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STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
OF
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AMVETS NATIONAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

FOR THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY AND MEMORIAL
ASSISTANCE

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS



CONCERNING:
LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON:
H.R. 3790, H.R. 4016, H.R. 4190, H.R. 4306, H.R.5559, H.R.1753
&
VARIOUS DRAFT LEGISLATION

A M V E T S

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2023

Statement for the Record
Before the
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Assistance
November 8, 2023

AMVETS

Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, AMVETS appreciates the opportunity to present you with our views on proposed legislation in the House.

As the largest veteran service organization open to all who have honorably served, we are dedicated to pursuing those issues that stand to improve the quality of life for our nation's servicemembers, veterans, and their survivors. AMVETS works tirelessly to address these important concerns, and we are proud to provide our input on the legislation included in today's legislative hearing. We thank the Subcommittee for their consideration.

Regarding Surviving Spouses

AMVETS is a service organization dedicated to veterans, servicemembers, and their families. As such, we as an organization unequivocally stand behind our surviving spouses who have lost their partners in the line of duty or due to service-connected conditions. We pursue numerous efforts on their behalf in full recognition of their immense and irreplaceable sacrifices.

AMVETS supports H.R. 3790 – Justice for ALS Veterans Act of 2023. AMVETS recognizes the need to extend increased dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC) compensation to those whose spouses died due to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Regardless of how long a veteran or servicemember suffered from this ailment, this service-connected disability must be included among other recognized conditions eligible for DIC payments upon their passing.

Regarding Disability Exam Expansion

AMVETS supports the Veteran Exam Expansion Act of 2023. AMVETS has heard from its membership and other trusted partners that there is a significant wait time for active duty servicemembers to receive compensation and pension exams to determine service-connected disabilities. Reducing these wait times and helping veterans complete their disability exams would allow new veterans to get their disability determinations, access to medical care, and compensation faster. Our nation's veterans deserve speedy, efficient processes to provide them with the benefits they earned.

Regarding Issues of Fraud

AMVETS remains concerned about the increasing number of fraud cases related to veterans' benefits, claims, fiduciaries, and other relevant circumstances. As such, AMVETS has made numerous strides to educate and alert veterans to potential scams and fraudulent activity by

immoral actors. Protecting our veterans and their earned benefits continues to be a top priority of our organization.

AMVETS supports H.R. 4016 – Veteran Fraud Reimbursement Act. AMVETS believes that in cases involving a fiduciary misusing a veteran’s benefits and related compensation, the VA must pay the beneficiary or the beneficiary’s successor fiduciary the same amount that was misused. The VA must also investigate any misuse of funds by fiduciaries, holding them accountable for their actions and combating negligence within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

AMVETS supports H.R. 4190 – Restoring Benefits to Defrauded Veterans Act. AMVETS supports the repayment of certain benefits to the estates of deceased beneficiaries whose benefits were misused by fiduciaries. Our organization believes that inheritors and successor fiduciaries are entitled to these benefits.

Regarding Presumptive Conditions

AMVETS played a major role in the passage of the PACT Act last year, a monumental law that compensates veterans impacted by service-connected toxic exposure. Similar to this effort, AMVETS continues to support the recognition of further conditions that impact servicemembers, both presumptive to their service and following their service experiences.

H.R. 4306 – Michael Lecik Military Firefighters Protection Act. AMVETS supports this bill that would establish presumptions of service connection for diseases associated with firefighting. Such conditions included in this bill severely impact the quality of life for these veterans and should be acknowledged as service-connected.

Regarding Transparency in VA Claims, Appeals, and Other Processes

AMVETS supports H.R. 5559, the Protecting Veterans Claim Options Act, Chairman Luttrell’s Review Every Veterans Claim Act, Chairman Luttrell’s Veteran Appeals Decision Clarity Act, and Representative Self’s Veteran Appeals Transparency Act. These bills work toward more transparent processes within the Department of Veterans Affairs, boosting accountability and accessibility for all of our nation’s veterans. AMVETS believes that each veteran’s claim must be granted the attention it deserves, and any further VA action with claims, appeals, or similar processes should be clearly communicated to impacted veterans.

Other Legislation

H.R. 1753 – Jax Act. This bill seeks to properly credit members of the military who served in female cultural support teams. AMVETS supports the recognition of these servicemembers given their exceptional service to the United States.

