

Testimony of



Legislative Priorities
&
Policy Initiatives *for the*
119th Congress, Second Session

Presented by

Tom Burke
National President

Before the
House and Senate
Veterans Affairs Committees

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Chairman Moran, Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Blumenthal, Ranking Member Takano, Members of Congress:

I appear before you today as a Vietnam veteran and the proud president of Vietnam Veterans of America, an organization born not from comfort or consensus, but from necessity.

**Our motto is simple, and it is unyielding:
“Never Again Will One Generation of Veterans Abandon Another.”**

That promise was forged by Vietnam veterans who came home to a country that did not know what to do with us. We did not return to parades or gratitude. Too often, we returned to silence, skepticism, or hostility. Some questioned our service. Some questioned whether Vietnam was even a real war.

But we knew the truth. We learned quickly that if veterans did not fight for each other, no one else would. So we fought. We fought for ourselves when no one else would. And we won battles many said could not be won.

Long before PTSD had a name, Vietnam veterans forced this nation to recognize those invisible wounds as real injuries. Long before Agent Orange or toxic exposure were politically safe to acknowledge, we demanded accountability for harms caused in service to this country.

There were no playbooks and no large budgets — only conviction, persistence, and the refusal to be ignored. That is how Vietnam Veterans of America was built. And that spirit has never faded. That is who we are. We may not have the largest balance sheets, but our passion is rooted in lived experience and the hard, hard knowledge of what happens when a nation looks away from those it sent to war.

That is why, although our name reflects one generation, our mission has never been confined to one. We speak today not only for Vietnam veterans, but for all veterans. Because we know what abandonment looks like, and we will not allow it to be repeated.

Vietnam Veterans of America wants to reaffirm our strong commitment to working in partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to strengthen outreach, access, and trust across the entire veteran community. Our mission has always been grounded in one simple but powerful truth: service to our nation matters.

Whether a veteran served in combat or non-combat roles, in the air, on the sea, or on land, before or after 9/11, their honorable service is worthy of respect and recognition. The uniform does not measure sacrifice solely by exposure to enemy fire. It represents commitment, discipline, readiness, and a willingness to stand in defense of the United States whenever called.

We recognize the invaluable contributions of our Cold War veterans and those who stood watch during periods often described as “peacetime,” yet marked by real-world tensions, deterrence missions, and global instability. Their vigilance helped prevent conflict and preserved freedom. They are an essential part of the fabric of this great nation.

Too many veterans across generations have hesitated to seek VA services because they feel unworthy or believe their service does not “measure up.” That belief is both heartbreaking and incorrect. VVA is committed to expanding multigenerational outreach programs that connect veterans and their families to the benefits and services they have earned. We will work alongside the VA and partner organizations to ensure veterans understand that their honorable service, regardless of era or occupational specialty, entitles them to care, respect, and support.

We also acknowledge that, over time, legislative focus on specific conflicts or service periods, while often necessary and well-intentioned, has sometimes unintentionally contributed to fractures within the broader veteran community. VVA’s goal is not to divide, but to unify. We are prepared to collaborate with all organizations and leaders willing to set aside partisan rhetoric and political noise in favor of principled cooperation.

Our commitment applies to every generation: past, present, and future. VVA stands ready to build bridges, strengthen networks, and ensure that no veteran or family member feels forgotten, overlooked, or less than worthy because of when or where they served. Service is service. Honor is honor. And together, we will ensure that no veteran is left behind.

Vietnam Veterans of America has stood with all veterans harmed by toxic exposure, including those suffering from Gulf War Illness, whose symptoms were dismissed for far too long. VVA has worked tirelessly to have the needs of sick Gulf War veterans addressed with the Department of War (DoW) and the VA and has taken the lead among VSOs to address these important and specific concerns of Gulf War

veterans, who, by the way, are often the sons and daughters of Vietnam veterans. Fighting for justice regarding toxic exposures is never limited to a specific era.

Vietnam Veterans of America will continue working across the aisle on a wide range of legislative issues. We look forward to working with both Committees and every Member, offering our expertise and opinions directly to any office whenever it is helpful, because results matter more than credit.

