP briefings and attendance throughout DOD. The American Legion strongly agrees with that recommendation. In order for all separating service members to be properly advised of all VA benefits to which they may be entitled, it is crucial that Congress adequately fund and mandate both TAP availability and attendance in all of the military services.

VA also affords separating service members the opportunity to start the disability claims process, at least 6 months prior to separation from active duty, through its Benefits Delivery at Discharge

(BDD) program. Unfortunately, this program is not available to all separating service members with service-related medical conditions as the program is only available at 140 military installations. Necessary measures, including adequate funding, should be taken to ensure that all separating service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, have the opportunity to participate in the BDD process, if they so desire.

Other Outreach Efforts

An overall weakness in VA's outreach program is that its efforts to target veterans already in the VA system. Often times, various informational mailings discussing changes in law, new benefit entitlements, and other pressing issues are only sent to individuals who are currently receiving VA benefits, or those who participated in one of VA's various registry programs, such as Gulf War or Agent Orange. VA also makes such information available at its medical centers and outpatient clinics. We realize that it may be easier to locate and contact veterans that are already being served by VA or have been in the past. Unfortunately, this method drastically limits the number of veterans reached since many are not currently receiving VA benefits or being treated at a VA medical facility. In fact, there are many veterans that have never even applied for VA benefits.

These are the veterans who fall through the cracks, especially when it comes to being advised of changes in law or regulation, or the addition of new benefits to various presumptive categories, that could directly affect their eligibility to receive various benefits. For example, it is not unusual for American Legion Service Officers to encounter "in-country" Vietnam veterans diagnosed with type II diabetes that are not aware they are eligible to receive disability compensation and free VA health care for the condition, despite the fact the disability was recognized as an Agent Orange/herbicide presumptive disability 7 years ago. In most, if not all, of these cases the veteran was not currently in the VA system. It is very apparent that VA needs to expand its outreach efforts to reach these veterans.

VA should expand its use and distribution of public service announcements, press releases and other media tools, especially in instances where the information affects a large number of veterans, in order to reach veterans that do not have any current or past affiliation with VA. The American Legion also encourage VA to enhance its outreach efforts by working closer with Veterans' Service Organizations (VSO), utilizing VSO publications to reach veterans VA may not otherwise be able to reach.

American Legion Outreach Programs

Department (State) Service Officers

Department Service Officers have specialized training and experience with VA regulations and are familiar with the many VA programs and services. They provide an invaluable service to veterans as this service is free and the veteran does not have to be member. When a veteran contacts The American Legion National Headquarters, views our website, or speaks to a Legion member, they are referred to that state's Department Service Officer. A Post Service Officer's Guide is distributed to 14,000 posts nationwide to help answer benefit questions which also serves as a referral source for veterans wishing to file claims.

Heroes to Hometowns

In an effort to increase transparency and cooperation between DOD and the American people, The American Legion entered into an understanding with the Office of the Secretary of Defense's (OSD) Office of Military Community and Family Policy (MCFP) under the authority of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, Leslye A. Arsht, to assist in outreach and assistance efforts to transitioning severely injured service members. The American Legion agreed to provide outreach support to the military community's severely injured as they transitioned home through a program known as Heroes to Hometowns. This program embodies The American Legion's long standing history of caring for those "… who have borne the battle …" and their families.

Heroes to Hometowns is designed to welcome home service members who no longer serve in the military. The American public's strong support for our troops is especially evident in their willingness to help service members who are severely injured in the war, and their ever-supportive families, as they transition from the hospital environment and return to civilian life. Heroes to Hometowns is a program that focuses on reintegration back into the community, with networks established at the national and state levels to better identify the extraordinary needs of retuning families before they return home and with the local community to coordinate government and non-government resources as necessary for as long as needed.

There are three charter members in each State's Heroes to Hometowns Executive Committee, each uniquely able to contribute to overall support with the ability to tap into their national, state, and local support systems to provide essential links to government, corporate, and non-profit resources at all levels and to garner the all important hometown support.

State Heroes to Hometowns Committees are the link between the Military Treatment Facilities and the community. The charter members consist of the State Office of Veterans Affairs, the State Transition Assistance Office and the State's veterans community represented by The American Legion. Heroes to Hometowns is a collaborative effort and The American Legion leads communities in preparation to support returning service member in areas such as:

- Financial assistance;
- Finding suitable homes and adapting as needed;
- Home and vehicle repairs;
- Transportation for veterans to medical appointments;
- Employment and educational assistance;
- Child care support;
- Arrange "welcome home" celebrations; and
- Sports and recreation opportunities

When a transitioning veteran request assistance via a web-form or brochure available through The American Legion, the veteran's contact information is shared with the State Executive Committee. The American Legion State offices refer the veteran's request to the local Post, which connects with the veteran to provide assistance. The American Legion focuses on those needs not provided by Federal and state agencies.

