

STATEMENT OF  
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

**H.R. 1443, H.R. 1612, H.R. 1702, H.R. 2065, and DRAFT LEGISLATION**

WASHINGTON, D.C.

JULY 9, 2013

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Auxiliaries, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on today's pending legislation.

**H.R. 1443, the Tinnitus Research and Treatment Act of 2013**

The VFW supports this legislation which would require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to recognize tinnitus as a mandatory condition for research and treatment by the VA Auditory Centers of Excellence in cooperation with the Department of Defense Hearing Center of Excellence. Characterized by a steady or intermittent ringing of the ears, tinnitus can cause sleep disruption, cognitive impairment and employment difficulties, and can worsen the symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders. Tinnitus is the most frequent service-connected disability awarded by VA among veterans of all eras. The common causes of tinnitus are acoustic trauma and traumatic brain injury, placing Iraq and Afghanistan veterans at particularly high risk due to IED blast exposure. Since 2000, the number of veterans who are service-connected for tinnitus has increased by at least 16.5 percent each year.

Although there is no known cure for tinnitus, it should not be assumed that the condition is untreatable. VA's Progressive Tinnitus Management approach, which assists tinnitus sufferers through individual counseling and support, is helping veterans better manage their symptoms. Still, more research is needed in order to identify truly effective treatments to alleviate those symptoms. This bill represents a positive first step towards achieving that goal.

## **H.R. 1612, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to convey a parcel of land in Tuskegee, Alabama, to Tuskegee University.**

The VFW supports H.R. 1612, a bill that directs the Secretary of VA to convey a parcel of land in Tuskegee, Alabama, to Tuskegee University. More than 90 years ago, Tuskegee University, a land grant university, voted to donate 300 acres of land so the United States government could build a veterans hospital. Today, 21 of the buildings, accounting for nearly 280,000 square feet of space, sit vacant on that property. Nearly half of the buildings that would accompany the transfer are former quarters for employees who worked in housekeeping within the hospital, while several others are small 500 square feet or less storage buildings.

Annually, VA spends approximately \$2 per square foot to maintain vacant space. For the buildings that fall within this land transfer, VA spends more than \$500,000 per year in maintenance. Reducing the financial burden for upkeep of these buildings and grounds will allow VA to better use those non-recurring maintenance funds to ensure the highest level of maintenance for the facilities that provide care and service to our veterans and not on buildings that are sitting vacant.

With nearly 1000 vacant or underutilized buildings within their system, the VA must work to right-size its property inventory, decreasing its footprint in some areas and increasing it in others. In doing so, VA must ensure they can provide a full continuum of care for veterans. At the Tuskegee VA Campus, programs and services have been expanded to include homeless shelters, community living facilities and women veterans services. Knowing VA has utilized as much of the property as possible, it is a financially responsible decision to return 64.5 acres of the original 300 acres land and improvements back to Tuskegee University.

## **H.R. 1702, the Veterans Transportation Service Act**

The VFW supports this legislation to permanently authorize the Veterans Transportation Service (VTS). This program, commissioned by the VHA Office of Rural Health in 2010, has greatly improved access to care for rural and seriously disabled veterans by allowing VA facilities to establish and coordinate networks of local transportation providers, including community and commercial transportation providers, and government transportation services. The VTS augments veterans service organizations' volunteer-based transportation services, which are limited to transporting ambulatory veterans, and supplements the existing beneficiary travel programs of mileage reimbursement, which does not provide assistance with the coordination of transportation for those who need it, and special mode travel, for which few veterans medically qualify.

The VTS suffered a major setback in 2012 when it was temporarily suspended following a determination by the VA Office of General Counsel that VA lacked the statutory authority to hire paid drivers to transport veterans. Congress wisely passed a one-year authorization of the VTS program in January 2013, but a long-term fix is still needed.

The VFW believes that unnecessary hardships associated with accessing VA health care should be eliminated at every opportunity. This legislation would guarantee the continuation and future expansion of VTS, which plays a critical role in minimizing the challenges many veterans face in traveling to their appointments due to physical disabilities or great distances.

## **H.R. 2065, the Safe Housing for Homeless Veterans Act**

The VFW supports this legislation which would require facilities that house homeless veterans to meet all relevant local building codes in order to receive per diem payments under the VA Homeless Providers Grant Per Diem Program. Currently, VA is required to check housing certificates before awarding grants for housing services provided to homeless veterans. However, thorough checks of fire and safety requirements, as well as structural conditions of the building, are often overlooked. The bill requires that current recipients of per diem payments submit certification of compliance with local codes within two years of the enactment of this act, giving them ample time to make any necessary improvements.

The VFW believes that VA funded transitional housing must be safe, secure, and sanitary. This bill would ensure that those standards are met, providing homeless veterans with the best chances of successful community reintegration.

## **Draft Bill, the Long-Term Care Veterans Choice Act**

The VFW supports this legislation, which would add language to Section 1720 of Title 38 to allow veterans who receive VA care and require a protracted period of nursing home care to transfer into an adult foster home at their request. Under the bill, such homes must be “designed to provide non-institutional, long-term, supportive care for veterans who are unable to live independently and prefer a family setting.” VA currently has the authority to reimburse institutional care facilities such as nursing homes for long-term domiciliary care, but veterans who choose to live in adult foster homes must do so at their own expense. To grant VA the authority to reimburse adult foster homes would provide veterans with an additional residency choice, potentially improving the quality of life for those who would prefer this option.

The VFW strongly believes that all non-VA services should be provided in conjunction with proper care coordination. VA Handbook 1141.02, Medical Foster Home Procedures, establishes the policies and standards of VA care coordination for veterans who choose to live in medical foster home settings. It requires an interdisciplinary VA Home Care Team to provide the veteran with primary care, regularly communicate with the foster home caregiver, and monitor the care provided by the foster home with frequent unannounced visits. The VFW feels that these would ensure adequate care coordination for veterans who chose to participate in a fully-funded adult foster care program. VA Handbook 1411.02 is scheduled for recertification in 2014, and the VFW recommends that the care coordination policies outlined in that document should be made permanent by adding them to the language of this legislation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I am happy to answer any questions you or other members of the committee may have.

**Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives**

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2013, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.