



**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

**IN RESPONSE TO “SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL
AFFAIRS LEGISLATIVE HEARING”**

**DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS’ AFFAIRS**

**JULY 10, 2024
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Dear Chairman Luttrell and Ranking Member Pappas:

On behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo), the only organization representing the nation's 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs, I write to thank you for the opportunity to submit comments in support of the bipartisan *Simplifying Forms for Veterans Claims Act (H.R. 8880)* and the *Improving VA Training for Military Sexual Trauma Claims Act (H.R. 8879)* to be considered during the Subcommittee's July 10 legislative hearing.

Regardless of population size, geography and available resources, counties are deeply invested in our residents' health and well-being. Every day, we provide services that help vulnerable individuals and families thrive, functioning as an integral part of the federal, state and local partnership in veteran service delivery. Whether assisting veterans with pension and disability benefits, housing, employment, education, or providing mental health services that treat trauma and prevent suicide in partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), counties are deeply invested in the health and well-being of our nation's veterans.

In 29 states, county veteran service officers (CVSOs) work to secure benefits for veterans by collaborating with the VA, state Departments of Veterans Affairs and Veterans Service Organizations to file VA claims. CVSOs are local county employees who are nationally accredited by the VA to prepare, present, and prosecute VA claims and are often a veteran's first point of contact in the community for accessing services. They assist veterans in accessing a range of benefits, including service-connected benefits, enrollment in VA health care, VA home loans, education benefits and available job placement assistance. Veterans are not always aware of the benefits available to them, and CVSOs are often the first to inform them about their eligibility. This relatively small workforce is responsible for successfully processing more than \$50 billion in direct compensation, pension, health care and other benefits for veterans each year.

Among these services, CVSOs assist veterans with filing disability claims for physical and mental health conditions related to Military Sexual Trauma (MST). This workforce has witnessed first-hand just how difficult this process is to navigate and how it can compound trauma for survivors. Even though thousands of United States military personnel experience MST every year, many do not receive—or even attempt to apply for—the benefits to which they are entitled due to the retraumatizing nature of the claims process, inconsistent sensitivity training for benefits staff and unrealistic evidentiary standards.



Counties applaud the *Improving VA Training for Military Sexual Trauma Claims Act*, which takes important steps to improve the claims process by requiring the VA Secretary to create a plan to improve MST training for Contracted Disability Compensation Examiners and improve quality assurance to prevent retraumatization during the examination process. The legislation would also ensure annual, continuously updated training for all Veterans Benefits Administration employees and require VA to automatically obtain all service and personnel medical records for PTSD-based claims to reduce red tape for claimants. These reforms will help CVSOs in their mission to ensure that survivors of MST can meet their immediate and long-term health needs, improving their quality of life and helping to facilitate their recovery and reintegration into civilian life.

Additionally, even with the assistance of CVSOs, many veterans are facing long wait times for their claims to be processed as the VA experiences backlogs. In a report from VA in December 2023, the Department reported that more than 368,00 cases are backlogged, meaning that they have been pending for over 125 days. Counties support the *Simplifying Forms for Veterans Claims Act*, which would direct VA to enter into an agreement with a federally funded research and development center to assess claimant forms and offer recommendations on how these forms can be clarified and improved, ultimately making the process more efficient for veterans and CVSOs.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to working with you to ensure Congress quickly passes both of these bipartisan measures. Please direct any follow-up questions to Rachel Mackey, NACo's Legislative Director of Veterans and Military Affairs: rmackey@naco.org.

Sincerely,



Matthew D. Chase
Executive Director/Chief Executive Officer