

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**



STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE OFFICERS
FOR THE
JOINT HEARING OF THE HOUSE AND SENATE VETERAN AFFAIRS COMMITTEES

March 3, 2026

Presented by

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Chairmen Moran and Bost, Ranking Members Blumenthal and Takano, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee, on behalf of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO), we thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for the record. We value the steadfast congressional commitment to improving the benefits, services, and systems that directly impact veterans and their families across the nation.

Transition to Civilian Life Is Not a Series of “Warm Hand-offs”

From the moment a service member enters the military, the federal government is continuously connected to their life. Moreover, service members are connected to one another. Yet once they begin the transition to civilian life, we—Congress and veteran-serving agencies—repeatedly return to the same fundamental question: how do we do better for veterans? Too often, that conversation is organized around individual systems—benefits, health care, employment, housing—rather than the veteran’s lived experience moving through those systems.

We discuss these programs in isolation. Veterans experience them all at once.

We already know that veterans do not experience government as a seamless continuum. Instead, they encounter a series of entry points—often disconnected—each with its own rules, timelines, and expectations, say nothing of the number of forms to complete. Every transition—from uniform to civilian, from employment to benefits, from benefits to health care—introduces risk. Missed benefits, delayed care, incomplete or incorrect information, and vulnerability to exploitation are not anomalies; they are predictable outcomes of poor architecture.

This fragmentation is not caused by a lack of connection. Veterans are already technologically connected to the federal government from the moment they raise their right hand. Records, systems, and data follow them throughout their service and into their lives with VA. Nor is the system intended to serve them broken, either. Today’s VA is the amalgamation of numerous independent or unique systems over time, each with their own historic scope of practice and organizational culture. Moreover, VA is not in the fortune telling business. It cannot predict all future need of each generation of veterans that enter civilian life. With every service or wartime era comes new needs of that generation. It is safe to say that VA is in a perpetual reactive state and can never fully be as proactive as the era may demand.

So, what is missing? We have observed that the most relevant missing ingredient is *intentional continuity*—a real human connection that carries a veteran forward once service ends and follows them home into the communities where they live, work, raise families, and eventually age. Just as military members can turn to their right and left and find support in the mission, this real human connection should mirror that effective and familiar culture once they separate. NACVSO—our members—are that human connection who *already* possess the intentional continuity needed to ensure that no veteran walking through our door is ever the victim of disconnected systems.

The Veteran Lifecycle—and Where the System Breaks Down

Veterans already have experience with effective continuity. While in uniform, their pay, health care, records, and daily responsibilities are fully integrated within a single federal framework. Checking in and out of a command comes with a checklist detailing which department to go to for signatures and a deadline to get it done. There is no ambiguity about where to go or who is responsible for resolving an issue. This near constant connection allows inconsistencies to be addressed quickly and further demonstrates an important truth: when connection is continuous, human systems excel.

Continuity virtually vanishes after separation—a period when it is arguably needed the most. Separation is treated as a discrete event rather than a long-term process. While various programs introduce valuable information, resources are often presented as conditional options. Veterans leave active duty connected to federal systems *on paper* but lack a bridge to the new realities of which they ironically enter ill equipped. With no such bridge, the chasm between security and alienation widens, perpetuating the all-to-common tragedies that plague the veteran community despite being preventable.

This is not a failure of the veterans making, nor is it a failure of technology. It is a failure of system architecture. Previous generations returned to communities that provided real, human continuity that helped them translate service into stability. Today's veterans are pushed through transition systems that replace human continuity with the illusion of access, mistaking an abundance of information across various platforms for *connection*.

Once home, veterans immediately confront practical questions about employment, education, and reintegration. Where can I afford to live? Who is hiring? How are education benefits certified?

What state or local benefits might apply in this new community? These questions cannot be fully answered by federal systems alone. This is precisely where Government Veteran Service Officers—or GVSOs—already operate: translating federal policy and programs into something actionable. GVSOs are the conduit for veteran resources that exist—much like their peers in service—at the state, county, and community levels, *in addition* to those at the federal level. GVSOs – our members – are the local government equivalent to the VA.

Fragmentation creates risk. Veterans without a trusted point of contact turn to whoever answers the phone or most loudly advertises assistance. In that vacuum, unaccredited claims consultants—often referred to as “claims sharks”—thrive. Veterans seek something framed to them as “choice” not because they prefer it, but because navigating a vast and unfamiliar system *alone and completely in the dark* makes paying for help seem reasonable. It is not. This is why continuous connection to a trusted GVSO dramatically reduces both the demand for and the influence of predatory actors. We already have the tools to abolish the false dichotomy of “choice” sold to veterans. Unfortunately, not all regions of the country have invested in sound local advocacy. While there exist many reasons for this failure, the most familiar to veterans is “That’s VAs job,” to which the country’s collective reply should be “No. That’s *OUR* job.”

