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**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. SENATE AND U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C.
FEBRUARY 25, 2025**

Chairman Moran, Chairman Bost, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Takano, and Members of the Committees on Veterans' Affairs:

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to deliver the 2025 legislative priorities for DAV—Disabled American Veterans—an organization of nearly 1 million members, all of whom were injured or became ill as a result of wartime service.

Messrs. Chairmen, this August will mark the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. The global conflict took over 400,000 American lives and wounded nearly a million others.

By war's end, the United States and our military looked very different than it does today. Women's roles were limited or nonexistent; African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans were forced to serve in segregated units, and our military relied on a draft-based system.

While much has changed within our military, core values such as loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and courage remain the same.

Today, I am honored and humbled to be here in front of you as a proud Latino with strong family ties to the military; all three of my brothers also served.

Messrs. Chairmen, I am a service-disabled Army veteran who served as a combat medic and nurse from 1980 to 1996, achieving the rank of sergeant first class.

When my Army career ended short of the 20-year goal I'd set for myself, I was heartbroken and forced to look for a new civilian career. Fortunately, thanks to my background as a medic and nurse, I found a job helping geriatric patients.

But I missed the structure and military culture that had become so familiar in my life. No matter what I tried, I could not replicate that underlying sense of purpose and duty to mission in my new career.

It was during that time that a fellow soldier I served with, Jay Main, had become a benefits advocate at DAV. He reached out to me to see if I needed help.

For the most part, I was doing well. But I confessed that I didn't have that same sense of camaraderie or purpose with my new role in civilian life. That's when Jay told me there could be another path, one of service to others under the banner of DAV.

In that moment, I discovered my new calling as a DAV benefits advocate. As leaders in our communities, veterans advocates are given the ability to serve other veterans. We have the ability to empower and uplift the voices of others. We have the ability to improve the lives of those who suffered injury or illness while serving. All of this so they can live their lives with respect and dignity and can care for themselves and their families.

This was something that was obvious and on full display during my first trip to Washington as a member of DAV 21 years ago. I sat in a room similar to this and watched the "Lion of the Senate," Ted Kennedy, introduce our national commander at the time, Alan Bowers, who sadly died this past December.

There, I got to witness Commander Bowers—an Air Force major who severely injured his spine when he ejected from an OV-10 over Vietnam—testify before these very committees like I am today. I still remember him proudly delivering DAV's recommendations for what Congress must do to deliver on that solemn promise made to America's ill and injured veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

That experience was life-changing. What I witnessed was DAV advocacy in action, which goes far beyond rhetoric. I learned how DAV was—and is—a power broker for the veteran community. I learned how truly important this work is, how meaningful legislative victories are for veterans. From that moment, I knew the path I was on was a righteous one. The work we do matters.

The ability to advocate for the veteran community has truly transformed my life. From seeing our members meet with lawmakers to witnessing the testimonies of previous commanders before me, I have been filled with immense pride in DAV and our mission for over two decades. It is an honor and privilege to serve in this esteemed role and continue the legacy of service to the veteran community.

As President Harry Truman stated in his address after the death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Our debt to the heroic men and valiant women in the service of our country can never be repaid. They have earned our undying gratitude. America will never forget their sacrifices."

Messrs. Chairmen, I am here today to make sure that the sacrifices of our nation's ill and injured veterans and their families are never forgotten.

I am proud to highlight below our legislative priorities for 2025 along with the programs and services DAV provides to support the rehabilitative needs of our nation's service-disabled veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.

We thank the 118th Congress for coming together at the end of its second session to pass the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act. This comprehensive reform bill includes provisions for improved access to community services and long-term care support, expansion of pay flexibilities for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care workers, enhancement of same-day scheduling for medical appointments, and improved VA staffing models to ensure timely access to care. Additionally, the bill will help improve mental health services, suicide prevention programs and efforts to end veteran homelessness. These reforms are crucial for maintaining the VA as the preferred provider of choice for veterans.

STRENGTHEN PRESUMPTIVE POLICIES TO ENSURE TOXIC-EXPOSED VETERANS RECEIVE EARNED BENEFITS IN A TIMELY MANNER

Messrs. Chairmen, toxic exposures have been something veterans have been facing since our founding members left the trenches of World War I more than 100 years ago. Unfortunately, toxic-exposed veterans have had to overcome significant obstacles to receive the benefits and health care they need. Toxic illnesses and wounds often take years or decades to manifest, and by the time they do, it's almost impossible to prove the exact nexus to military service or how those exposures made them ill. But we in the veterans community know too well the negative health outcomes toxic exposures have on our veterans, their families and survivors.

The enactment of the Honoring our PACT Act of 2022 provided the largest expansion of health care and benefits for toxic-exposed veterans in history, and we thank both congressional committees for your role in making that a reality. In addition to expanding health care access for millions of veterans, the law created presumptives for burn pits and other toxic exposures to cover veterans who develop cancers and respiratory conditions specified in the law. The PACT Act also codified a new internal VA decision-making process for creating future presumptives for other toxic exposures; however, it did not include adequate accountability and transparency for those outside the VA, including Congress and veterans service organizations.

Although the PACT Act has delivered new benefits and health care eligibility to millions of veterans, the law does not cover every toxic-exposed veteran. Too many veterans are still waiting for formal VA recognition of service-connected toxic wounds that would allow them access to life-changing benefits and health care to ease their pain and suffering—including those who served at the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base (commonly known as K2) in Uzbekistan and Fort McClellan in Alabama.

To find ways to fill these gaps and expedite justice for future generations, DAV and the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) researched the history of toxic exposures and presumptives. Together, we developed findings and recommendations

that we published in a report released in September 2024 called *Ending the Wait for Toxic-Exposed Veterans: A post-PACT Act blueprint for reforming the VA presumptive process*. We found that it takes more than three decades, on average, from the first incidence of a military toxic exposure to a formal governmental acknowledgment of that exposure. Presumptive conditions take, on average, 34.1 years to be established. Veterans wait decades for access to the care they need to survive and go without the benefits they've earned from conditions that make it impossible for them to hold down a job and care for their families. Many die without ever achieving justice, and their survivors are left to fend for themselves.

To shorten this time frame and help ensure toxic-exposed veterans get all the benefits they have earned, our report calls on Congress to enact legislation to establish a new legal framework for creating toxic-exposure presumptives to complete the work that the PACT Act began. The report contains several other critical recommendations to ensure toxic-exposed veterans don't have to wait decades for justice, which include expanding federal research on toxic exposures; creating an independent scientific review process for toxic exposures, injuries and illnesses; and establishing a veterans stakeholder advisory commission to strengthen oversight and transparency of the VA presumptive-making process.

Messrs. Chairman, the PACT Act was a generational legislative victory for veterans, and we are truly grateful for the work that so many of you on both veterans' affairs committees did to make that happen. However, there is still more work to be done. We believe that by working together to build upon the PACT Act by implementing the recommendations in our report, we can finally end the wait for toxic-exposed veterans.