Conclusion

Chairman Luttrell, Ranking Member Pappas, and Members of the Subcommittee, I would like

to thank you once again for the opportunity to provide commentary on these issues that impact AMVETS' membership, active duty service members, American veterans, and their surviving family members. As Congress continues its oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs and works with the VA to address these concerns, it will be imperative to remember that this legislation will help improve the lives of millions of individuals who have dedicated their lives to defending our country. AMVETS looks forward to continuing to contribute to this conversation and keeping the interest of our veterans and the military-connected community at the forefront of national discourse. Thank you.

Executive Director Joseph Chenelly

Joseph R. Chenelly was appointed national executive director of the nation's fourth-largest veterans service organization in May 2016. In this capacity, he administers the policies of AMVETS, supervises its national headquarters operations, and provides direction, as needed, to state and local components. Joe previously served as AMVETS' national communications director.

Joe Chenelly is the first veteran of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq to lead one of the nation's four largest veterans service organizations' staffs. A native of Rochester, N.Y., Joe enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1998, serving with the 1st Marine Division, and was honorably discharged as a Staff Sergeant in April 2006. He is a combat veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, having served in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Kuwait, East Timor, and the Horn of Africa.

Joe became a veterans' advocate, a journalist, and a political adviser after his time in uniform. He covered military and veterans matters on staff with Leatherneck magazine, the Military Times newspapers, USA TODAY, and Gannet News, reporting on operations in the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and Africa, as well as disaster relief in the United States. Joe was named one of the 100 "most influential journalists covering armed violence" by Action on Armed Violence in 2013. He was the first U.S. Marine combat correspondent to step into enemy territory after September 11, 2001, as a military reporter in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He also reported from the front lines with American and Allied forces in Kuwait and Iraq as that war began. He was on the ground for the start of both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Joe served as AMVETS' national communications director in 2005 and for the past eight years as assistant national director for communications for the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) in Washington, D.C. leading grassroots efforts through social networking and new media.

He has also served as president of Social Communications, LLC, and as a public affairs officer director for the Department of Navy. Joe is an alumnus of Syracuse University and Central Texas College. He resides in Fairport, N.Y., with his wife Dawn, a service-connected disabled Air Force veteran, and their five children.

ABOUT AMVETS

Today, AMVETS is America's most inclusive congressionally chartered veterans service organization. Our membership is open to both active duty, reservists, guardsmen, and honorably discharged veterans. Accordingly, the men and women of AMVETS have contributed to the defense of our nation in every conflict since World War II.

Our commitment to these men and women can also be traced to the aftermath of the last World War, when waves of former service members began returning stateside in search of the health, education, and employment benefits they earned. Because obtaining these benefits proved difficult for many, veterans savvy at navigating the government bureaucracy began forming local groups to help their peers. As the ranks of our nation's veterans swelled into the millions, it became clear a national organization would be needed. Groups established to serve the veterans of previous wars wouldn't do either; the leaders of this new generation wanted an organization of their own.

With that in mind, 18 delegates, representing nine veterans' clubs, gathered in Kansas City, Missouri, and founded The American Veterans of World War II on Dec. 10, 1944. Less than three years later, on July 23, 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed Public Law 216, making AMVETS, the first post-World War II organization to be chartered by Congress.

Since then, our congressional charter has been amended to admit members from subsequent eras of service. Our organization has also changed over the years, evolving to better serve these more recent generations of veterans and their families. In furtherance of this goal, AMVETS maintains partnerships with other Congressionally chartered veterans' service organizations that round out what's called the "Big Six" coalition. We're also working with newer groups, including Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America and The Independence Fund. Moreover, AMVETS recently teamed up with the VA's Office of Suicide Prevention and Mental Health to help stem the epidemic of veterans' suicide. As our organization looks to the future, we do so hand in hand with those who share our commitment to serving the defenders of this nation. We hope the 116th Session of Congress will join in our conviction by casting votes and making policy decisions that protect our veterans.

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

Pursuant to Rule XI 2(g) of the House of Representatives, the following information is provided regarding federal grants and contracts.

Fiscal Year 2023 - None

Fiscal Year 2022 - None

Fiscal Year 2021 - None

Fiscal Year 2020 - None

Fiscal Year 2019 - None

Fiscal Year 2018 - None

Fiscal Year 2017 - None

Fiscal Year 2016 - None

Disclosure of Foreign Payments – None