To assist in the coordination of community resources, The American Legion supports OSD's Military Homefront Online Support Network for military personnel and community organizations to connect and collaborate. Located at www.homefrontconnections.mhf.dod.mil, this online network is dedicated to citizens and organizations that support America's service men and women. Through the support network, veterans can easily identify and quickly connect with national, state and community support programs.

In 2007, the Heroes to Hometowns program expanded its vision to include all transitioning service members, to include the underserved National Guard and Reserve components. Currently, the National Guard and Reserve do not have mandated TAP briefings when demobilizing. This hard-to-reach population primarily lives in rural America, disconnected from the traditional services provided by DOD or VA. The American Legion, with its 2.7 million members and 14,000 posts, reaches into these rural communities conveying a consistent message of strong support for America's military personnel; the veteran who return home; care for the veteran's family; and a patriotic pride in America. With the Heroes to Hometowns program, The American Legion reaches out to provide support long after the deployment is over.

Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Program

The American Legion is a staunch supporter of VA's Voluntary Service (VAVS) program. In fiscal year 2007, some 7,527 regularly scheduled Legionnaires volunteered 909,137 hours at 167 VA facilities. Legionnaires volunteer at VA Medical Centers (VAMCs), Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, Vet Centers, and many other locations in support of hospitalized veterans.

The American Legion recently entered into a pilot program with VA in creating Heroes to Hometowns VA Volunteer Coordinators at 10 VAMCs. These coordinators will work with the VAMC Social Work offices and identify transitioning service members' needs with community resources. Currently, The American Legion is working with the VAVS program to increase the level of community support at VAMCs. By providing volunteer outreach training and resources to support a sustained outreach program, The American Legion is working to prepare the American Homefront for the return of our fighting men and women.

Department of Veterans Affairs OEF/OIF Welcome Home Celebration

The American Legion is an active participant in the annual OIF/OEF "Welcome Home" Celebration Event held at VAMCs nationwide. This event is designed to provide outreach services and offer valuable information, education and support to transitioning service members and their families. Legionnaires answer questions about veterans' benefits, filing claims and military discharge review requests. Here in Washington, D.C., during the Welcome Home event held at the DC VAMC, medical staff enrolled transitioning Marines into the VA medical system for their five years of free medical services, while community volunteers provided an environment of support with live music, food and valuable information about veterans' benefits and local community resources.

The American Legion Magazine

The American Legion uses a multimedia approach to its outreach. The American Legion Magazine has historically provided valuable and timely information on the issues facing

America's veterans. This tradition is carried on into the 21st Century via The American Legion website, www.legion.org, a hub for information, resources and specific points of contact for local assistance. A full library of informative brochures outline the leading issues facing America's veterans today to the furthest reaches of the American landscape. At any point, a transitioning veteran may receive assistance from The American Legion via informational brochures, printed media, web-based request forms, a 1-800 call center, state veterans' service officers and most importantly, the local American Legion post.

The American Legion Local Post

The American Legion Post is important in providing direct outreach as it provides a common meeting place for veterans and their families. The local Post may be the first place a veteran stops when returning home. It may be the first place where the community as a whole thanks a returning veteran for their service and sacrifice.

Department of Virginia American Legion Post 270 is a leading example of the support provided by The American Legion family. Each year the food manufacturer "Newman's Own" awards financial grants to organizations that support the military. In 2004, Post 270 was awarded the Newman's Own "Best Volunteer Program in the Country Supporting Our Active Duty Military and their Families" for the post's outreach to Walter Reed Medical Center. All across America, American Legion Posts have partnered with businesses to assist returning veterans find gainful employment. Most notably, The American Legion has partnered with Military.com and Recruit Military on veteran-targeted job fairs.

Within the past month, The American Legion worked with Walter Reed Medical Center to host a career and benefits fair for the injured service members in outpatient care. Employers, many veterans themselves, meet with injured service members and their supporting family member in a relaxed atmosphere. Service members and family members were able to have dinner and meet with employers from all across the nation.

The American Legion works closely with the DOD, VA and the Department of Labor (DOL) to assist transitioning veterans in accessing their benefits and resources in order to reach their fullest potential, regardless of location or disabilities. The American Legion believes that more emphasis should be placed on Heroes to Hometowns and programs that allow transparency within the government and utilizes the established resources with communities to fulfill the unmet needs of transitioning service members. The American Legion has a proud history of securing and protecting the earned benefits of America's veterans. The American Legion stands ready to continue this legacy today by caring for those veterans returning from the current conflicts.

Conclusion

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for allowing The American Legion to present comments on these important matters. As always, The American Legion welcomes the opportunity to work closely with you and your colleagues to reach solutions to the array of problems discussed here today that are in the best interest of America's veterans and their families.