ELIMINATE GAPS IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE AND SUICIDE PREVENTION AND BOLSTER GENDER-TAILORED CARE

Another key DAV legislative policy goal for 2025 is to ensure that service-disabled veterans have timely access to the VA's specialized mental health care, services and supports to address post-deployment readjustment and mental health challenges, while also bolstering gender-tailored care.

The VA's *2024 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report* reflects the complexity of suicide inherent in the veteran population and the numerous risks and protective factors. The report reflects data through 2022 and found increased rates of suicide among veterans—noting that there was a decrease in suicide among women veterans.

The report confirmed that in 2022 there were 6,407 veteran suicide deaths (approximately 17 per day). The age-adjusted suicide rate for male veterans rose 1.6% compared with female veterans, which decreased 24.1%. The report also noted that suicide deaths among veterans were more likely to involve firearms than suicide deaths among nonveteran adults. Specifically, firearms were involved in 73.5% of all veteran suicides.

Although the latest data showed a decrease in suicide rates among women veterans, the year following the pandemic witnessed a dramatic spike. These fluctuations in annual data obscure the troubling reality that suicide rates among women veterans have been steadily rising since the first year of reporting. DAV's special report, *Women Veterans: The Journey to Mental Wellness*, uncovered significant gaps in the VA's consideration of unique risk factors contributing to suicide among this population. The report provides over 50 recommendations aimed at enhancing gender-tailored care and improving the VA's overall suicide prevention efforts for all veterans.

The VA utilizes a suicide predictor model that continuously scans veterans' electronic health records to identify potential risk factors. When the model detects an at-risk individual, it flags the veteran, enabling the VA to intervene promptly and connect them with necessary resources. However, this model currently overlooks certain critical risk factors such as military sexual trauma (MST) and intimate partner violence (IPV), both of which are known contributors to elevated suicide risk.

To enhance the effectiveness and precision of the suicide predictor model, the VA should update it to incorporate these specific risk factors and appropriately weigh them. By doing so, the model would provide a more comprehensive assessment of a veteran's suicide risk, ensuring that those who are particularly vulnerable due to experiences like MST and IPV receive timely and targeted support. This improvement would not only refine the accuracy of risk predictions but also enable the VA to deliver more personalized interventions, ultimately strengthening its suicide prevention efforts and better serving the veteran community.

Firearms remain the predominant method of suicide among both male and female veterans. To address this critical issue, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) launched a multifaceted campaign in collaboration with the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF). This initiative aims to emphasize the importance of lethal-means safety counseling for veterans at risk of self-harm or suicide. Despite the progress made, a significant challenge remains in alleviating the concerns of veterans who fear that seeking mental health assistance from the VA might result in the confiscation of their firearms. Nevertheless, this partnership is showing promise in building trust within the veteran population by advancing efforts to mitigate the risk of suicide by firearm. By fostering a collaborative approach and addressing the unique concerns of veterans, VHA and its partners can make strides toward more effective suicide prevention efforts.

Veterans access to timely, high-quality, evidence-based mental health services is essential in reducing suicide. In 2023, VHA experienced net increases in overall clinical staffing but continued to report severe shortages of mental health providers throughout most of the country. A 2023 Office of Inspector General (OIG) report (OIG-23-00659-186) notes that 91 of 139 VA facilities identified a severe shortage of psychologists, and 73 facilities identified a severe shortage of psychiatrists.

As newly established grant programs and community-based initiatives to promote suicide prevention for veterans are implemented, it is vital to ensure that existing programs within VHA remain properly staffed with well-trained providers using evidence-based treatments for veterans who need specialized care. According to the VA's 2024 suicide prevention annual report, a comparison among veterans receiving care showed that veterans who received community care services only—had higher suicide rates than those who received VHA direct care alone. This highlights the importance of the VA being the primary provider and coordinator of veterans' care. This ensures veterans have access to the VA's specialized care and supportive wraparound services even when they are receiving services through the VA Community Care Network.

All community care providers can assist in the national effort to reduce veteran firearm suicide by taking the VA's critical training on how to incorporate discussions with their patients about the importance of secure firearm and medication storage, especially among at-risk veterans. Unlike VA providers, community providers are not mandated to take available training in suicide prevention and competence in lethal-means safety counseling. In fact, only a very small percentage of these community providers have completed this evidence-based, lifesaving training. Understanding the veteran experience and common mental health conditions among this population, coupled with training in evidenced-based treatments, is essential for quality care delivery, suicide prevention and successful health outcomes.

We urge Congress to enact legislation that requires specific training protocols for all VA Community Care Network mental health providers to ensure they meet the same quality and access standards as VA mental health providers. Mandating training in evidence-based therapies is vital to ensuring community partners develop core competencies for addressing veterans' unique mental health and readjustment needs—particularly for conditions frequently associated with military service. The VA should revise its agreements with community care providers to mandate that those who treat veterans receive training in suicide prevention and lethal-means safety counseling. Additionally, Congress could enforce such training requirements to ensure that all providers are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to support veterans effectively.

The conventional, one-size-fits-all approach to suicide prevention has not been effective in addressing the unique needs of the veteran population. This highlights the importance of alternative and emerging therapies, which have shown promise in being more effective than traditional methods. By exploring and implementing these innovative treatments, we can better support the mental health and well-being of veterans. The VA must also continue expanding the implementation of its Safety Planning in Emergency Departments initiative. This initiative has proven effective and is crucial in providing immediate support and post-intervention for veterans in crisis.

Finally, VHA must persist in proactively identifying and enhancing interventions for at-risk veterans through integrated clinical and community strategies. The goal is to prevent suicide and overdose deaths, particularly in areas at higher risk due to limited

access, such as rural regions, Native American reservations and Alaska's remote areas. Ensuring these vulnerable groups receive comprehensive and specialized support is essential. Legislative efforts and strong partnerships with Congress are key to creating a more accessible and effective mental health care system for all veterans.

To address the urgent need for mental health and suicide prevention efforts among veterans, it is imperative that Congress ensures the VA is provided with sufficient resources. This should include maintaining a robust suicide prevention research portfolio. By equipping the VA with the necessary support, Congress can help guarantee that all veterans have access to specialized care to tackle their unique mental health challenges and reduce the risk of suicide.

DAV looks forward to collaborating with the VA and Congress to reduce veteran suicides and improve overall mental health outcomes for those who have served our nation.

REFORM VA INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING TO SUSTAIN THE VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM AND EXPAND ITS CAPACITY TO DELIVER TIMELY, HIGH-QUALITY HEALTH CARE TO VETERANS

Another key legislative priority for DAV is addressing funding for VA's aging infrastructure. Over the past decade, the veterans health care system has experienced unprecedented growth and stress while undertaking historic reforms to ensure that veterans have timely access to comprehensive, high-quality health care. However, an increasing number of veterans have no choice but to use non-VA care due to their inability to access VA care in a timely manner.