Recently, VA paused implementation of a proposed disability rating rule following the concerns expressed by veterans and their service organizations. This demonstrates that, when advocates are engaged, meaningful policy outcomes are stronger. We applaud VA leadership for their responsiveness to concerns voiced by those who they most affect, but we shouldn’t need to discuss these issues within the columns of *Task & Purpose* or *Stars and Stripes*. When advocates are engaged early and intentionally, we reinforce our collective commitment to veterans and reduce friction that fragmentation can cause. The commitment to veterans appears strong across the board—but architectural fragmentation is obvious even by how *we* communicate.

The same fragmentation affects health care and dependent benefits. Benefits determinations unlock access to health care, CHAMPVA, and other programs for dependents, yet these systems often fail to adequately communicate with one another. When that happens, families absorb the consequences. Yet GVSOs encounter these issues daily, routinely assisting veteran families with enrollment, denied claims, dependency status changes, and other family-related issues. GVSOs measure the veteran’s inquiry as a common life event, not as isolated administrative procedure.

There are fewer events in a veteran’s personal timeline where that continuity is more critical than in the delivery of survivor benefits. When a veteran passes away, surviving spouses are often forced to navigate complex and time-sensitive systems while grieving. There is no doubt that survivor benefits can be complex but, in many cases, the GVSO is the only consistent human connection available. This is the true test of continuity—and the role of the GVSO underscores that connection matters most when the system is hardest to navigate.

Constant Connection to a System that Works and The Role of the GVSO

GVSOs are not just another veteran support organization, they are the **local government equivalent** of federal veterans services, embedded in the communities where veterans carry out their daily lives. They represent the continuation of service once a veteran leaves uniform, translating federal programs into real-world outcomes at the city, county, state, and tribal level. When the federal veteran support systems work best, it’s because connection remains constant. GVSOs are more than an extension of that connection: they stand to the veterans left and right as the familiar face, ensuring veterans remain connected.

This distinction matters. Veterans do not experience their needs the way we distinguish them during committee hearings. They do not differentiate between federal versus local systems, or disability benefits versus health care related to their disability. These are life events and life problems that are reasonable steps with logical solutions. GVSOs live in the intersection of these systems, serving as the one who understands how federal benefits, state programs, and community resources work together. Treating GVSOs as anything less than a continuation of service creates unnecessary gaps and reinforces fragmentation that already exists. Once again, veterans are left alone and in the dark to navigate systems with a level of complexity for which they have zero training.

NACVSO represents the professionals who see the veteran lifecycle in its entirety. From discharge through employment, benefits, health care, dependency changes, and ultimately survivor benefits, GVSOs are often the veteran’s primary and most consistent source of information and assistance. Our members do not engage with veterans at a single moment in time. Their support spans decades. This perspective gives NACVSO a unique understanding of how policies perform not just on paper, but in practice.

Our members have their fingers on the pulse of the most common issues encountered by veterans and, when we converge with advocates from all corners of the country, it's not surprising that we find out that these issues do not affect veterans in the same silos as we talk about them during hearings. Because GVSOs are present, they see failures long before they appear in congressional reports. Furthermore, veterans frequently bring issues to their local service office that fall well outside formal benefits assistance. On any given day, a small, two-person county-level office may receive a call from a veteran asking for help moving furniture, resolving a housing crisis, or addressing a sudden medical hardship. While these requests may be outside the technical scope of a GVSO's role, they are never outside the GVSO's sense of responsibility.

In those moments, GVSOs do what the system often cannot. They listen. They learn about the veteran's broader circumstances—chronic pain, disability, family strain, financial stress—and they act as problem-solvers. A GVSO may not even be allowed to physically help a veteran move, but they can coordinate with a local VFW, faith-based organization, or community nonprofits to assemble volunteers who can help. This is what it means to be the local government equivalent: leveraging local services, knowing who to call, how to connect directly to local resources, and how to ensure the veteran is not left alone and in the dark simply because the problem does not have a federal form associated with it.

This is why NACVSO and its members are your indispensable partners. GVSOs ensure continuity. They are tired of “warm handoffs” because they see firsthand the disconnect behind the rhetoric and provide cohesion where others cannot. They absorb the complexity of the system so veterans and their families don't have to. And when the federal government finally sees GVSOs as the local government equivalent they are, veterans everywhere will experience support as a continuous extension of the service they once gave for the rest of us.

GVSOs are often described by VA and by Congress as trusted partners in serving veterans. That recognition is appreciated but remains rhetorical. Practice, policy, funding, and the system in its current design do not reflect the reality or the responsibilities GVSOs carry. The result is a persistent underutilization of one of the most effective veteran-facing assets in the country.