Vietnam veterans taught this nation something important: that progress does not come from waiting to be invited. It comes from showing up, from telling the truth, and from refusing to go away. That is who we are.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Vietnam Veterans of America Legislative Priorities

Fund the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) Our long-time top priority remains a demand to properly fund the DPAA. That agency has been underfunded for years. As a Nation who is dedicated to the Warrior Ethos, especially noting we “never leave a fallen comrade behind,” we are missing the mark on recovering our fallen soldiers. We must honor the 250th anniversary of this nation and increase the DPAA budget immediately to \$250 million and add the staffing needed to bring resolution to the missing comrades who indeed have been left behind. We must not forget the prisoners of war and those who went missing in action. Since VVA’s formation, the accounting and recovery of POW/MIA servicemembers have remained our top priority. The DPAA investigates potential crash and burial sites and aids in the recovery and identification of remains in Southeast Asia and other conflict locations. To do so, it must engage in extensive research, conduct interviews, and collaborate with numerous nonprofit organizations and foreign governments. Funding the DPAA is an effective way for Congress to ensure that the families of the unaccounted-for receive the fate-clarifying information they deserve. Time is the enemy, as witnesses are passing away and identified potential sites are being altered by construction and land reclamation.

Form a Congressional Committee to Aggregate Existing Research on Biological Descendants of Veterans Exposed to Toxic Substances VVA calls upon Congress to create a federally chartered advisory committee to look at the intergenerational impact on descendants of service members and veterans who were exposed to toxic substances. This body should be charged with collecting, organizing, and rigorously evaluating existing research from VA, DoW, NIH, academic institutions, and relevant international sources concerning potential biological-descendant effects of military toxic exposures. By synthesizing the current scientific evidence, identifying gaps in knowledge, and clearly outlining areas of consensus and uncertainty, the task force would create a strong, transparent foundation to guide prudent and evidence-based next steps.

Revise the Blue Water Navy Act and Investigate Broadscale Dioxin Exposure Congress must amend the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2019 (PL 116-23) to include servicemembers who served aboard vessels that supported the war effort but were excluded from coverage. Congress must also investigate heightened dioxin exposure due to Navy water distillation methods. The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act established a presumption of Agent Orange exposure for veterans who served offshore in the territorial waters of Vietnam between January 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975. Unfortunately, the Act imposed a rough twelve-nautical-mile limit for presumed exposure. The result was the denial of presumption for the tens of thousands of sailors who served aboard nearly two dozen aircraft carriers. Dioxin does not respect arbitrary lines in the sea and can be found in most bodies of water. Before the advent of reverse osmosis systems following the Vietnam War, U.S. military vessels used multi-stage flash distillation for water purification. While this water purification method is effective at removing larger masses from potable water, condensers increase the toxicity of drinking water by increasing the concentration of dioxins and adjacent pollutants. Exposure amounts for sailors were estimated to be two to three magnitudes higher because of distiller use. It should be noted that these toxic effects were seen using systems comparable to the reverse osmosis systems used by the Navy after the Vietnam War, systems that were supposed to be more effective at removing contaminants but failed to purge dioxin and other toxins. Generations of sailors and Marines were presumably at risk of exposure. Congress is therefore obliged to compel the DoW and VA to properly investigate dioxin exposure due to these faulty water purification methods.

Suicide Prevention Initiatives The alarming rate of veteran suicides demands immediate action. According to the most recent 2026 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, the rate for veterans aged 55 to 74 years old held at 4.4 percent, and suicide rates fell by 8.1 percent for male veterans aged 75 and older who were actively engaged with VA geriatric or primary care. Veterans in crisis must have immediate access to mental health services without being turned away due to staffing shortages or funding limitations. Tragically, many veterans have taken their lives shortly after being denied access to care. When mental health services cannot be provided within 24 hours of a veteran's request, the VA must refer them immediately to the nearest veteran community care provider and provide transportation. We urge the continued funding and prioritization of alternative therapies and peer mentoring programs that provide vital support to veterans struggling with mental and physical health issues. Such initiatives can significantly reduce the suicide rate among veterans and foster a sense of community and understanding.

Addressing Homelessness Among Veterans Since the 2024 Point-in-Time (PIT) Count of homelessness in the United States, there has been nearly a 5 percent decrease, bringing the total number of veterans experiencing homelessness to an expected 31,450. The nationwide picture of veteran homelessness, however, remains complex and deeply concerning, particularly in areas like West Los Angeles. We must ensure that properties designated for homeless veterans are not repurposed for non-veteran use, as has been done in West L.A. This includes preventing such properties from being converted into civilian homeless shelters or other non-supportive uses.