Service-disabled veterans are prominent users of the VA health care system, which is designed to meet their unique medical, mental health and rehabilitative needs. Most veterans indicate they want to receive care at the VA whenever possible due to its comprehensive, specialized veteran-centric care and wraparound services. But for the VA to remain the primary provider of care and veterans' first choice in care, the department must improve its internal capacity to deliver timely, convenient and high-quality care. Specifically, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) must address aging infrastructure, staffing needs to meet increasing demand for care and challenges with its electronic health record (EHR) modernization efforts.

Aging Health Care Infrastructure

As we progress into 2025, the need for increased resources and budget allocations to address the VA's aging health care infrastructure is essential. While private sector health facilities have a median age of approximately 11 years, VA facilities have a median age of nearly 50 years. Renovating older facilities is challenging, as they were not originally designed to support the technological and design innovations necessary for modern health care delivery.

To continue being the primary health care provider of choice for our veterans, the VA must improve its internal capacity by building new facilities or modernizing existing ones to better meet the needs of current and future veterans. Achieving these goals will require the VA and Congress to work collaboratively to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to modernize the department's infrastructure and improve project management of VA capital asset programs. Therefore, it is imperative for Congress to significantly increase construction funds for health care facilities to expand the VA's internal capacity to care for our veterans. This investment will ensure our veterans receive the highest standard of care in facilities that reflect our nation's gratitude and respect for their service.

Vacancies and Staffing Shortages

The VA's fiscal year (FY) 2025 budget request submitted in March 2024 called for just over 448,000 employees, a decrease of more than 10,000 from the 2024 estimated workforce levels—with most of the workforce reduction coming from VHA. This request came even as the veteran community stressed the importance of ensuring the department continues to build its internal capacity to deliver more timely health care and benefits to veterans, especially as the VA provides a record number of toxic-exposed veterans and their survivors expanded health care and benefits under the PACT Act.

VHA notes it intends to continue its strategic hiring initiatives in FY 2025, but recently acknowledged it would have to hire at least 5,000 employees in the current fiscal year in order to meet veteran needs. Most of these positions are believed to be related to the mental health care profession, but the department continues to have a need for registered nurses (RNs), licensed practical nurses (LPNs) and certified nurse assistants (CNAs) to meet the ever-increasing demand for care.

Congress must enact legislation and increase funding to support recruitment, education, expansion and retention efforts to improve the VA's workforce. Additionally, Congress must address a VHA estimated budget shortfall to ensure it can continue to provide care to a record number of veterans seeking that care.

Information Technology and Electronic Health Record Modernization

The VA has faced persistent challenges in modernizing its IT systems, even with significant resources being provided by Congress. While EHR modernization efforts have seen mixed results, investing in IT and EHR modernization must continue; it is essential to ensure our veterans receive the exceptional care they deserve. Outdated IT systems are inefficient and costly. Modernizing systems will help improve operational efficiency, reduce administrative burdens and allow providers to focus on patient care. The growing importance of telehealth underscores the need for robust IT systems to support remote consultations and seamless transfer of information. Advanced security features in modern IT and EHR systems are better able to protect sensitive veteran information from cyberthreats. Adapting to future technological advancements also ensures the VA remains at the forefront of health care innovation.

Modernizing the VA's IT infrastructure and EHR systems as we advance into 2025 and beyond is essential to meet the evolving needs of our veterans. Modern EHR systems will provide real-time access to patient data, enabling health care providers to make swift, informed decisions, thereby enhancing patient care and safety. Seamless information sharing among providers ensures coordinated care and is essential for managing chronic conditions and avoiding unnecessary hospitalizations. We urge Congress to maintain oversight of these initiatives and to work closely with the VA to move this vital initiative forward.

Expanding Access to VA Care Through Telehealth and Virtual Health Services

Telehealth technology has the potential to bridge many gaps and ensure veterans receive the care they deserve. In FY 2024, nearly half of veterans who received care from the VA did so using virtual health care services, significantly expanding access to VA care, especially in rural and remote locations. To fill gaps created by provider shortages, address long travel distances to health care facilities and help veterans overcome limited transportation options, the VA must continue to leverage and build its infrastructure for virtual health care services.

We urge the committee to support the proposed elimination of copayments for all VA telehealth services and the establishment of a grant program to fund designated VA telehealth access points in non-VA facilities. This program, known as Accessing Telehealth Through Local Area Stations (ATLAS), would provide funding to organizations—including nonprofits and private businesses—to offer veterans comfortable, private spaces equipped with high-speed internet access and the technology to meet with VA providers remotely. Expanding telehealth access has the potential to greatly improve the health and well-being of rural veterans, reduce wait times for appointments, and ensure veterans can access care where and when they need it.

The VA's Fourth Mission

The VA's three primary missions are to care for our ill and injured veterans; educate and train our nation's health care professionals; and conduct veteran-focused research to ensure access to high-quality, veteran-centric care. However, the VA's Fourth Mission is equally crucial: enhancing national preparedness for war, terrorism, emergencies and natural disasters. This responsibility involves supporting emergency management and public health at national, state and local levels. The VA's significant role during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated its importance, as the department not only continued to care for enrolled veterans but also supported the nation's medical system.

However, to fully meet the needs of enrolled veterans and ensure the continuity of health care during emergencies, we must allocate additional resources specifically for the department's Fourth Mission. Investing in the VA's Fourth Mission strengthens our national resilience and preparedness. By ensuring the VA remains the most prepared

and responsive integrated health care system in the nation, we not only benefit our veterans but also reinforce our national emergency response capabilities. The VA must maintain sufficient health care capacity to meet its Fourth Mission functions during national emergencies while ensuring veterans continue to have uninterrupted and timely access to VA health care. Meeting the needs of our nation's veterans and acting as a back-up to the nation was especially important during COVID-19 pandemic where VA fulfilled its critical mission and acted with distinction during this national emergency.

STRENGTHENING AND IMPROVING VETERANS AND SURVIVORS BENEFITS

Messrs. Chairmen, despite notable progress over the past decade, wounded, ill and injured veterans and their survivors continue to face barriers and inequities in securing financial stability. These challenges stem from unjust practices and the failure to provide parity with comparable government-provided civilian benefits.

Currently, two groups of veterans are eligible to receive both full military retirement pay and VA compensation: those under concurrent retirement plans and longevity retirees with a VA disability rating of at least 50%. However, veterans with a VA disability rating of 40% or lower and those medically retired under Chapter 61 experience offsets, where every dollar of VA disability compensation reduces their retirement pay. These veterans are effectively funding their VA compensation out of their retirement benefits, despite having earned both separately. This offset is inherently unjust.

