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Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies FY 2021 Member Day Testimony

Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz, Ranking Member Carter, and members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to provide input on the FY 2021 Appropriations process on behalf of the residents of California's 39th Congressional District.

As a Navy veteran with the honor of representing over 25,000 veterans, the programs under your jurisdiction are important to me, our veterans and their families. I would like to take this opportunity to highlight just a few examples of the federal programs that most benefit my district.

First, I urge you to provide strong funding levels for the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program. The veterans in my district rely on VR&E to receive help with job training, employment accommodations, resume development, and job seeking skills coaching. I appreciate that the President's Budget Request indicates the funding requested will keep the VA on track to maintain the required ratio of 1 counselor to 125 veterans. However, my constituents continue to face unnecessary frustration with the program due to the terribly egregious practice of transferring a veteran from one counselor to another, without ever notifying the veteran or ensuring a warm handoff to improve implementation of the program. As a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, I have raised this issue and my concerns with

employee retention with Secretary Wilkie and we are working towards a solution. But in the interim, continued federal funding is necessary to ensure the VA remains on track to properly serve veterans nationwide.

Similarly, my district is lucky to have a Veteran Success on Campus (VSOC) program at Mt. San Antonio Community College (Mt. SAC) in Walnut. The VSOC helps student veterans thrive and complete their education prepared for a successful career. VSOC counselors understand the unique challenges that face veteran students and are able to quickly resolve problems that our veteran students face. I've heard from countless student veterans about the need to expand the Veteran Success on Campus program to the other colleges in the 39th District. With long travel times and heavy traffic congestion, it's unacceptable that our veterans have to jump through so many hoops just to access their education and vocational benefits. According to the President's budget request, the current VSOC funding levels supports only 104 campuses nationwide. If we are to see the success of the VSOC at Mt. SAC replicated across the other colleges and universities in our district – whether that is through the establishment of new programs or allowing the existing program at Mt. SAC to be shared across nearby campuses - sufficient funding must be available to support our veterans.

Further, I urge you to provide increased funding for Grants for Construction of State Veterans Cemeteries to support a veteran's cemetery in Orange County. Last year, I testified before this Subcommittee to express my support for state-level efforts to establish a veterans cemetery in Orange County to serve the disproportionately high population of veterans in our region that are forced to travel over two hours to the closest national cemetery. Since my testimony, local

officials have been working with the state to finalize a location for a state veterans cemetery and have secured \$20 million in the state's budget to support the cause. Federal funding will need to be available in order to bridge the gap in the state's allocation and finally get this project across the finish line. I urge you to increase the VA's State Cemetery Grant program funding this long overdue project does not suffer any further delays.

I encourage you to provide strong funding for VA homeless assistance programs. While substantial progress has been made in reducing the number of homeless veterans nationally, sustained funding is needed until the numbers have been reduced to zero. This includes the highly effective Supportive Services for Veterans Families Program. Volunteers of America in Orange County uses this funding to provide hundreds of veterans in the region who are at risk with rapid rehousing and assistance obtaining benefits. This also includes the VA Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program which supports supportive services and supportive housing for homeless veterans in Diamond Bar in my district.

Finally, although I understand that these programs are not under the direct purview of this Subcommittee, I would be remiss if I did not urge you to work with your colleagues on the House Appropriations Committee to reject the President's proposal to cut other programs that serve our veterans. I am appreciative of the President's proposed 12 percent increase in funding for the VA. For instance, as of January 2019, there are 37,085 homeless veterans, and yet the President's budget request completely eliminates funding for HUD-VASH vouchers for the fourth year in a row. Given the work this Subcommittee has done to work together in support of VA programs under your jurisdiction in year's past, I know your commitment to serving our

nation's veterans transcends partisanship. I hope you will continue that commitment in other areas of the budget.

Thank you again for your time and consideration. I know you have a tough job ahead of you, but I hope you will keep these stories in mind as you craft the FY 2021 Appropriations Act for Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies.