

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD  
OF  
THE AMERICAN LEGION  
TO THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ON  
MISSION READINESS: VA'S PREPAREDNESS FOR NATURAL DISASTERS  
DURING A PANDEMIC**

**JUNE 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020**

Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Dunn and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of National Commander James W. "Bill" Oxford and the nearly two million members of The American Legion, we thank you for the opportunity to provide a statement addressing the critical issue of "VA's Preparedness for Natural Disasters During a Pandemic." As the largest veteran service organization in the United States, we stand ready to assist this committee and the Department of Veterans Affairs in ensuring that America's veterans are provided with the highest level of support and healthcare under any circumstances.

**State of the United States Healthcare System and VA**

The ongoing COVID-19 outbreak, which began in early 2020 in the United States, has caused severe disruptions in all aspects of daily life and has compounded preexisting issues by placing increased strains on the healthcare system. There are over 1.6 million positive cases, and nearly 100,000 deaths in the United States alone, with the numbers of cases continuing to climb every day.<sup>1</sup> The increase in cases has been a particularly alarming statistic for the veteran community, who have a large population deemed "at-risk" for the virus.

The adverse effects on the healthcare system are already critical, and any further strain could be catastrophic. The ability of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to accomplish its fourth mission to support the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in responding to national emergencies could be compromised given the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential for a second wave later in 2020. Preparedness for natural disasters is an issue that is further complicated when creating and executing plans during an active pandemic, where state resources may already be limited. The American Legion supports VA in its efforts to collaborate with partners and communities nationwide to assist veterans in crisis.

In keeping with The American Legion Resolution No. 134: *The American Legion Role in Homeland Security (2010)*, The American Legion urges its Legionnaires, Posts, and Departments to assist in homeland security efforts in communities; for example, by developing emergency kits and plans, and taking proactive efforts to remain informed. The American Legion also urges

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<sup>1</sup> "Cases in the U.S.", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 7 May 2020, [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/cases-in-us.html).

citizens to support families, schools, workplaces, and communities in developing their own emergency plans and checklists.<sup>2</sup> These steps will better prepare veterans and communities to stay safe and protected during a potential national emergency.

### **Handling COVID-19 and VA Preparedness for Other National Disasters**

The American Legion is concerned with the staffing and supply shortages which have already taken a toll on VA.<sup>3</sup> The status of staff and supply readiness will be further impacted should there be a natural disaster that needs resources already in demand and in use for COVID-19 efforts. With tornado and hurricane season quickly approaching, VA must ensure its staff are positioned to provide the support and care that veterans require during a natural disaster. Currently, there are still critically low numbers in medical and support staff working to battle COVID-19; this issue will only be exacerbated in the event of a natural disaster. Additionally, VA facilities are having to ration supplies or work without proper personal protective equipment (PPE), due to the nationwide shortage of supplies.<sup>4</sup> The American Legion, in conjunction with other veteran service organizations, are making efforts to ensure veterans continue to receive the care they need and procure additional supplies for veteran facilities.<sup>5</sup>

VA's so-called fourth mission, to support FEMA in responding to national emergencies, is already being implemented to handle non-veteran COVID-19 cases.<sup>6</sup> Due to the critical nature of COVID-19 and the strict quarantine protocols required to protect providers and patients, should there be a national emergency of any type, VA would not be equipped to handle the influx of ill and injured. The ongoing problem of the shortage of medical and support staff, as well as supplies, would be further impaired in any area experiencing a national disaster as it inevitably becomes more challenging to keep logistic chains open to the affected areas.

In accordance with The American Legion Resolution No. 115: *Department of Veterans Affairs Recruitment and Retention (2016)*, The American Legion supports legislation addressing the recruitment and retention challenges that VA has regarding pay disparities among those physicians and medical specialists providing direct healthcare to our nation's veterans. The American Legion urges the Veterans Health Administration to continue developing and implementing staffing

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<sup>2</sup> American Legion. "Resolution No. 134: The American Legion Role in Homeland Security." 1 Aug. 2010, [archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/549](https://archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/549).

