

STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

WITH RESPECT TO

H.R. 1721, H.R. 1900, H.R. 3122, H.R. 3656, H.R. 3657, and Draft Legislation

WASHINGTON, DC

SEPTEMBER 13, 2017

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on legislation pending before this subcommittee.

H.R. 1721, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to designate at least one city in the United States each year as an “American World War II City”, and for other purposes.

The VFW supports this legislation, which would direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs VA to designate at least one city in the United States each year as an "American World War II City" based on the city's contributions to the war effort during World War II and their efforts to preserve the history of such contributions. This legislation would serve to recognize the contributions and preservation efforts made to the war by communities all across the United States, and incentivize cities to honor the memory of the sacrifices made by WWII veterans.

Throughout the past few years, multiple attempts have been made to pass similar legislation that would give the Secretary of Veterans Affairs the authority to make this designation, and while most of those attempts have passed the House, they have all failed in the Senate. In general, the VFW supports legislation that seeks to recognize veterans and preserves the military history of our greatest generation.

H.R. 1900, National Veterans Memorial and Museum Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would designate the Veterans Memorial and Museum, which is currently being constructed in Columbus, Ohio, as the National Veterans Memorial and Museum.

Continuing the legacy left by the late Senator John Glenn, the museum would serve as a civic landmark to honor, connect, inspire and educate visitors about the service and sacrifice of all our nation's service men and women. The creation of this institution would have a profound, lasting impact on every American and would help instill a deeper meaning to the freedoms we all enjoy.

The VFW has always advocated on behalf of those who have given the most to this nation. Whether that means ensuring that veterans are respected for their service, receive their earned benefits, or are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country, we have consistently led the way.

These tenants are directly reflected by the creation of this institution, and it will serve as a reminder to all those who visit that true patriotism begins with service over self. With nearly 21 million veterans alive today, we must ensure that we have a specific and special place to celebrate their service and honor the sacrifice of our veterans from all branches of our military and from all eras of war.

While there are several museums and monuments dedicated to specific branches and eras, our country currently lacks a museum specifically dedicated to honoring and preserving the collective sacrifices made by this nation's veterans. This museum would serve to fill that gap and serve as a constant reminder to all of the importance and value of military service by honoring the contributions of our veterans; educating the public about what it means to serve; and, ensuring that our veterans, regardless of the location, branch, or era in which they served, have a nationally designated facility to call their own.

H.R. 3122, Veterans Care Financial Protection Act of 2017

The VFW strongly supports this legislation, which would address and correct many of the oversight and accountability problems that have plagued the Aid and Attendance (A&A) program for some time by directing the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to work with other federal agencies to develop standards that would protect veterans receiving A&A benefits from dishonest and predatory business practices.

As the number of elderly veterans increases, so too does the need to provide them with additional assistance that enables them the ability to complete day to day activities, but these services can be extremely expensive. Many veterans depend on the A&A program because it enables them to obtain these services. However, because of poor oversight, many veterans are being taken advantage of by individuals claiming to be "consultants", and in some circumstances, even retirement homes. Not only do these practices cost the federal government millions in taxpayer dollars, but often times result in the veteran being responsible for repaying any debt that is incurred, which makes an unstable financial situation even worse.

Far too often, veterans and service members are victimized by individuals, businesses, and organizations simply due to their unique financial situation and their circumstances. It is unfortunate that legislation such as this even needs to exist. However, so long as the need is there, the VFW will support any measure meant to protect the financial well-being of those who are most at risk.

H.R. 3656, to amend title 38, United State Code, to provide for a consistent eligibility date for provision of Department of Veterans Affairs memorial headstones and markers for eligible spouses and dependent children of veterans whose remains are unavailable.

The VFW supports this legislation which would codify the date of eligibility for VA provided headstones and markers for the spouse and any dependent children of a veteran whose remains are unavailable on or after November 11, 1998.

H.R. 3656 would ensure a consistent applicability date for provision of memorial headstones and markers for eligible non-veteran individuals. Under present law, each class of non-veterans eligible to receive a headstone or marker has a different applicability date. For example, a surviving spouse who dies on or after November 11, 1998, is eligible for a headstone or marker. However, only dependent children who die on or after December 22, 2006, are eligible.

According to VA, most of the issue revolves around people who go missing at sea due to a boating or plane accident. There are situations in which VA may be able to provide a marker for the parent, but not the child due to the inconsistency in the dates.

H.R. 3657, to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide headstones and markers for the graves of spouses and children of veterans who are buried in tribal cemeteries.

The VFW supports this legislation, which would expand the headstone and marker eligibility for spouses and dependent children buried in tribal cemetery.

American Indians and Alaskan Natives have served in every branch of our military for over 200 years. An estimated 156,000 veterans identify as American Indian/Alaska Native veterans, and the Department of Defense reports that there are around 20,000 service members who identify as being American Indian/Alaskan Natives.

While current law provides headstones and markers only for the graves of spouses and children of veterans who wish to be laid to rest in a national cemetery or veterans cemetery owned by a State, the VFW believes that H.R. 3656 is a common sense fix which would ensure that the families of those who are eligible, and wish to be buried on tribal land, can do so.

Draft Bill, Veterans Fair Debt Notice Act of 2017

The VFW strongly supports this legislation, which would require VA to use certified mail and plain language when notifying a veteran about debts related to their benefits program, including written demands from VA, requests for waivers from the debtor, and notifications concerning the debt.

Almost 187,000 overpayment notices were sent from VA to veterans and their families in 2016, many of which were erroneous. When this happens, a debt notice is sent out by VA, regardless of

the nature of the debt. However, often times the language is ambiguous, and gives no clear options to request recourse, which leaves many fearful of the process as a whole.

To make matters worse, the contact information that VA has for the veteran in many instances is incorrect, which can lead to inaction by the veteran, resulting in the debt going to a collections agency, or their pensions being garnished until the debt is satisfied or until the veteran can prove that the debt is erroneous.

By requiring debt notifications be made in easy to understand language via certified mail, veterans would be able to understand what they need to do in order to ensure that the issue is addressed in a timely manner, and VA will be able to ensure that they have the correct contact information on file for the veteran.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. The Veterans of Foreign Wars sincerely appreciates the opportunity to provide views on these important bills, and I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members 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, the VFW has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2017, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.

The VFW has not received payments or contracts from any foreign governments in the current year or preceding two calendar years.