STATEMENT OF
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NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
H.R. 4255, UNITED STATES OLYMPIC COMMITTEE PARALYMPIC PROGRAM ACT OF 2007; H.R. 3786, SERVICEMEMBERS TELECOM CONTRACT RELIEF ACT; H.R. 2721; H.R. 6070, MILITARY SPOUSES RESIDENCY RELIEF ACT; H.R. 6272, SMOCTA REAUTHORIZATION ACT; AND OTHER PROPOSED LEGISLATION

JUNE 19, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present The American Legion's views on the legislation being considered today. The American Legion commends the Committee for holding a hearing to discuss these important issues.

H. R. 4255, United States Olympic Committee Paralympic Program Act of 2007.

This bill seeks to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide assistance to the Paralympic Program of the United States Olympic Committee.

The purpose of this bill is to provide support to the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) for the Paralympic Program; to increase the participation of physically disabled members of the Armed Forces and veterans with service-connected disabilities, through regular participation in physical activity and sports; to promote life-long health of members of the Armed Forces and veterans with service-connected disabilities through regular participation in physical activity and sports; and to provide training to physically disabled members of the Armed Forces and veterans in their communities.

The U.S. Olympic Committee Paralympic Division was formed in 2001 to increase support for Paralympic sport in the United States. The USOC Paralympic Division coordinates the preparation and selection of athletes to U.S. Paralympic Teams, for both summer and winter games. The U.S. Paralympic Military Program provides post-rehabilitative support and mentoring to American servicemen and women who have sustained physical injuries. Veterans are introduced to adaptive sport techniques and opportunities through clinics and camps, and are also connected with on-going Paralympic sports programs in their hometowns. The Veterans

Paralympic Performance Program (VP3) supports Paralympic-eligible military veterans in their efforts to represent the USA at upcoming Paralympic Games.

Through its Paralympic Military Program, the USOC looks to channel America's returning wounded service members into adaptive sports programs. USOC is partnering with the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the National Recreation and Park Association to promote adaptive sports to wounded service members through the DOD's Heroes to Hometowns program. The American Legion supports such programs of the United States Olympic Committee that promote Americanism, and facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of our disabled veterans and servicemembers. This funded program will extend more opportunities for disabled veterans, who in turn will provide them the opportunity to achieve and maintain an improved quality of life, and once again experience the pride of being a United States citizen representing their community and nation. In turn, The American Legion also supports the United States Olympic Committee Paralympic Program Act of 2007.

H. R. 2721, To amend title 10, United States Code, to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to develop, and the Secretary of Defense to distribute to members of the armed forces upon their discharge or release from active duty, information in a compact disk read-only memory format that lists and explains the health, education, and other benefits for which veterans are eligible under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Since 1919, The American Legion has been advocating for returning service members and providing them with assistance in understanding and accessing their benefits. The American Legion supports the distribution of benefit information on compact disc. Additionally, we offer a few suggestions:

1. Any comprehensive benefits information package should include a comprehensive reference guide of available veteran service organizations (VSOs) with a detailed description of what services they offer transitioning service members.
2. Digital information should complement, rather than replace, a paper manual or guide to veterans' benefits.
3. Any comprehensive guide should also include Department of Defense (DOD) assistance information.
4. A system to update information must be in place to ensure the accuracy of the information being distributed.
5. The information should be available to download free of charge from Department of Veterans Affairs and DOD websites.

H. R. 6070, Military Spouses Residency Relief Act.

This legislation seeks to amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to guarantee the residency of spouses of military personnel.

The American Legion supports this legislation as it will help to ensure that the spouses of military personnel are indeed able to effectively participate in the democratic process.

The American Legion also recommends:

1. That appropriate laws and guidelines be developed at Federal, state and local levels with the intent that all military absentee voters and their families will have their votes counted in every applicable election.
2. That the sending and receiving of blank and completed military absentee ballots be accomplished electronically as much as possible.

H.R. 6272, The SMOCTA Reauthorization Act of 2008

This proposed legislation would authorize discretionary appropriations to carry out the Service Members Occupational Conversion and Training Act of 1992 (SMOCTA). SMOCTA was developed as a transitional tool designed to provide job training and employment to eligible veterans discharged after August 1, 1990. When created, SMOCTA was the only Federal job training program available strictly for veterans and the only Federal job training program specifically designed for use by state veterans' employment personnel to assist veterans with barriers to employment. Veterans eligible for assistance under SMOCTA were those with a primary or secondary military occupational specialty that DOD determined was not readily transferable to the civilian workforce or those veterans with a service-connected disability rating of 30 percent or higher. SMOCTA is a unique job-training program because it successfully returned veterans to the civilian workforce.

The American Legion strongly endorses this bill along with the proposed funding request.

H.R. 6224, The Pilot College Work Study Programs for Veterans Act of 2008

This legislation would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct a five-year pilot project to test the feasibility and advisability of expanding the scope of certain qualifying work-study activities under title 38, United States Code. The bill refers to work study positions on college campuses to include positions as "tutors, research, teaching, and lab assistants." The American Legion recommends that students should also be allowed and encouraged to participate as a VA Work Study student at veteran offices within the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Department of Labor (DOL), Department of Defense, (DOD) and

Department of State. The College Work Study Program could also include veteran service organizations (VSOs) and military family support offices and other offices that focus on the reintegration of returning Reserve and Guard members as well.

The American Legion endorses this bill to include the $10 million funding authorization.

H.R. 6221, Veteran-Owned Small Business Protection and Clarification Act of 2008.

H.R. 6221 seeks to amend Title 38, United States Code, to require the VA Secretary to include in each contract the Secretary enters for the acquisition of goods and services a provision that requires the contractee to comply with the contracting goals and preferences for small business concerns owned or controlled by veterans, and for other purposes.

The American Legion has urged Congress to require reasonable set-asides of Federal procurements and contracts for businesses owned and operated by veterans. The American Legion supported legislation in the past that sought to add service-connected disabled veterans to the list of specified small business categories receiving 3 percent set-asides. Despite enactment of Public Law 106-50, the "Veteran Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act of 1999," agency compliance has been minimal; however, VA has sought to raise their veteran procurement goals to 9 percent. Therefore, The American Legion supports H.R. 6221 which is intended to assist VA in reaching their new goals by ensuring that every contract up for bid be considered for a service disabled owned company.

H.R. 6225, to amend title 38, United States Code, relating to equitable relief with respect to a State or private employer.

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) protects civilian job rights and benefits of veterans and members of the armed forces, including National Guard and Reserve members. USERRA also prohibits employer discrimination due to military obligations and provides reemployment rights to returning service members.

Since September 11, 2001 nearly 600,000 National Guard and Reserve members have been activated for military duty. During this same period, the Veterans Employment and Training Service of the Department of Labor has provided USERRA assistance to well over 400,000 employers and service members. Therefore, the American Legion supports this legislation that would greatly increase the authority of the courts to use its full equity powers to "administer temporary or permanent injunctions, temporary restraining orders, and contempt orders, to vindicate fully the rights or benefits of persons under this chapter, 4323 Title 38."

Again, thank you Mr. Chairman for allowing The American Legion this opportunity to present its views on the aforementioned issues. We look forward to working with the Committee to help increase the earned benefits for our nation's veterans.