<sup>3</sup> Rein, Lisa. "VA Health Chief Acknowledges a Shortage of Protective Gear for Its Hospital Workers." The Washington Post. WP Company, April 25, 2020. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/va-health-chief-acknowledges-a-shortage-of-protective-gear-for-its-hospital-workers/2020/04/24/4c1bcd5e-84bf-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/va-health-chief-acknowledges-a-shortage-of-protective-gear-for-its-hospital-workers/2020/04/24/4c1bcd5e-84bf-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7_story.html).

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence, Quil. "VA Head Acknowledges Challenges For Health Care Workers Battling Coronavirus." NPR. NPR, April 20, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/20/839235819/va-head-acknowledges-challenges-for-health-care-workers-battling-coronavirus>.

<sup>5</sup> III, Leo Shane. "Veterans Groups Step up Efforts to Help with Coronavirus Financial Challenges and Isolation." Military Times. Military Times, April 14, 2020. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2020/04/14/veterans-groups-step-up-efforts-to-help-with-coronavirus-financial-challenges-and-isolation/>.

<sup>6</sup> Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs. "VA announces 'Fourth Mission,' actions to help America respond to COVID-19" VA.gov, 1 Sept. 2016, [www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5420](http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=5420).

models for critical-needs occupations and working with community partners when struggling to fill acute shortages within VA's ranks.<sup>7</sup>

### **Preparations in Advance of a Potential Natural Disaster**

VA has increased its staffing through an expedited hiring process which increased medical staff by approximately 2,000 new medical practitioners and approximately 7,000 support staff since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup> However, there is still a need for an additional 44,000 medical and support staff.<sup>9</sup> VA has also expanded its telehealth program to allow veterans to be safely seen from home for nonurgent matters. This expansion was accomplished through the passage of the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act)*, the largest stimulus bill ever passed into law, which allocated \$19.6 billion in additional funding to the VA to fight the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Further, in keeping with The American Legion Resolution No. 188: *Department of Veterans Affairs' Role in National Emergency Preparedness (2016)*, we urge Congress to provide VA with the funding necessary to further enhance its capacity to act as a back-up to FEMA in responding to national emergencies.<sup>11</sup> The American Legion also urges the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to continue to take an active role in the development and implementation of plans to enhance federal homeland security initiatives, and sustain VA's ability to perform its fourth mission as a back-up medical system in a state of emergency.

### **Conclusion**

Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Dunn, and distinguished members of this committee, The American Legion thanks you for holding this important forum, and for the opportunity to express the views of the nearly 2 million members of this organization. The American Legion is committed to working with the Department of Veterans Affairs and this committee to ensure that VA is ready and able to accomplish all of its missions.

For additional information regarding this statement for the record, please contact Mr. John Medin, Legislative Associate of The American Legion's Legislative Division at (202) 263-5756 or JMedin@legion.org.

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<sup>7</sup> American Legion. "Resolution No. 115: Department of Veterans Affairs Recruitment and Retention." 1 Aug. 2016, archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5772.

<sup>8</sup> III, Leo Shane. "VA Hiring Jumps amid Coronavirus Crisis, but Department Opposes Hazard Pay for Front-Line Staff." *Military Times*. Military Times, May 14, 2020. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/05/14/va-hiring-jumps-amid-coronavirus-crisis-but-department-opposes-hazard-pay-for-front-line-staff/>.

<sup>9</sup> Wentling, Nikki. "VA Hires Nearly 1,000 Nurses to Help with Coronavirus Response." *Stars and Stripes*, April 28, 2020. <https://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/va-hires-nearly-1-000-nurses-to-help-with-coronavirus-response-1.627681>.

<sup>10</sup> United States. Cong. House. *CARES Act*. 116<sup>th</sup> Congr. 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. H.R.748. Washington: GPO, 2020. *Proquest Congressional Publications*.

<sup>11</sup> American Legion. "Resolution No. 188: Department of Veterans Affairs' Role in National Emergency Preparedness." 1 Aug. 2016, archive.legion.org/handle/20.500.12203/5525.