GVSOs are not confined to a single lane of service. On any given day, they help veterans secure disability compensation, navigate VA health care access and enrollment, translate dependent survivor benefits to a grieving widow, or get classes certified for a new veteran student. In the

same interaction, the same GVSO may also assist with a state property tax exemption, connect the veteran to a local Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialist for employment support, getting their veterans license plate, or otherwise coordinate with partners to meet needs that government systems are not designed to touch.

This breadth of responsibility underscores the disconnect between how GVSOs are described and how they are supported. When policy and systems fail to recognize GVSOs as the local government equivalent they are, veterans are left to bridge gaps on their own. Fully leveraging GVSOs requires intentional integration into system design, sustainable funding, and a universal understanding that their role extends into the full spectrum of veteran thriving long after they've turned in their uniform.

How This Congress Can Help

Support the Existing GVSO Mechanism

The most direct way to reinforce the continuity that GVSOs already provide is by fully implementing and funding Section 302 of the Elizabeth Dole Act. Establishing a funding mandate would ensure that knowledgeable, accredited local support is not solely determined by geography or local resources and is a consistent expectation nationwide. NACVSO helped draft this legislation—initially called the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act, or CVSO Act—and possesses the education and training infrastructure needed to support new GVSOs in communities where they do not yet exist. Rather than creating yet another new system let's work on stabilizing and scaling a proven one that keeps veterans connected long after their service has ended.

Reinforcing the Integrity of Benefit Access

Predatory actors flourish where connection is fractured. When veterans lack dependable access to ethical, accredited advocates, unaccredited claims consultants arrive ready to exploit confusion and complexity for profit, alone. Strengthening accreditation standards, enforcing meaningful penalties, and establishing trust through accountable representation are essential to protecting veterans and preserving these benefits systems. True claims integrity is achieved by ensuring veterans are never left alone and in the dark. "Choice" in this context is a false dichotomy amplified

by those wishing to deepen their pockets on the sacrifice and service of the brave men and women selfless enough to serve us. The time has come to hold accountable those who wish to exploit them.

Interlacing the Mesh Between Federal and Local Coordination

Life is not experienced in silos, and the systems designed to serve veterans should not function as if it does. Benefits, health care, education, dependency, and survivor programs should communicate across federal, state, and local levels to reflect how veterans actually live. GVSOs already perform this coordination every day without federal support or recognition that could vastly improve their ability to accomplish this function. They translate policy into veteran outcomes and bridge gaps that exist or arise between systems. Federal policy should codify, formalize, and support this role, ensuring that coordination is built in. Similar to the ways local law enforcement agencies are recognized as partners performing an essential function of governance, GVSOs are your local government equivalent to ensuring the benefits afforded veterans are faithfully executed and realized. Creating a *National Veterans Strategy* may be a start. However, without directly engaging those already in the field doing the work, what can *truly* be accomplished? Strategy without input will produce only theory; theory that will inevitably construct additional silos, missed handoffs, and lost opportunities to utilize what we already possess: a dependable infrastructure of *local government equivalents* who translate policy into action *daily* on behalf of the veterans who seek them out.

Make Continuity the Standard, Not the Exception

Veterans do not need another “warm handoff.” They want to recognize the support to their right and left in a way that is familiar and they know works. They need continuity. The veteran lifecycle demonstrates over and over that fragmentation is a failure of architecture, not of our collective intent, nor of a lack of programs created in their honor. Veterans currently navigate systems that weren’t intently designed to move cohesively alongside their lives. Rarely do the needs of veterans fall neatly into the categories we use to organize them. Continuity is the missing element, and without it, each of life’s transitions become an unnecessary foreseeable and preventable risk.

Government Veteran Service Officers are the continuity, and we are already here doing the work. We are not an enhancement; we are the local government equivalent of federal services and the natural continuation of a rhythm veterans already know and understand. If the federal government

truly views GVSOs as partners, then veterans should meet GVSOs by design instead of by chance. That means investing in what already exists: integrating GVSOs into these systems and funding the laws already on the books. If you do this, continuity will no longer depend on geography or capacity. When GVSOs are fully leveraged, veterans' outcomes improve, and they experience government as a single, continuous commitment that follows them home and stays with them for life. In other words, a rare opportunity to be proactive in their honor instead of reactive to their struggle.