DAV calls on Congress to enact legislation to eliminate this long-standing and inequitable offset between military retirement pay and VA disability compensation for all eligible veterans, including Chapter 61 medically retired veterans. Similarly, veterans who receive separation pay from the Department of Defense must repay those funds if they later become eligible for VA disability compensation. Because separation payments are unrelated to service-connected disabilities, withholding VA disability benefits to recover these payments is unfair. DAV urges Congress to enact legislation to end the practice of withholding VA disability compensation based on the receipt of military separation payments, ensuring veterans retain both benefits earned through service.

While the VA rightly prioritizes the needs of veterans, we must not overlook the families, caregivers and survivors who share the burden of their sacrifice.

Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), created in 1993, provides support to surviving spouses of service members who die in the line of duty or as a result of service-connected conditions. However, the current DIC benefit is insufficient to ensure economic stability for survivors. For example, a 100% service-disabled veteran with a spouse receives approximately \$4,045 per month, while surviving spouses receive only \$1,653—a mere 41% of the veteran's compensation. In contrast, survivors of federal civil service retirees receive up to 55% of the retiree's benefits under the Federal Employees Retirement System or Civil Service Retirement System. This

disparity highlights the inequity between the benefits provided to survivors of federal employees and those of our nation's veterans.

Veterans' surviving spouses eligible for DIC should at least have parity with federal civil service survivors and receive 55% of their veterans' disability compensation rate. This increase to DIC payments would equate to approximately \$6,860 more per year. DAV urges Congress to enact legislation to increase DIC payments to 55% of the compensation for a 100% service-disabled veteran with a spouse and index the benefit to inflation to ensure fair and meaningful support for survivors.

Another challenge survivors face is the remarriage penalty. Surviving spouses lose eligibility for DIC benefits if they remarry before the age of 55. While lowering the remarriage age from 57 to 55 in 2021 was an improvement, the penalty remains unjust for younger survivors. DAV calls on Congress to enact legislation to eliminate the remarriage age restriction for DIC recipients, ensuring that surviving spouses are not penalized for rebuilding their lives through remarriage.

These measures are vital to address long-standing inequities and ensure that veterans, their families and their survivors receive the justice and support they have earned through sacrifice and service.

CREATE ASSISTED-LIVING CARE OPTIONS FOR DISABLED VETERANS

Another critical legislative priority for DAV in 2025 is ensuring service-disabled veterans have access to a full continuum of long-term care (LTC) services, including assisted-living care options. With a rapidly aging veteran population and the increasing complexity of veterans' health care needs, revising, expanding and adapting existing long-term care programs and supports is essential.

Aging and Service-Disabled Veterans

An estimated 8.3 million veterans are currently age 65 or older, with 4.9 million age 75 or older and 1.3 million age 85 or older. The VA projects that in the next decade, the number of veterans age 85 and older will rise by 33%, and the subset of women veterans in this age group could more than double. This mirrors the aging trend of the general population and poses a strain on our nation's health care infrastructure.

To meet aging veterans' needs, the VA operates several LTC and caregiver support programs, including:

- Homemaker and Home Health Aide Care
- Home Based Primary Care
- Medical Foster Care
- Skilled Home Health Care
- Respite Care
- Adult Day Health Care

- Caregiver Support Program
- Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers

The VA's Geriatric and Extended Care program also includes a range of long-term supportive services, including institutional LTC through Community Living Centers, State Veteran Homes and contracted community nursing homes. Unfortunately, funding has not kept pace with growing needs and challenges, such as workforce shortages, inadequate specialty LTC services and geographic barriers that pose access issues in certain locations.

Additionally, the percentage of veterans with disability ratings of 70% or higher who are age 85 or older is expected to grow by almost 600% by 2037. Tens of thousands of veterans with disability ratings of 50% and 60% may need extended care but do not have mandatory eligibility for such care. An increasing number of aging women veterans will also require extended care services, necessitating appropriate changes to meet standards for safety and privacy.

As noted above, there is a gap for veterans who are unable to remain in their homes but do not yet require intensive nursing home care. An assisted-living care program would help fill this gap, offering semi-independent living with individualized supportive services for daily living activities.

We urge Congress to increase resources for expanding home-based services, modernizing and expanding VA Community Living Centers and State Veterans Homes, and creating assisted-living care options for service-disabled veterans. Legislation should also expand the VA's benefits package to include mandatory eligibility for long-term nursing home care for service-disabled veterans rated 50% and 60%. This will help ensure that veterans can live with dignity and independence to the greatest extent possible and enjoy the quality of life they have earned through their service.

DAV Caregivers Support

Caregivers—often family members—provide essential support to veterans that allows them to remain in their homes as they recover and age. DAV operates its own Caregivers Support initiative to help facilitate assistance and connect caregivers to an array of public and private resources that help improve the quality of life for care receivers and their caregivers. This no-cost program offers tailored support and resources to veteran caregivers or friends, family members and loved ones who are caregivers for veterans.

Investing in DAV Caregivers Support as part of our long-term care strategy ensures that care receivers can age with dignity while extending the time those care receivers can live in their own home. It also relieves the burden on health care systems and ensures that caregivers have the support and training they need to perform their vital roles effectively. Like all DAV programs and services, DAV Caregivers Support is free of charge. Supporting this program is not just an act of gratitude; it's a commitment to the lifelong health and happiness of our veterans, their families and their survivors.

EXPAND COMPREHENSIVE DENTAL CARE SERVICES TO ALL SERVICE-DISABLED VETERANS

Another one of DAV's key critical policy goals is to ensure all service-disabled veterans have access to comprehensive dental care services. Currently, the VA only provides full dental care to a limited number of veterans enrolled in its health care system, which includes those who have a service-connected dental disability, 100% service-disabled veterans and those receiving Total Disability Based on Individual Unemployability benefits. While certain other veterans may receive limited dental services, in total, only about 806,000 of the 9 million veteran enrollees in the VA health care system were provided dental care services in FY 2024.

The VA's health care model is specifically designed to be holistic, integrated and preventive—a system that treats the entire well-being of the veteran. However, the absence of dental care in VA health care coverage represents a significant and harmful gap. Studies have demonstrated that poor dental hygiene can lead to a variety of chronic health conditions, including serious infections from decaying and dying teeth, which, if left untreated, can become life-threatening. Many private employers and state Medicaid programs include dental care as part of a comprehensive health care package. Our nation's veterans deserve parity with these private employers and other existing federal packages, ensuring they receive the same level of support and care.

DAV urges Congress to pass legislation that would provide dental access to all service-disabled veterans enrolled within the VA health care system. Also, it is imperative that Congress provide funding to increase the number of VA dentists, oral health clinicians and technicians; open new dental clinics; and expand treatment space in VA health care facilities.

ENSURE FULL FUNDING FOR VA HEALTH CARE AND PROTECT VETERANS BENEFITS

Our nation has a sacred obligation to ensure that veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors receive the care and benefits they have rightfully earned and deserve. It is DAV's mission to ensure these promises are kept.

