

**Testimony of U.S. Rep. Ron Barber**  
**H.R. 1702 the *Veterans Transportation Service Act***

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Brownley, thank you for your leadership on this subcommittee, which is so vital to meeting the health care needs of America's veterans.

Thank you for the opportunity to attend this hearing and to offer testimony on H.R. 1702, the *Veterans Transportation Service Act*. I apologize that I cannot be here in person, as I am with the Arizona Congressional Delegation attending the funerals of nineteen firefighters who perished fighting the Yarnell Hill Fire.

Mr. Chairman, according to data provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Veterans Service Organizations, about six million veterans reside in rural areas of the United States.

Of these six million veterans, more than half are enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs healthcare system.

In my district alone, there are nearly ninety thousand veterans, many of whom live outside of the major cities in communities very far away from VA clinics or service centers. My office receives a significant number of calls every week from veterans who live in rural areas and who need medical services from the VA and for whom transportation is a major problem.

The stories that I hear from rural veterans are no different, I imagine, from those that you are hearing from veterans in your districts as well.

Those who live in rural areas are not the only veterans who need assistance. Thousands of veterans who live in the cities and towns across this nation need help with transportation as well.

In 2010, the Department of Veterans Affairs launched a Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) initiative to enhance transportation options for veterans who were seeking health care at VA facilities.

Through the Veterans Transportation Service, funding is provided to local VA facilities to hire transportation coordinators and purchase vehicles driven by VA-trained staff.

Over the course of the last two years, VTS has provided veterans with more than 199,000 trips to medical facilities, totaling more than 9.7 million miles in 37 states.

As you can tell from these numbers, this is a service that plays an important role in supporting our veterans. I believe we need to expand it so that we may assist transportation-disadvantaged veterans in other un-served or underserved areas of the country.

I have introduced H.R. 1702, along with my colleague and Vice Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Mac Thornberry, to enact a permanent reauthorization for the VTS service.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention the leadership provided by Senator Jon Tester on this issue as well; he is a champion in the Senate where this legislation also has strong bipartisan support.

Last year, the VA's Office of General Counsel raised questions as to whether the VA could hire drivers to operate the VTS without specific Congressional authorization. The program was discontinued as a direct function of the VA.

Luckily, with Senator Tester's leadership, the Congress moved quickly at the end of last year to provide the authorization needed to get the program back in operation.

That authorization will only run until the end of 2013.

Questions have been raised about the possibility of volunteers providing transportation.

We all appreciate the invaluable volunteer transportation assistance the Disabled American Veterans provide to veterans, but there are many veterans who need a service different from the one provided by the DAV. The VTS is therefore complementary, not competitive, to the DAV program.

VA Mobility Managers are trained to help make transportation decisions that are in the best interest of the veteran, often directing veterans to DAV services when appropriate and available.

VTS drivers operate Americans with Disabilities Act compliant wheelchair and stretcher vehicles.

For those veterans who are not ambulatory, who require portable oxygen, who have undergone a procedure involving sedation, or who have other clinical issues, these transportation services are critical to ensure their safe transportation to medical appointments and facilities.

One of the most important aspects of the *Veterans Transportation Service Act* is that it saves the taxpayers money.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has projected that they will save 19.2 million dollars in fiscal year 2014 alone by using the VTS for appropriate patients.

This legislation is estimated to save the VA over 100 million dollars in five years. This is money that could be well spent on other aspects of veteran care.

I believe HR 1702 is critical to the care of veterans in my Southern Arizona district and across this nation.

I urge the Committee to take up this needed legislation so that the VA can continue and expand the VTS program. Thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony, and I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.