Veteran Transition Assistance The move from military service to civilian life is one of the most vulnerable periods a servicemember will face. Service members leave a highly structured environment with built-in purpose, housing, healthcare, and community, and must quickly navigate employment, education, financial planning, mental health care, and family stability on their own. Without effective transition support, even highly trained and disciplined veterans can struggle with underemployment, financial hardship, homelessness, or isolation. Strong transition programs help translate military skills into civilian credentials, connect veterans to meaningful careers, and ensure access to earned benefits and healthcare. Investing in transition assistance is not simply a workforce issue; it is a moral obligation that

honors service, protects families, and reduces long-term social costs by setting veterans up for stability and success from day one of civilian life.

Enact Legislation Prohibiting the Reduction of VA Disability Compensation for Incarcerated Veterans Veterans involved with the justice system who are otherwise eligible for VA benefits served their country with distinction, and incarceration should not be used as justification for diminishing earned benefits. Congress must enact legislation prohibiting the reduction of VA disability compensation for these veterans, placing any balance above 10 percent into an escrow account until a veteran's release date. Under current regulations, benefits for these veterans are capped at 10 percent, leaving them with inadequate financial resources upon release. The natural consequence of this is an increased risk of poverty, homelessness, and recidivism for veterans and their families. By holding justice-involved veterans' money in escrow, we can reduce instability and help them return as productive members of society once they have served their time. We recommend continuing to develop comprehensive support systems to address the root causes of veteran homelessness, including mental health services, job training, and housing assistance. Legislative efforts must focus on providing the necessary resources and support to prevent homelessness among veterans. Careful oversight of new programs to address veteran homelessness must also be mandated by Congress to avoid delays and misappropriations like what has played out at the West L.A. Campus and VA Medical Center.

Order the VA to Reinstigate the Use of Physician Assistants as Mental Health Treatment Providers at VA Hospitals and Clinics Access to mental healthcare has historically been a struggle for veterans. VA is the largest centralized provider of these services, operating over 1,500 facilities where it provides mental health services to roughly 2 million veterans. The level of service, however, is grossly inadequate; an August 2023 OIG survey found that more than 75 percent of the VA's hospital networks and associated clinics reported severe shortages of mental health providers. Permitting physician assistants to practice in this space will allow for the dramatic expansion of access to mental health services for our nation's veterans.

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Funding Statement
February 24, 2026

The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For further information, contact: James McCormick
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Tom Burke

Tom Burke was elected to serve as Vietnam Veterans of America National President at VVA's 22nd National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana.

A Navy veteran, Burke volunteered for service in 1963. He was sent to Helicopter Combat Support Squad One at Ream Field, California, and in his final year, served aboard the Aircraft Carrier USS *Hancock*. Burke is a Gold Star family member who lost his brother during the Korean War.

Burke's VVA service includes three consecutive terms as National Vice President (2019-2025). He was first elected to the VVA National Board of Directors in 2009 and served as At Large Director for one term (2009-2011) and as National Region 5 Director for two terms (2015-2019). As Region 5 Director, he represented the states of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

Over his tenure at VVA, Burke has been appointed by the VVA National President as National committee Chair, Vice Chair, and as a member of several committees. He has led or has served as a member of the following VVA national committees: Government Affairs (2013-2019); Veterans Benefits Chair (2015-2019); Public Affairs (2011-15); Finance; Veterans Incarcerated; and Disciplinary.

Burke represented Ohio to VVA's Council of State Council Presidents as the president of the Buckeye State Council, a position he held for eight years. He first joined VVA in 2000, and was soon elected president of VVA Chapter 857, a position he held for eight years.

Burke's dedication to veterans, combined with his strength of leadership earned him the VVA Commendation Medal, VVA's highest award. In 2016, he was inducted into the Ohio Veterans Hall of Fame.

In his professional career, Burke spent 37 years in the Transportation & Logistics sector. Employed by the Canadian National Railroad for 27 years, he served as Market Manager for the pulp and paper division, with current annual sales more than \$14 B. Later, he was employed by the Wheeling & Lake Erie Railway, with operational control as well as marketing and sales of the intermodal Terminal operation.

After leaving the Railroad Industry, Burke moved over to the trucking side of the transportation industry, serving as Vice President of Marketing for a privately held trucking company, prior to establishing a highly successful consultancy business in Logistics.

Burke, and his wife, Robin, reside in New Philadelphia, Ohio.