Andrew Tangen

President, NACVSO
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Veterans Assistance Commission
of Lake County, Illinois

Attachment 1

Letter for the Record to the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees

Subject: Enhancing the Transition Assistance Program (TAP): Empowering Veterans to Thrive as Catalysts of Growth, Change, and Impact in Local Communities

To: The Honorable Members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs and the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

From: Kevin M. Schmiegel, Lieutenant Colonel, USMC (Ret.)
Co-Founder and CEO, ZeroMils

Dear Chairmen, Ranking Members, and Distinguished Members of the Committees,

I respectfully submit this letter to address necessary improvements to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and to encourage the Committees to consider a new and different approach — one that welcomes new and different organizations with new and different perspectives at future hearings and roundtables with both Committees going forward.

The recommendations in this letter are based on my 20-year career as a Marine Officer and a decade spent building national nonprofits like Hiring Our Heroes. Currently, I serve as the Co-Founder and CEO of ZeroMils, a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business (SDVOSB) dedicated to creating "Military Thriving" cultures and changing the broken Veteran narrative.

My suggestions for improvements are intended with one goal in mind: to empower service members and military spouses to make better, more informed decisions in transition; to thrive in their transformation as Veterans and Veteran spouses; and to continue to realize their full potential serving as catalysts for growth, impact and change at the local level. This can also be achieved with the help of subject matter experts who are on the frontlines in communities where Veterans and their families live, work and serve.

While TAP is a vital, multi-agency effort involving the Departments of War, Veterans Affairs and Labor, its current structure is part of the problem, and it continues to exacerbate a growing and systemic challenge: the transition to civilian life for Veterans is fundamentally fragmented. This "poor architecture" lacks intentional continuity that Veterans and their families need at home to ensure they have meaningful employment, purpose through continued service, connection to a tribe, good health and well-being, and the tools and resources they need to constantly seek self-improvement like they did in the military.

All of these things, which are present and effective during active duty, vanish after separation when it is needed most, leading to predictable negative outcomes. The model of jamming several days of content in TAP at the end of someone's military service, often with instructors who lack private sector experience, is leading to ill-prepared and ill-equipped Veterans and spouses in transition. Ultimately, TAP falls short because it focuses on entitlement rather than empowerment.

This is particularly evident in TAP's failure to empower service members to thrive as small business owners, which has led to an alarming decline in the number of Veterans owning a small business in the United States (from 11% in 2014 to 4.3% in 2023). For the first time since the end of World War II, Veterans are less likely to own a small business than our civilian counterparts. To put this in perspective, nearly 50% of all WWII Veterans went on to own a small business. Today less than 5% of all Post 9/11 Veterans are small business owners.

This systemic fragmentation and failure of the transition models also place an undue burden on front-line support, with County Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs) and their state equivalents often left to assist Veterans and Military Spouses who have had less-than-optimal experiences. These Government Veteran Service Officers (GVSOs), as members of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO), are the crucial "human connection" and the local equivalent of federal veteran services.

They are embedded in communities, translating federal policy and programs into actionable outcomes. GVSOs span the veteran lifecycle, assisting with everything from discharge and employment to benefits, health care, and financial stress, essentially serving as problem-solvers for issues outside the formal federal scope, including housing crises and financial stressors.

To reverse this decline and better serve those transforming into Veterans and Veteran spouses, the solution lies not solely with government or big nonprofits that champion the broken Veteran narrative, but with the vast majority of subject matter experts in the private sector that don't often get a seat at the table or a voice in hearings and at roundtable discussions with these Committees.

The solution rests with 2,650 County VSOs, over 40,000 local nonprofits, and the 1.6 million Veteran small businesses like mine. These businesses account for more than one-third of America's Veteran workforce and stand on the front lines of this challenge. They are critical to ensuring that Veterans and their families do not fall through the cracks.

I strongly urge the Committees to consider the following three improvements:

1. Empower and Engage Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (VOSBs): Integrate VOSB expertise and resources into the core transition ecosystem by increasing access to capital (including exploring options under the GI Bill), formalizing the inclusion of VOSB experts within TAP and on military installations, and ensuring Veteran small business owners and smaller, local military and Veteran nonprofits have a consistent and influential voice in policy and legislative discussions, including with these Committees.
2. Fully Fund and Stabilize the Local GVSO/CVSO Mechanism: Guarantee consistent, high-quality, local support for Veterans by fully implementing and funding Section 302 of the Elizabeth Dole Act (the CVSO Act) to stabilize the proven GVSO/CVSO system and provide the necessary intentional continuity for Veterans across the country.
3. Strengthen Coordination and Protect Benefit Integrity: Formally codify the GVSO role, ensuring seamless, continuous support is built into system design across all levels (federal, state, and local) and strengthen accreditation standards.

Thank you for your careful consideration of these issues and I look forward to working alongside you as we strive to improve the Veteran transition experience to ensure their lifelong success wherever they reside.

Very Respectfully,

Kevin M. Schmiegel
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Co-Founder & CEO, ZeroMils