

**Oral Remarks
To the House and Senate Committees
on Veterans' Affairs**

**American Legion National Commander Michael D. Helm
February 25, 2015**

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In the interest of time, I will wait to introduce my team at the conclusion of my opening statement.

Chairman Miller, Chairman Isaacson, Ranking members Brown and Blumenthal...

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These challenges are also filled with **historic opportunities** to make positive changes for America's veterans, military personnel and their families.

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With more than 1.5 million military men and women expected to discharge from service in the coming years, a wave of new veterans is entering the civilian ranks. They join millions more from previous eras.

They look to us to uphold the promises we – as a nation – made to them when they pledged their lives to protect our freedoms and keep us safe from harm.

I have visited hundreds of American Legion posts this year. When I speak of the Four Pillars of service our organization upholds – veterans, defense, Americanism and youth – **one particular topic ALWAYS** gets a collective nod of understanding.

That topic is effective treatment for the “signature wounds” of the Global War on Terrorism – **post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.**

The American Legion has been personally helping veterans suffering from head injuries and mental health

conditions since the doughboys came home from the Great War with what was then called “shell shock.”

But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

For the last 30-plus years, however, too often VA’s treatment plan for veterans coping with PTSD has been pharmaceutical.

The American Legion’s Task Force on PTSD and TBI has worked with top medical experts, VA, veterans and their families to offer a more effective strategy, one which recognizes that:

- No two cases of PTSD/TBI are the same, so no magic pill is going to solve the problem.

- The entire family must be involved in treatment programs, especially caregivers.

- And non-pharmaceutical, alternative treatments **really do work** for individual veterans, and they must be recognized as such by VA.

Just as everyone's stress experience is unique – including those who suffer with the **distinct** effects of **Military Sexual Trauma** – so too must be our compassionate response.

For tens of thousands of veterans, VA's current prescription is not working.

A 2014 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 veterans with PTSD or TBI showed that:

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- 30 percent said they terminated their plans because they were ineffective.

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Another opportunity: civilian careers.

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Veterans need careers as much as our economy needs veterans.

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We strongly encourage the **continuation of tax credits for those employers** – with expansion to companies that hire veterans of the National Guard and Reserves, so many of whom left their careers and families to serve in combat.

We all know how the original GI Bill – the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 – changed America. Today's veterans are poised to have the same kind of impact.

One successful provision of the original GI Bill is often overlooked: low-interest business and farm loans that helped 20th century veterans across the land become engines of their local economies.

Today, we ask Congress to expand the Post 9/11 GI Bill so that unused funds can be applied to help veteran-owned businesses get off the ground.

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Upon seeing that – like so many veterans of his generation – he suspended his life plan, stepped away from campus and stepped *up* to serve his country.

He came home from Iraq a changed man in 2006.

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But no two cases are alike. That's what makes our shared mission so complicated.

We have certainly learned that this year, as The American Legion has personally interacted with thousands of veterans who **did not receive effective transition assistance**.

They have come to us frustrated and in need at our Veterans Crisis Command Centers and Benefits Centers, which we have conducted across the country in the aftermath of VA's meltdown of trust last April.

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VA reports that it is making headway against the overall backlog of claims 125 days old or older.

But The American Legion is equally concerned about the growing number of appeals and remands. This suggests that quantity is trumping quality in many cases, and we all know where that kind of thinking led VA last year.

At the centers, we also are working alongside VA staff to improve access to care for veterans who still wait too long for medical appointments.

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The timing for change is upon us, as new VA leadership, looks to shift a culture that was decades in the making. **The need is urgent** with so many veterans entering the system right now.

And the need is not going away soon, as our nation is once again is deploying troops into a theater of war to fight Islamic State terrorists.

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The American Legion has been personally helping veterans suffering from head injuries and mental health

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But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

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on Veterans' Affairs**

**American Legion National Commander Michael D. Helm
February 25, 2015**

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Chairman Miller, Chairman Isaacson, Ranking members Brown and Blumenthal...

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With more than 1.5 million military men and women expected to discharge from service in the coming years, a wave of new veterans is entering the civilian ranks. They join millions more from previous eras.

They look to us to uphold the promises we – as a nation – made to them when they pledged their lives to protect our freedoms and keep us safe from harm.

I have visited hundreds of American Legion posts this year. When I speak of the Four Pillars of service our organization upholds – veterans, defense, Americanism and youth – **one particular topic ALWAYS** gets a collective nod of understanding.

That topic is effective treatment for the “signature wounds” of the Global War on Terrorism – **post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.**

The American Legion has been personally helping veterans suffering from head injuries and mental health

conditions since the doughboys came home from the Great War with what was then called “shell shock.”

But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

For the last 30-plus years, however, too often VA’s treatment plan for veterans coping with PTSD has been pharmaceutical.

The American Legion’s Task Force on PTSD and TBI has worked with top medical experts, VA, veterans and their families to offer a more effective strategy, one which recognizes that:

- No two cases of PTSD/TBI are the same, so no magic pill is going to solve the problem.

- The entire family must be involved in treatment programs, especially caregivers.

