

July 25, 2025

Written Statement of

**John D. Lawson, Superintendent**

Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County, Illinois

Before the

United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Subcommittee on Technology Modernization

With Respect To

**Pending Legislation**

### **H.R. 3132, CHOICE for Veterans Act of 2025**

We adamantly oppose H.R. 3132, CHOICE for Veterans Act of 2025 as written. We do not view this proposal as a compromise contrary to some commentary being published and will continue to oppose any legislation that charges veterans for initial claims assistance based on their future benefits. This proposal has the likely outcome of putting veterans into debt before even receiving a single penny in their earned benefit. The companies engaging in this currently illegal activity should be punished, not rewarded with a disabled veterans compensation benefit. Congress' inaction on this matter has forced veterans to seek remedy at the statehouse, namely here in Illinois with the passage of SB3479 codified in Public Act 103-0783 under the Consumer Fraud and Deceptive Business Practices Act. Free VA accredited veterans service officers all over the country are ready to assist our fellow veterans without taking any part of their earned disability benefit. We expect our elected representatives to work with us to help serve the veterans in their districts and not to line pockets of claim sharks with money the taxpayers set aside to provide for the disabled veterans of the United States Armed Forces. We are extremely disappointed we must continue to have dialogue on this topic, year after year after year. This legislation is also strongly opposed by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans.

### **Veterans Benefits Improvement Act: Enhancing Communication**

With regard to the implementation of the **Veterans Benefits Improvement Act: Enhancing Communication**, Veterans Service Officers are still not experiencing the mandated communication in Section 3 between Claims and Pension (C&P) Examiners and veteran's representatives. It is essential to the timely adjudication of a veteran's claim that when issues arise or clarity is needed, an examiner attempts to resolve the issue directly with the veteran's representative, not by sending more letters or kicking the can to another work queue. Additionally, Section 4 of the same Act mandates that the VA provides regular reports on how it

can improve communication with veterans' representatives. This includes assigning veteran liaisons to local facilities and enhancing access to VA systems, all aimed at fostering better coordination and ensuring veterans have the support they deserve throughout their benefits process. To date, this has not occurred in any meaningful way with our accrediting body, the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO).

### **H.R. 3951, Rural Veterans' Improved Access to Benefits Act of 2025**

We encourage support of this legislation to extend the license portability for contracted health care professionals to perform VA disability examinations to January 2031. The disability examination system has evolved and expanded over many years. In 1996, as part of a pilot program, VA granted temporary license portability to allow contracted physicians to assist with disability examinations. Since the fall of 2016, VA has transitioned from VA-conducted examinations in VA settings to contracted examinations in non-VA settings for nearly all disability examinations. Exceptions are examinations that VA personnel must specifically perform by law. By increasing the number of eligible providers, this legislation would accelerate the initial stage of the disability claims process, particularly for rural and tribal veterans who often have few examination options near their homes.

### **S. 784, Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act**

We encourage support of this legislation that would expand eligibility for the Highly Rural Transportation Grant (HRTG) program. It would also grant as much as \$80,000 to state and county veterans service agencies, such as the Veterans Assistance Commission of St. Clair County and its Veterans Service Organization members to purchase vehicles, including those compliant with the *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* (Public Law 101-336) to provide innovative transportation options for veterans in rural or highly rural areas traveling to and from medical treatment.

Unique to the HRTG program is the definition of "highly rural" as a location that contains no more than seven persons per square mile, which is a highly restrictive criterion. Other VA rural programs use the Rural-Urban Commuting Areas (RUCA) coding system to assess rurality. This bill would expand eligibility by including veterans who reside in either rural as defined by RUCA, or highly rural areas as defined by HRTG. This uniformity in standard will simplify processes and be more a more realistic approach to solving transportation issues in rural communities such as St. Clair County.

Our Public transportation options, taxis, and ridesharing companies that urban dwellers take for granted are virtually non-existent in rural St. Clair County, severely disadvantaging ill or injured veterans or those who do not drive or own a vehicle. This expanded program would satisfy a pressing need and ensure veterans could use their earned benefits regardless of where they live.