DAV calls on Congress to fully fund the VA to ensure that health care and benefits are available in a timely manner. Underfunding or not providing funding on time not only breaks that sacred obligation to our nation's veterans but also reduces their access to care and puts their health at risk.

In an attempt to control federal debt and deficits, Congress has adopted laws and rules to limit its ability to increase federal spending, regardless of the need for or merit of that spending. So-called "fiscal responsibility" reforms have included budget caps, sequestration and a particularly insidious mechanism called "PAYGO." This requires Congress to cut existing benefits before adding new benefits. However, unlike any other government program, veterans benefits and care have already been paid for through the sacrifices of those who served.

Additionally, over 5.6 million disabled veterans receive compensation from the VA for injuries, illnesses and disabilities caused or aggravated by their military service. In recent years, proposals have been floated to begin taxing VA disability compensation payments and count it as income when determining eligibility for other federal benefits. There is also a proposal to phase out Total Disability Based on Individual Unemployability—a disability compensation rating based on a veteran’s inability to achieve and maintain gainful employment—once a veteran reaches Social Security retirement age. Finally, there have been proposals to reduce benefit levels for disability compensation across the board for current or future veterans and to phase out lower disability compensation payments altogether.

DAV strongly urges Congress to exempt all veterans programs, benefits and services from Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act requirements, including sequestration, as well as any House and Senate PAYGO rules adopted for the 119th Congress. Lastly, any attempt to reduce, offset or tax any amount of disability compensation for service-disabled veterans is vehemently opposed by DAV and must be fully and permanently rejected by Congress.

DAV NATIONAL SERVICE PROGRAM

Claims Assistance

Messrs. Chairmen, while much of our focus in Washington, D.C., is on advocacy, DAV’s core mission nationwide involves providing direct services to America’s ill and injured veterans and the families who care for them. DAV fulfills the mandate of service most prominently through our National Service Program by directly employing a corps of national service officers (NSOs), all of whom are wartime-service-connected disabled veterans who successfully completed our 16-month formal on-the-job training program. DAV NSOs’ own personal military claims and VA health care experiences not only provide a significant knowledge base but also help promote their passion for helping other veterans through the labyrinth of the VA system. These benefits advocates are situated in spaces provided by the VA in its regional offices, as well as in other VA facilities nationwide.

With our national, department, chapter and transition service officers, as well as county veteran service officers, over 4,200 DAV benefits experts represent claimants nationwide. They serve on the front lines providing much-needed benefits advocacy to our nation’s veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. With the generous support of a grateful American public and patriotic businesses, DAV is proud to provide these services without cost to any veteran, dependent or survivor in need.

In 2024, DAV’s service program took more than 3.1 million actions to advocate for veterans and their families—representing claimants in hearings and appeals for benefits, reviewing and developing records, providing professional advice, responding to inquiries, and establishing new claims for earned benefits.

I can proudly state that DAV has the largest and most well-trained service program in the country. No other organization has more impact on empowering disabled veterans to become even more productive members of society. Over 1.1 million veterans and their survivors elected DAV to be their representation before the VA. In 2024, there were 561,358 claims presented to the Veterans Benefits Administration under DAV representation for 1,538,112 specific injuries and illnesses. Thanks to the great work of our service officers, claimants represented by DAV obtained more than \$30.4 billion in earned benefits in 2024.

Appellate Representation of Denied Claims

In addition to our work at VA regional offices, DAV employs national appeals officers who serve appellants in the preparation and presentation of written briefs for Board of Veterans' Appeals review. These elite advocates also represent appellants in formal hearings before veterans law judges. The Board is the highest appellate level within the VA, responsible for the final decision concerning entitlement to veterans benefits. More than 80% of the claims before the Board involve disability compensation issues.

In fiscal year 2024, DAV appeals officers provided representation in more than 13% of all appeals decided by the Board, which is a caseload of approximately 116,192 appeals. Of appeals represented by DAV at this level, 72% of original decisions were overturned or remanded to the regional office for additional development and readjudication.

DAV also has a pro bono representation program for veterans seeking review in the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. DAV currently works with two of the most accomplished law firms in the country dealing with veterans issues at the Court. Each case acted upon by our national appeals office in calendar year 2024 was reviewed to identify claims that were improperly denied. Thanks to DAV and our relationship with private law firms and our pro bono program, 1,393 of these cases previously denied by the Board were appealed to the Court.

These partnerships have allowed this program to grow exponentially over the past few years and would not have been possible without the coordinated efforts of DAV and two top-notch law firms: Finnegan, Henderson, Farabow, Garrett & Dunner LLP of Washington, D.C., and Chisholm, Chisholm & Kilpatrick of Providence, Rhode Island. Since the inception of DAV's pro bono program, our attorney partners have made offers of free representation to more than 24,500 veterans and have provided free representation in over 18,500 cases.

Transition Services for New Veterans

DAV continues to provide direct, on-site assistance to ill and injured active-duty military personnel through our Transition Service Program, which provides benefits counseling and assistance to separating service members seeking to file initial claims

for benefits administered through the VA. In addition to NSOs, our transition service officers (TSOs) are trained specifically to give transition presentations, review military service treatment records and initiate claims activities at nearly 100 military installations nationwide.

DAV currently employs 25 TSOs who provide free assistance to those in need. In 2024, the DAV Transition Service Program conducted over 970 briefing presentations to groups of separating service members, with more than 32,900 participants attending those sessions. They also counseled more than 39,000 people in individual interviews and electronic communications, reviewed 27,610 military service treatment records and presented over 13,900 benefits applications.

DAV remains committed to advocating for these service members to ensure that they are better informed about the benefits they have earned as a result of their military service. Through our Transition Service Program, DAV is able to advise service members of their benefits and ensure that they know about the free services we provide during every stage of the claims and appeals process.

Information Seminar Program

Another important outreach program for veterans is DAV's information seminars, which educate veterans and their families on specific veterans benefits and services. With the support of DAV's network of state-level departments and local chapters, DAV NSOs conduct these free seminars across the country.

During 2024, DAV held over 470 seminars, briefing over 18,600 veterans and their families about benefits they may be entitled to as a result of their military service. Service officers interviewed veterans and their families at these seminars and assisted in filing new claims for benefits as well.

Disaster Relief Program

DAV's Disaster Relief Program provides checks and supply kits to help veterans and their families secure temporary lodging, food and other necessities in the aftermath of natural disasters and emergencies in various areas around the nation. During 2024, DAV provided nearly \$1.5 million to more than 2,200 veterans affected by natural disasters, including hurricanes, tornados, floods and fires throughout 24 states.

In the last 10 years, DAV has disbursed 19,651 checks totaling over \$10.3 million in relief.