- And non-pharmaceutical, alternative treatments **really do work** for individual veterans, and they must be recognized as such by VA.

Just as everyone's stress experience is unique – including those who suffer with the **distinct** effects of **Military Sexual Trauma** – so too must be our compassionate response.

For tens of thousands of veterans, VA's current prescription is not working.

A 2014 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 veterans with PTSD or TBI showed that:

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Veterans need careers as much as our economy needs veterans.

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One successful provision of the original GI Bill is often overlooked: low-interest business and farm loans that helped 20th century veterans across the land become engines of their local economies.

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We have certainly learned that this year, as The American Legion has personally interacted with thousands of veterans who **did not receive effective transition assistance**.

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VA reports that it is making headway against the overall backlog of claims 125 days old or older.

But The American Legion is equally concerned about the growing number of appeals and remands. This suggests that quantity is trumping quality in many cases, and we all know where that kind of thinking led VA last year.

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The American Legion has been personally helping veterans suffering from head injuries and mental health

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But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

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I would also like to take this opportunity to introduce and
thank my wife and best friend, Debbie.

Thank you. (pause)

**Oral Remarks
To the House and Senate Committees
on Veterans' Affairs**

**American Legion National Commander Michael D. Helm
February 25, 2015**

I want to extend special thanks to Senator Moran for his kind introduction and for his steadfast support of those who have served our nation in uniform.

In the interest of time, I will wait to introduce my team at the conclusion of my opening statement.

Chairman Miller, Chairman Isaacson, Ranking members Brown and Blumenthal...

On behalf of the 2.3 million wartime veterans who make The American Legion our nation's largest veterans service organization, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. In the interest of time I will acknowledge some of my important guests today at the conclusion of my remarks.

The challenges ahead of us are enormous and urgent.

These challenges are also filled with **historic opportunities** to make positive changes for America's veterans, military personnel and their families.

As National Commander of The American Legion, I have the great privilege of traveling our nation, state by state, city to town, personally meeting with veterans and their families.

I have listened to their frustrations.

I have promised solutions.

With more than 13,500 local posts stitched across the fabric of our country, and beyond, The American Legion is

uniquely positioned to do the best kind of market research – in person, face-to-face, eye-to-eye, one veteran at a time.

As I testify before you today, American Legion service officers are working one-on-one with nearly 750,000 veterans across the country, helping them with their VA benefits, health-care access, education, employment and other needs.

The American Legion is also now in the midst of a nationwide Veterans Benefits Center tour where we have already **personally assisted thousands** of frustrated veterans and their families.

The American Legion's legislative priorities are built on countless such personal interactions with:

- Veterans

- Military personnel
- VA staff
- Health-care providers
- Elected officials
- Business leaders
- Educators
- And patriotic Americans everywhere.

Today, as you might suspect, the prevailing concern expressed among them all is **transition assistance**.

With more than 1.5 million military men and women expected to discharge from service in the coming years, a wave of new veterans is entering the civilian ranks. They join millions more from previous eras.

They look to us to uphold the promises we – as a nation – made to them when they pledged their lives to protect our freedoms and keep us safe from harm.

I have visited hundreds of American Legion posts this year. When I speak of the Four Pillars of service our organization upholds – veterans, defense, Americanism and youth – **one particular topic ALWAYS** gets a collective nod of understanding.

That topic is effective treatment for the “signature wounds” of the Global War on Terrorism – **post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.**

The American Legion has been personally helping veterans suffering from head injuries and mental health

conditions since the doughboys came home from the Great War with what was then called “shell shock.”

But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

For the last 30-plus years, however, too often VA’s treatment plan for veterans coping with PTSD has been pharmaceutical.

The American Legion’s Task Force on PTSD and TBI has worked with top medical experts, VA, veterans and their families to offer a more effective strategy, one which recognizes that:

- No two cases of PTSD/TBI are the same, so no magic pill is going to solve the problem.
- The entire family must be involved in treatment programs, especially caregivers.
- And non-pharmaceutical, alternative treatments **really do work** for individual veterans, and they must be recognized as such by VA.

Just as everyone's stress experience is unique – including those who suffer with the **distinct** effects of **Military Sexual Trauma** – so too must be our compassionate response.

For tens of thousands of veterans, VA's current prescription is not working.

A 2014 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 veterans with PTSD or TBI showed that:

- 59 percent of respondents felt no improvement as a result of their treatment plans.
- 30 percent said they terminated their plans because they were ineffective.

This breakdown contributes mightily to the high rate of veteran suicide, substance abuse and homelessness that our nation – and The American Legion – simply cannot abide.

We implore you to study alternative therapies. Many have proven much more effective than pills alone. Introduce and pass legislation that will require VA to recognize treatments

other than those that are measured in milligrams and doses per day.

This is just one among many opportunities we share to improve the lives of veterans and their families at this time of **enormous urgency and transition.**

Another opportunity: civilian careers.

For those who are getting RIFFed – military careers unexpectedly cut short due to budget-driven force reductions – **and for those simply separating after honorable tours** – it is not some act of charity to ease the path to civilian employment.

Veterans need careers as much as our economy needs veterans.

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