



a program of United Spinal Association

Statement for the Record

of

VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association

Submitted by

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Director of VetsFirst

Before the

Subcommittee on Health

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

United States House of Representatives

Regarding

H.R. 353

July 14, 2015



Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley, and other distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to share VetsFirst's views on a bill under consideration today.

VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association, represents the culmination of over 65 years of service to veterans and their families. We advocate for the programs, services, and disability rights that help all generations of veterans with disabilities remain independent. This includes access to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) financial and health care benefits, housing, transportation, and employment services and opportunities. Today, we are not only a VA-recognized national veterans service organization, but also a leader in advocacy for all people with disabilities.

H.R. 353, the Veterans' Hearing Health Act of 2015

VetsFirst believes veterans should have timely access to professional hearing care services to ensure a higher quality of life.

The VA's Office of Inspector General's February 2014 audit of hearing aid services found that VA was not timely in issuing new hearing aids to veterans and meeting its 5 day timeliness goal. The report indicated that VA audiology staff attributed the hearing service delays to inadequate staffing¹. In addition to providing hearing aid services, these staff members are also required to conduct compensation and pension examinations.

Tinnitus and hearing loss were the most prevalent service-connected disabilities in FY 2012 for veterans receiving disability compensation². It is concerning that VA has not adequately anticipated the demand for hearing services, and in turn created a staffing model to meet the challenge. I, like many veterans of all eras, have experienced acoustic trauma due to my military service.

With the prevalence of explosions from artillery, engine noise from aircraft and the sound of rifle-fire in training and combat operations, it is not surprising that many veterans suffer from hearing loss. Audiology staff having to divide their time between compensation and pension exams is understandable. However, not adjusting current staff workloads appropriately to meet the timeliness delay is not acceptable.

This legislation would allow VA to appoint hearing aid specialists to assist veterans in receiving quicker access to needed services. These professionals are licensed in their respective states and can provide robust services that include: hearing testing; determining necessity for hearing

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, *Office of Audits and Evaluations*, Audit of VA's Hearing Aid Services, February 20, 2014.

² *Ibid.*

assistive devices; performing hearing aid adjustments; taking impressions for ear molds, and providing counseling and aural rehabilitation. These hearing aid specialists have received extensive training and hundreds of professionals are currently entering the industry. The legislation's reporting requirements related to wait times and contract referrals will also help identify remaining gaps in hearing care services.

VetsFirst strongly supports H.R. 353.

Information Required by Clause 2(g) of Rule XI of the House of Representatives

Written testimony submitted by Ross A. Meglathery, Director of VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association; 1660 L Street, NW, Suite 504; Washington, D.C. 20036. (202) 556-2076, ext. 7103.

This testimony is being submitted on behalf of VetsFirst, a program of United Spinal Association.

In fiscal year 2012, United Spinal Association served as a subcontractor to Easter Seals for an amount not to exceed \$5000 through funding Easter Seals received from the U.S. Department of Transportation. This is the only federal contract or grant, other than the routine use of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for Veterans Service Officers that United Spinal Association has received in the current or previous two fiscal years.

Biography of Ross Meglathery

Ross Meglathery is the Director of VetsFirst, a program of the United Spinal Association. Ross has been with VetsFirst since April, 2015. Prior to his tenure at VetsFirst, Ross spent over 15 years in the military, Homeland/National Security and private sectors. As a high school student he interned for Representative Ted Weiss in his New York City district office. As a college student he attended Officer Candidates School where upon graduation, he was commissioned a second lieutenant of Marines. Highlights of his active duty career include a deployment to Western Sahara, Africa as a United Nations Military Observer serving as one of 15 US military personnel in a multi-nation contingent. In 2004-05 Ross deployed with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) where he received the Combat Action Ribbon and the Purple Heart Medal for wounds received. He deployed once again to Iraq as part of the 2007 Surge in Al Anbar where he performed the duties of a Joint Terminal Attack Controller and led a specialized team in support of US, and Iraqi Army units. For his service, he was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Valor Device. In 2010, Ross was selected as a Congressional Marine Fellow where he worked for Representative Mike Coffman. In this capacity, he worked on Defense, Homeland Security, Veterans, Small Business and Rare Earth Metals issues.

As a reservist, Ross has commanded an artillery battery and currently serves as a lieutenant colonel at MAGTF Staff Training Program.

As a civilian, Ross has worked as a Program Analyst at the Office of Special Programs at the Department of Homeland Security for Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance matters. Additionally, he has experience with unmanned aerial system policy, test & evaluation, modeling & simulation, intelligence production as a subject matter expert in both the public and private sectors.

Ross is a graduate of Harvard University where he earned a Master in Public Administration. In addition, he holds a Master of Science in the Management of Information Technology degree from the University of Virginia and a Bachelor of Arts in History from Trinity College, Hartford.

In his spare time, Ross volunteers with Deeper Missions an organization devoted to clean energy and safe water in Africa.

Ross serves the Resource Center through VetsFirst's programs to answer veterans' question regarding educational, health, and disability benefits that they deserve based on their service. Additionally, his lobbying efforts support legislation that is designed to address the issues where veterans and disability community issues intersect.