VOLUNTARY SERVICES

A vital part of DAV's success is the more than 21,000 DAV and DAV Auxiliary volunteers who selflessly donate their time to assist DAV's mission of empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. By enlisting the support of volunteers, DAV helps ensure that ill and injured veterans are able to attend their

medical appointments and receive care in VA medical centers, clinics and Community Living Centers. Volunteers also visit and support veterans within their communities and, in some cases, go beyond the current scope of government programs and services. Simply stated, they provide a special thanks to our nation's heroes.

If the VA had to pay federal employees for the nearly 585,000 hours of essential services that DAV in-hospital volunteers provide at no cost to veterans, the cost to taxpayers would have exceeded \$19.5 million last year.

DAV Transportation Network

The DAV Transportation Network is the largest program of its kind for veterans in the nation. This unique initiative provides free transportation to and from VA health care facilities to veterans who otherwise might not be able to obtain needed care and services. The program is operated by 133 hospital service coordinators and more than 3,800 volunteer drivers at VA medical centers across the country.

During fiscal year 2024, DAV volunteers donated over 586,000 hours of their time transporting veterans to their VA medical appointments. With most VA medical facilities returning to full operation, volunteers logged more than 9.3 million miles and provided over 235,000 rides to VA health care appointments, saving taxpayers more than \$19.6 million. Since our national Transportation Network began in 1987, over 20 million rides have been provided, with volunteers transporting veterans more than 761 million miles.

We are also very pleased to report that in 2024, DAV donated 70 new vehicles to VA facilities to use for transporting veterans, at a cost of more than \$3.2 million. In 2025, we plan to donate 100 additional vehicles to the VA, at a cost of more than \$4.7 million. DAV's efforts were again supported by Ford Motor Co., with the presentation of five new vehicles to the DAV Transportation Network. To date, Ford donations have exceeded more than \$6.4 million toward the purchase of 269 vehicles to support this critical transportation program. DAV is very thankful for Ford Motor Co.'s collaboration and its continued support and commitment to the men and women who have served our nation.

DAV's commitment to ensuring veterans can access the care they earned is strong and lasting. Since 1987, we have deployed DAV vehicles in every state and nearly every congressional district in order to serve our nation's ill and injured veterans, many of whom are your constituents. DAV has donated a total of 3,833 vehicles, with a value of nearly \$94 million, to the VA since the program began transporting veterans to their medical appointments.

DAV Local Veterans Assistance Program

DAV created the Local Veterans Assistance Program (LVAP) to facilitate and recognize initiatives in which volunteers can contribute their skills, talents, professional abilities and time in ways that benefit veterans residing within a volunteer's local

community. DAV and DAV Auxiliary volunteers have answered that call in full measure. From July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, LVAP volunteers performed buddy checks, delivered groceries and provided other help to our nation's heroes in a variety of ways. Overall, they donated more than 2.3 million hours of service to ensure that no veteran in need of help was left behind. We see examples of this each and every day, highlighting the principal objective of our organization: keeping our promise to America's veterans.

Our LVAP volunteers contribute time and energy for various activities that include but are not limited to:

- State department- and chapter-level volunteer benefits advocacy
- Outreach at events such as Homeless Veterans Stand Downs and a volunteer presence at National Guard mobilization and demobilization sites
- Direct assistance to veterans, their families and their survivors, including home repairs, maintenance and grocery shopping, among many other supportive activities

To date, LVAP volunteers have donated more than 19.6 million volunteer hours in their local communities. We believe this important program makes a difference in the lives of all of those we serve.

Mentorship and Rehabilitation

Another innovative program offered by DAV is our mentorship program, which operates in collaboration with the Boulder Crest Foundation at locations in Virginia and Arizona. Boulder Crest is committed to improving the physical, emotional, spiritual and economic well-being of our nation's military members, veterans, first responders and their family members. DAV, in partnership with the Gary Sinise Foundation, participates in annual retreats for ill and injured veterans. DAV also sponsors all-female veteran cohorts. In 2024, 40 veterans were a part of these life-changing retreats. Since 2015, 334 veterans have participated in this alternative program that offers new and holistic ways to help veterans who are struggling to overcome the challenges that often follow military service.

DAV leaders, including DAV past national commanders, national service officers and other DAV members, have served as mentors at these retreats for the latest generation of seriously injured veterans. Spouses of many of these leaders have also served as mentors to the caregivers of participants and imparted the knowledge and understanding that comes with decades of serving as caregivers.

Adaptive Sports

Messrs. Chairmen, DAV is especially proud of our adaptive sports programs and associated events that directly improve the lives and well-being of our most profoundly injured veterans. Working in cooperation with the VA's Adaptive Sports Program, DAV is proud to co-present the annual National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic and the National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic.

For nearly four decades, DAV and the VA have teamed up for the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, often referred to as “Miracles on the Mountainside.” Last year, nearly 400 veterans were able to participate in this unique clinic, which promotes rehabilitation and restoration by coaching and encouraging veterans with severe disabilities to conquer adaptive skiing, curling, ice hockey, and other sports and adaptive recreational activities. Often, this event offers veterans their very first experience in winter sports and gives them motivation to take their personal rehabilitation to a higher level than they may ever have imagined. Participants have included veterans with multiple amputations, traumatic brain and spinal cord injuries, severe neurological deficits and total blindness.

The 38th National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic was hosted April 1–7, 2024. This year’s event is scheduled for March 31–April 5 in Snowmass, Colorado.

The National Disabled Veterans Golf Clinic provides legally blind and other eligible disabled veterans opportunities to develop new skills and strengthen their self-confidence through adaptive golf, bowling, cycling and other activities. Attending veterans participate in therapeutic adaptive sports activities that demonstrate that a visual, physical or psychological disability need not be an obstacle to an active and rewarding life. Veterans from all eras have attended our clinics, including many who were injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. DAV has proudly co-presented this event since 2017. We are happy to report that the 30th anniversary event near Iowa City, Iowa, Sept. 8–13, 2024, was also at full capacity. This year’s event is scheduled for September 7–12.

Both of these exceptional physical rehabilitation programs have transformed the lives of some of America’s most severely injured and ill veterans. These unique programs help them rebuild their confidence, compensate for their injuries and regain balance in their lives. I invite all members of these committees to come and experience these events with DAV leaders this year.

The Next Generation of Volunteers

Each year, DAV awards scholarships to deserving youth volunteers. These outstanding young people, who participate as DAV volunteers in the VA Voluntary Service Program and/or LVAP, donate their time and provide compassion and support to ill and injured veterans. They represent not just our next generation of volunteerism but also the future of our nation.

We are excited to present 10 scholarships annually for a total of \$110,000, with the top scholarship of \$30,000. The top award will be presented at the 2025 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention later this year.

Since the scholarship program’s inception, DAV has awarded 241 individual scholarships valued at nearly \$2 million, enabling exceptional young people to pursue their goals in higher education and experience the significant rewards of volunteering.

DAV is very proud of this program, and we are honored to award these scholarships to worthy student volunteers.

