



LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES & POLICY INITIATIVES

118TH ★
CONGRESS



Congressional Testimony and Staying Relevant for All Veterans....

On March 1, I had the distinct honor of presenting VVA's legislative priorities before the Joint Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees' annual hearing, along with a huge panel of other veterans' advocacy and service organizations. Rather than addressing the same issues as other VSO's and just being a "me-too" presenter, our terrific Government Affairs and Communications staff thoroughly prepared and polished me up to focus on the issues that were specifically important from the perspective of our VVA members across the country.

I was joined by Vice President, Tom Burke, the State Council presidents, or legislative experts from the states of the Congressional Committees' leadership from both parties, and the great professionals of VVA's Government Affairs and Communications department staffs.

I want to express my deep appreciation to VVA Kansas State Council President Roland Mayhew, VVA Montana State Council President Chuck Renevier, and VVA California Legislative Expert Bob Mulholland for travelling to Capitol Hill. And to Sharon Hodge, VVA Director of Government Affairs, Mokie Porter, Director of Communication, and staff members Harold Hanson, Kathleen Grathwol, Logan Legates, and John Stovall, thank you for great teamwork and a job well done.

In my testimony, I highlighted several of VVA's top legislative priorities and policy initiatives:

- Assure full funding of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency so that the 1,581 unaccounted-for American servicemembers from VVA's long-ago war and their survivors can finally find some peace.
- Address the issues of aging veterans in a VA system that still lacks a clear and comprehensive roadmap to address VA healthcare concerns, and in an environment in which, despite comparable access and quality of care, significant racial and ethnic disparities persist among older veterans.
- Address the problems faced by rural veterans, who make up almost 5 million of the twenty million veterans in the U.S., and over 50 percent of whom are 65 years and older and affected by a service-related condition.
- Hold an oversight committee hearing on the *Toxic Exposure Research Act*, which calls for intergenerational research, with the VA Secretary as star witness, to investigate what metrics he used that empowered him to not follow the law.
- Amend *P.L. 116-23* to extend the arbitrary twelve-nautical mile limitation sufficient to include U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Vietnam veterans who were assigned to the Vietnam Theater of Combat Operations or received the Vietnam Service Medal.
- Work towards the equitable care and treatment of Gulf War veterans who were exposed to a long list of toxicants and are still waiting for answers as to their long-term effects.

- Address the failings of the Caregiver Support Program, which has been plagued by chaos and mismanagement since its inception in 2011. Earning trust continues to be a hallmark issue. Inequitable practices have led to unjust denials, discharges, and downgrades of countless participants and applicants since 2016.
- Provide funding for comprehensive, individualized assessments, and rehabilitation and treatment programs, using a continuum-of-care concept for homeless veterans. While the population of homeless veterans has been decreasing, the number of older homeless veterans has increased. The extreme shortage of affordable housing in the U.S. has helped create a homelessness crisis, but that alone does not explain why veterans are much more likely to experience homelessness than the average American.
- Work closely to help VA create a culture that proactively seeks out lonely, homeless, family-less, disenfranchised veterans and brings them in from the cold. Two out of three veteran suicides are over 55 years of age. Fourteen of 20 do not get care at a VA healthcare facility. Permitting vets to seek help from non-VA practitioners may help some.
- Ask Congress to enact a law that will make mandatory the insertion of this single question on every death certificate: Did the decedent ever serve in the Armed Forces of the United States? This simple step will enable researchers to do a more thorough medical postmortem of anyone determined to have committed suicide, hopefully leading to improved intervention services. To read VVA's Legislative Priorities & Policy Initiatives *for the 118 Congress*: https://vva.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/VVA_March_2023_Testimony-Final.pdf

For some reason the legislators believed that all these issues could be addressed in a three- to five-minute period with a time clock blinking in my face. From that perspective, this old guy really failed you. I overran the allotted time by more than several minutes, but managed not to get locked up in the Capitol Hill pokey for contempt of Congress. (I can't say "hello" in that short a time!)

There was a bunch of newly elected younger veterans on the HVAC who came up to us at the end of the hearing and expressed real gratitude for being so inclusive of ALL generations of veterans in our testimony and for being so passionate in our convictions.

WE ARE STILL RELEVANT!

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is the only national Vietnam Veterans organization congressionally chartered and exclusively dedicated to Vietnam-era veterans and their families.

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