

Statement for the Record

Of



Submitted by

Greg Nembhard, Director Veterans Benefits

Before the

**House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs**

Regarding

**Honoring Our Promise: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for
Dependents and Survivors**

February 8, 2022

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Luria, Ranking Member Nehls, and other Representatives of this distinguished subcommittee. On behalf of the VVA National President, Jack McManus, and the membership of Vietnam Veterans of America, I thank you for affording VVA the opportunity to present our statement for the record regarding Honoring Our Promise: Reviewing the Effectiveness of Services for Dependents and Survivors.

This nation holds a covenant with its military service members, and it is good that we acknowledge the promises made to those who have defended our nation and the freedoms we all enjoy. This pledge by the nation cannot be taken lightly nor can the very foundation upon which the VA was built — to honor those who have and “Shall have borne the battle.” VVA’s commitment to this promise is evident in our history of holding VA accountable when necessary and applauding when VA honors its pledge. We remain forever grateful to generations before us, our generation, and those who will come after to defend this nation.

VVA believes that VA has increased and improved its services to veterans and their families. We believe that the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is providing life-saving treatment, prosthetics, and routing services that are in many ways superior to those of private industry, especially to citizens who could not otherwise afford them. We continue to work closely with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) to improve communication to veterans and to ensure timely benefits delivery.

Communicating VA programs, services, and benefits to veterans is challenging; communicating these programs and benefits to non-military dependents and survivors can present an even greater challenge. The most recent disruption of mail at the Government Printing Office (GPO) is a great example of the need for more reliable modes of communication. The partnership between Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs) and VBA continues to prove invaluable for getting information out to veterans and their families, especially when current systems fail. VVA works closely with VA to relay important information that otherwise might not reach the intended recipients. We believe that Vet Centers are perfectly situated as excellent sources of information for survivors and dependents. The VA should either staff these centers with knowledgeable individuals, or partner with VSOs to operate in the spaces where they are easily accessible to veterans, survivors, and dependents.

VA is increasingly relying on Artificial Intelligence and other developing technologies to streamline its processes, improve efficiency, and increase productivity. Unfortunately, many veterans are not equipped to utilize these resources and are at risk of being excluded. This is especially true for Vietnam veterans who are not able to operate these technologies. Additionally, many of our veterans live in rural areas that do not have the right infrastructure necessary to adapt to this very rapid change. The bottom line is that VA may be moving at a pace that is too fast for certain veterans' communities. The VVA and other VSOs continue to be the best resource for these veterans, but the programs being developed by VBA increasingly exclude VSO participation, especially during the claims' development process. For example, the new VA.gov and GRIT applications put resources at the veteran's fingertips but do not have a platform for VSO inclusion until after a claim has been filed.

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) provides vital support services to families during the grieving process. We applaud its pre-burial benefits programs and its informative website on eligibility, education, and resources. The Veterans Legacy Memorial honors our heroes by ensuring our memories of them never fade. We applaud the passing of legislation to make it a grant-funded program instead of relying on contracts. This move was vital to ensure the continued cooperation with our colleges and universities. We do not overlook the tremendous effort that goes into building the infrastructure to educate and serve millions of deserving Americans. However, there remains a challenge to communicating these benefits widely and effectively.

The communication challenge is evident, for example, in the widows and widowers who frequently contact our office seeking information on how to obtain a DD-214 for a recently deceased veteran. These survivors and dependents have much more to worry about than trying to obtain a document to prove VA burial benefits for the loved one who fought to defend this nation. These same survivors are often woefully uninformed of other benefits and entitlements, especially for Veterans whose deaths were 100 percent service-connected. Many survivors are often not aware of certain state and local tax-exemption benefits available to them, and those who are aware of these benefits often do not know how to obtain them.

VVA receives frequent calls and emails from relatives, neighbors, and friends of veterans who leave behind elderly spouses suffering from dementia and other illnesses that prevent them from seeking benefits on their own. These cases demonstrate a need to communicate beyond the veteran and to educate families and communities about VA programs and benefits in order to ensure no survivor or dependent is deprived of these justly earned benefits.

Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) is frequently denied because the veteran's service-connected disability is not listed on the death certificate as either a primary or contributing cause of death. Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic has added to this challenge, leaving survivors feeling helpless. We have received numerous complaints that survivors are being denied DIC benefits because the death certificate does not indicate that the veteran died of a service-connected disability due to complications from COVID-19; or that the veteran's disability was a contributing factor. This indicates a dire and pressing need to educate healthcare professionals who provide care to or conduct autopsies on veterans on the importance of registering service-connected factors in the medical records of all veterans. We should make the process easier, not more complicated for survivors and dependents. These earned benefits have been out-of-reach for far too many families for far too long. It's time for a change!

Additionally, the VA must ensure survivors are not left holding huge amounts of debt from funeral costs. Congress must ensure the VA is fully funded to deliver on the promises to our veterans. This includes paying the full amount for burial costs, especially as inflationary pressure causes those costs to increase. Veterans have been promised that their surviving spouses and dependents would not have to worry about the cost of burial, but in many cases, they are. We must ensure that the full cost of internment is covered and not burden survivors with such debt.

Communicating NCA resources to veterans and their families is essential, but still a challenge for VA. While one generation of veterans desires electronic communication, another is still reliant on paper mail for information from VA. The VA must adapt its communication strategies to these generational needs. The NCA plays a vital role in the care, comfort, and resources available to families during the grieving process. However, many remain uninformed of these resources; especially pre-burial eligibility. Vietnam-era veterans are, sadly, increasingly in need of NCA services. Many are succumbing to the health-related effects of Agent Orange, while

others are dying in their old age. Resources on the VA website are vital, but only effective if they reach the community. The VA must maintain a multi-faceted communication strategy to reach our multi-generational veteran communities.

This is especially true for cemeteries located on tribal lands and U.S. territories with less resources and more complex transportation, structural, and cultural infrastructures. Keeping our cemeteries funded and operational is vital to veterans' families' access to the care, comfort, and resources provided by NCA. This includes ending the dependence on Continuing Resolutions to fund the government and working in a bipartisan manner to pass meaningful budgets.

VVA has proved itself a reliable partner in communicating programs and benefits to veterans. We provide valuable resources to veterans, dependents, and survivors at no cost and remain a committed partner in their pursuit of reliable VA benefits. We are pleased that VBA has improved its communication with us and has been very informative regarding current efforts. We encourage VA to bring us to the table early in its processes, especially when developing outreach and communication strategies. Even with advanced technologies, VA still struggles to reach certain communities of veterans. This is especially true for Native American Veterans and veterans living in Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories. Furthermore, VBA has failed in its obligation to print material in both English and Spanish for Puerto Rico's Veterans. We want to see this resolved as quickly as possible.

We thank the Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit our statement for the record.

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Funding Statement
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The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

For further information, contact:

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Greg Nembhard serves as the Director for Veterans Benefits with Vietnam Veterans of America. He has been advocating on behalf of veterans for over six years and has extensive experience assisting veterans at both the development and appeal stages of VA claims and working directly with VA leadership to improve services to veterans. Greg is a Veteran of both the United State Marine Corps and Army (Reserves), with a combined fifteen years of active and reserve service. He served two tours of duty as an active-duty Marine, with two deployments to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). His awards and decorations include the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal, Combat Action Ribbon, Sea Service Deployment Ribbon (w/1 Star), Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal, National Defense Service Medal, and the Army Reserve Component Achievement Medal.

Greg holds a Master of Business Administration degree, graduating Suma Cum Laude from TUI University and a Bachelor of Science in Healthcare Administration from University of Phoenix.