Messrs. Chairmen, DAV is extremely humbled by the service provided by our volunteers, many of whom are ill or injured veterans themselves or family members of such veterans. These volunteers continue to selflessly serve the needs of our nation's disabled veterans on a daily basis, and we applaud their compassion and dedication.

EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The journey from injury to recovery cannot be completed until veterans are able to find meaning in life and regain purpose after injury or serious illness. For those who are able, working to care and provide for themselves and their families is a fundamental principle. Each year, thousands of men and women make the transition from military to civilian life, and DAV remains dedicated to providing our employment services to all who have served and their spouses. Specifically, DAV remains fully committed to ensuring that they gain the tools, resources and opportunities they need to competitively enter the job market and secure meaningful employment or to pursue their own paths to success through entrepreneurship.

DAV believes in the potential of disabled veterans and spouses and works tirelessly to remove barriers so they can achieve their professional goals. In partnership with RecruitMilitary, since 2014, DAV has annually hosted over 100 traditional and virtual career fairs. DAV utilizes digital resources to connect employers, franchisers and educational institutions with active-duty service members, Guard and Reserve component personnel, veterans, and spouses.

DAV's efforts to connect veterans with careers significantly contributed to the historically low veteran unemployment rate of approximately 2.8% that our nation arrived at just before the dramatic, adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. From June 2014 through December 2024, DAV hosted over 1,000 in-person and virtual career fairs, resulting in over 190,000 job offers extended to over 340,000 participants. During 2024, we supported both in-person and virtual career fairs nationwide, with 78 in-person and 18 virtual events. In 2025, we will host over 100 career fairs. We encourage you to share with your constituents our full schedule of career fairs, which can be found at [davjobfairs.org](https://dajobfairs.org). Please let them know that companies are aggressively recruiting and hiring military veterans because they know the value veterans and their spouses bring to their organizations.

In addition to our sponsored veteran career fairs each year, DAV works directly with over 340 companies seeking the many talents and skills they know veterans possess. Moreover, DAV provides a multitude of resources that veterans can easily access within our employment resources webpage at jobs.dav.org, including a job search board offering more than a quarter-million current employment opportunities around the world, direct links to companies, resources for employers and other helpful information.

Additionally, DAV expanded our efforts to recognize outstanding companies that are not only veteran-friendly but veteran-ready—companies that fully understand the value and importance of veterans in their workplace and demonstrate solid recruiting, hiring and retention efforts. DAV’s Patriot Employer recognition program provides well-deserved recognition to many outstanding companies and encourages others to follow suit. We invite you to visit patriotemployers.org and nominate one or more companies in your respective districts and states.

Furthermore, DAV continued our partnership with “Hiring America,” the foremost voice in televised programs dedicated solely to helping veterans secure meaningful employment opportunities. Each episode features companies with outstanding veteran-hiring initiatives and shares insights from business leaders, career counselors and human resource specialists. With the program’s projected reach of nearly 3 million viewers—including those on American Forces Network (AFN)—we are very excited about this addition to the growing number of tools and resources that DAV provides to veterans seeking employment and companies that want to hire them.

DAV has expanded our published resource [*The Veteran Advantage: DAV Guide to Hiring and Retaining Veterans With Disabilities*](#) for employers to provide companies, hiring managers or other human resources professionals with a solution-oriented, practical and strategic approach to hiring and retaining veterans with disabilities. We are pleased with the ongoing positive response to our hiring guide, and we will keep this valuable information up to date and available to companies who visit our employment resources every day. We encourage you and your staff to visit jobs.dav.org to download a copy of our hiring guide, or we would be happy to provide you with copies of the printed version.

In 2021, DAV took a dramatic leap forward in assisting entrepreneurs in the veteran- and military-connected community, including spouses, with the acquisition of DAV Patriot Boot Camp, which was formerly an independent 501(c)(3) charity. In doing so, DAV has added to a community of thousands of entrepreneurs, supporters and mentors who participate in formal and informal training to make the business world more accessible to those who served. This community within DAV provides a network of support and resources to veterans and spouses who wish to change the world and contribute to our nation through their ventures.

DAV hosted two significant in-person training events in DAV Patriot Boot Camp’s inaugural year, three events in 2022 and four events in 2023, including an accelerator program. In 2024, DAV Patriot Boot Camp continued its impressive growth, hosting three in-person events, bringing the total to 24 in-person programs since its inception. This, combined with seven virtual events, has affected over 1,100 veteran entrepreneurs nationwide. A significant milestone was achieved in 2024 with the inaugural DAV Patriots Pitch competition held at the DAV national convention, where the winner received \$15,000 in non-dilutive capital.

DAV Patriot Boot Camp also provides monthly webinars and additional resources to empower founders to succeed. This initiative complements DAV’s ongoing efforts to

support and advocate on behalf of service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses.

In 2025, DAV Patriot Boot Camp will continue to expand its reach with three in-person cohorts scheduled for February, May and September. The February and May cohorts will take place in Erlanger, Kentucky, while the September event is tentatively planned to be hosted by MX in Lehi, Utah. In addition to the direct service this program provides to veterans and spouses, it helps prepare and inform our advocacy.

We invite you to attend one of these transformational events yourself and to encourage entrepreneurs to attend and prospective mentors in your constituencies to volunteer.

DAV CHARITABLE SERVICE TRUST

While many programs support our nation's ill and injured veterans, there remain unmet needs and creative solutions that deserve our support. Formed in 1986, the DAV Charitable Service Trust is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization serving primarily as a source of grants for qualifying organizations throughout the nation. As an affiliate of DAV, the Trust strives to meet the needs of ill and injured veterans through financial support of programs and services that provide direct support to veterans and their families.

DAV established the Trust to advance initiatives, programs and services that may not easily fit into the scheme of what is traditionally offered through VA programs or by DAV departments and other veterans organizations in the community. Nonprofit organizations meeting the direct service needs of veterans, their dependents and their survivors are encouraged to apply for financial support. Since the first grant was awarded in 1988, over \$177 million has been invested to serve the interests of our nation's heroes.

To fulfill the Trust's mission of service, grants are offered to organizations to ensure quality care and support for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, substance use challenges, amputations, spinal cord injuries and other combat-related injuries. The Trust also fuels efforts to combat hunger and homelessness among veterans, with priority given to long-term service projects that provide meaningful support to unserved and underserved veterans. Initiatives for evaluating and addressing the needs of veterans from every service era and conflict are encouraged.

Typically, grants are awarded to programs offering:

- Food, shelter and other necessities to veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- Mobility items or assistance specific to veterans with blindness, vision loss, hearing loss or amputations
- Qualified therapeutic activities for veterans and/or their families
- Physical rehabilitation, mental health and suicide prevention services

In 2020, a \$1 million grant was awarded to Save A Warrior, a nonprofit organization committed to ending the staggering suicide rate plaguing veterans, active-duty military and first responders. The grant was used to support the construction and development of Save A Warrior's National Center of Excellence for Complex Post-Traumatic Stress in Hillsboro, Ohio, to provide a healing outlet for ill and injured veterans combating suicide and mental health issues. In 2021, the Trust provided another \$200,000 grant for programming, and the center opened in June 2022. Save A Warrior received an additional \$1 million grant in November 2022 to offer trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, relevant 12-step programs, cognitive processing therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques and resources to participants.

The Trust continued its partnership with the organization in 2023 by awarding a \$2 million grant for general operating costs and construction expenses for lodging at the S/SGT Dick Wood Warrior Village. The lodges are located in a peaceful, wooded area near their National Center of Excellence, and amenities include comfortable sleeping quarters, communal areas for group interactions, dedicated meditation rooms, and expansive outdoor spaces ideal for both physical activities and quiet contemplation. In 2025, Save A Warrior will extend its healing cohorts to the spouses and adult children of veterans in an effort to strengthen family dynamics and promote healing across the entire household. The Trust awarded a \$1 million grant in 2024 to support this new initiative.

DAV has also provided nearly \$1.3 million to Boulder Crest retreats, where DAV leaders and spouses serve as mentors for the latest generation of seriously injured veterans and their caregivers.

The Trust is dedicated to making a positive difference in the lives of America's most deserving individuals and their loved ones. As long as veterans experience unemployment, homelessness, and physical and psychological illnesses, the need continues for innovative programs and services to address these challenges.

By supporting these initiatives and programs, the Trust furthers the mission of DAV. For over a century, DAV has directed its resources to the most needed and meaningful services for the nation's wounded, ill and injured veterans and their families. Significantly, the many accomplishments of both DAV and the Trust have been made possible through the continued support and generosity of corporate partners, individuals and DAV members who remain faithful to our mission.

LEGISLATION

Messrs. Chairmen, DAV's stance on legislation is approved by our members in the form of adopted resolutions, calling for program, policy and legislative changes to improve health care services and benefits for wartime-service-disabled veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. Outlined below is a partial list of DAV's legislative resolutions approved at our 2024 national convention. On behalf of DAV, I ask members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees to consider the merit of these proposals and use them to draft and enact legislation.

DAV's [2024–2025 Legislative Resolution book](#) is available on DAV's website.

Disability Compensation and Other Benefits

- Support legislation to provide service connection for disabling conditions resulting from toxic and environmental exposures.
- Support legislation to improve and reform Dependency and Indemnity Compensation.
- Support legislation to remove the prohibition against concurrent receipt of military retired pay and veterans disability compensation for all veterans.
- Support legislation that prohibits Special Separation Benefit payments from being withheld from VA disability compensation payments.
- Oppose reduction, taxation or elimination of veterans benefits.
- Support legislation for studies and establishing presumptive diseases related to PFAS exposure.
- Support legislation to provide studies, health care and benefits resulting from toxic exposures at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in Uzbekistan.
- Support legislation to increase disability compensation.
- Support oversight of VA practices in evaluating disability claims for residuals of military sexual trauma.
- Support legislation that would exempt the benefits paid to wartime-service-connected disabled veterans from the “PAYGO/CUTGO” provisions of the Budget Enforcement Act.
- Increase the grant and specially adaptive equipment rates for automobiles and other conveyances for eligible disabled veterans.
- Support legislation to ensure that Total Disability Based on Individual Unemployability remains available for all veterans in need regardless of age or receipt of any other earned federal benefits.
- Support legislation to improve the VA Fiduciary Program.
- Increase the VA Home Improvement and Structural Alterations Grant.
- Support an increase in the VA burial allowance for service-connected disabled veterans, and provide automatic annual adjustments.

Medical and Health Care Services

- Improve and enhance resources for VA mental health programs and suicide prevention.
- Enhance medical services and benefits for women veterans.
- Support equity in access to services and benefits for racial and ethnic minority service-connected disabled veterans.
- Provide comprehensive dental care to all service-connected disabled veterans within the VA health care system.
- Enhance long-term services and supports for service-connected disabled veterans.
- Support legislation to improve and provide comprehensive services for caregivers of severely wounded, injured and ill veterans of all eras.
- Strengthen and protect the VA health care system.

- Ensure a safe, secure and effective electronic health record for veterans that allows the VA to fulfill core missions of patient care, research and training.
- Support effective recruitment, retention and development of the VA health care system workforce.
- Ensure veterans have quality and timely access to health care from the Veterans Health Administration and Veterans Community Care Program providers.
- Support VA research into the medical efficacy of cannabis for treatment of service-connected disabled veterans.
- Support humane, consistent pain management programs in the veterans health care system.
- Support VA medical and prosthetic research programs.
- Support legislation to eliminate or reduce VA and Department of Defense health care copayments for service-connected disabled veterans.
- Support legislation directing the VA to research and make available effective psychedelic compounds for treating mental health conditions and traumatic brain injury.

General issues

- Support sufficient, timely and predictable funding for all VA programs, benefits and services.
- Support licensure and certification of active-duty service personnel.
- Provide adequate funding and permanency for veterans employment and/or training programs.
- Protect veterans from employment discrimination when receiving health care for service-connected conditions.
- Support renewed prisoner-of-war/missing-in-action discussions.
- Support legislation to strengthen and protect Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses.
- Support legislation to create, improve and reform federal programs for service-disabled veteran entrepreneurship.
- Support the continued growth of Veterans Treatment Courts for justice-involved veterans.
- Support veterans' preference in public employment.
- Support adequate air travel accommodations for disabled veterans.
- Provide scam and fraud protection for veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors.
- Support legislation to regulate the VA's use of artificial intelligence (AI) and automated tools in medical and benefit settings while requiring adequate oversight and transparency in the use and outcomes of AI implementation.

CONCLUSION

Messrs. Chairmen, DAV has a proud 100-year history of tireless advocacy for America's disabled veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. Our organization has come before these committees many times to highlight the challenges disabled veterans face and the critical need for health care, benefits and supportive

services so they can rehabilitate and live their lives with respect and dignity despite experiencing life-changing physical and mental wounds. We recognize and appreciate your unwavering commitment to these issues—and to the men and women who served—especially during difficult times.

As President Ronald Reagan said, “Veterans know better than anyone else the price of freedom, for they’ve suffered the scars of war. We can offer them no better tribute than to protect what they have won for us. That is our duty. They have never let America down. We will not let them down.”

To me, those words describe the importance of our work. It has been the honor of my life to serve our great country and DAV. And it is on our members’ behalf that I can call on everyone here today to live up to the words of President Reagan.

Thank you for the opportunity to present DAV’s legislative priorities and highlight the many services we provide to America’s injured and ill veterans and their families, caregivers and survivors. May God continue to bless DAV, the men and women who serve our great nation, and the United States of America.

This concludes my statement.