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- Military personnel
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With more than 1.5 million military men and women expected to discharge from service in the coming years, a wave of new veterans is entering the civilian ranks. They join millions more from previous eras.
They look to us to uphold the promises we – as a nation – made to them when they pledged their lives to protect our freedoms and keep us safe from harm.

I have visited hundreds of American Legion posts this year. When I speak of the Four Pillars of service our organization upholds – veterans, defense, Americanism and youth – one particular topic ALWAYS gets a collective nod of understanding.

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The American Legion has been personally helping veterans suffering from head injuries and mental health
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But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

For the last 30-plus years, however, too often VA’s treatment plan for veterans coping with PTSD has been pharmaceutical.

The American Legion’s Task Force on PTSD and TBI has worked with top medical experts, VA, veterans and their families to offer a more effective strategy, one which recognizes that:
No two cases of PTSD/TBI are the same, so no magic pill is going to solve the problem.

The entire family must be involved in treatment programs, especially caregivers.

And non-pharmaceutical, alternative treatments really do work for individual veterans, and they must be recognized as such by VA.

Just as everyone’s stress experience is unique – including those who suffer with the distinct effects of Military Sexual Trauma – so too must be our compassionate response.

For tens of thousands of veterans, VA’s current prescription is not working.
A 2014 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 veterans with PTSD or TBI showed that:

- 59 percent of respondents felt no improvement as a result of their treatment plans.

- 30 percent said they terminated their plans because they were ineffective.

This breakdown contributes mightily to the high rate of veteran suicide, substance abuse and homelessness that our nation – and The American Legion – simply cannot abide.

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Veterans need careers as much as our economy needs veterans.
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VA reports that it is making headway against the overall backlog of claims 125 days old or older.

But The American Legion is equally concerned about the growing number of appeals and remands. This suggests that quantity is trumping quality in many cases, and we all know where that kind of thinking led VA last year.

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on Veterans' Affairs
American Legion National Commander Michael D. Helm
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Military personnel
VA staff
Health-care providers
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And patriotic Americans everywhere.

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But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

For the last 30-plus years, however, too often VA’s treatment plan for veterans coping with PTSD has been pharmaceutical.

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Just as everyone’s stress experience is unique – including those who suffer with the distinct effects of Military Sexual Trauma – so too must be our compassionate response.

For tens of thousands of veterans, VA’s current prescription is not working.
A 2014 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 veterans with PTSD or TBI showed that:

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Oral Remarks
To the House and Senate Committees
on Veterans’ Affairs
American Legion National Commander Michael D. Helm
February 25, 2015

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American Legion National Commander Michael D. Helm
February 25, 2015

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Mike Moss, National Commander of the Sons of The American Legion

Past National Presidents of the American Legion Auxiliary

And Past National Commanders of the Sons of The American Legion.

I would also like to take this opportunity to introduce and thank my wife and best friend, Debbie.

Thank you. (pause)
I want to extend special thanks to Senator Moran for his kind introduction and for his steadfast support of those who have served our nation in uniform.

In the interest of time, I will wait to introduce my team at the conclusion of my opening statement.

Chairman Miller, Chairman Isaacson, Ranking members Brown and Blumenthal...

On behalf of the 2.3 million wartime veterans who make The American Legion our nation’s largest veterans service organization, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. In the interest of time I will acknowledge some of my important guests today at the conclusion of my remarks.

The challenges ahead of us are enormous and urgent.
These challenges are also filled with **historic opportunities** to make positive changes for America’s veterans, military personnel and their families.

As National Commander of The American Legion, I have the great privilege of traveling our nation, state by state, city to town, personally meeting with veterans and their families.

I have listened to their frustrations.

I have promised solutions.

With more than 13,500 local posts stitched across the fabric of our country, and beyond, The American Legion is
uniquely positioned to do the best kind of market research – in person, face-to-face, eye-to-eye, one veteran at a time.

As I testify before you today, American Legion service officers are working one-on-one with nearly 750,000 veterans across the country, helping them with their VA benefits, health-care access, education, employment and other needs.

The American Legion is also now in the midst of a nationwide Veterans Benefits Center tour where we have already **personally assisted thousands** of frustrated veterans and their families.

The American Legion’s legislative priorities are built on countless such personal interactions with:

- Veterans
Military personnel

VA staff

Health-care providers

Elected officials

Business leaders

Educators

And patriotic Americans everywhere.

Today, as you might suspect, the prevailing concern expressed among them all is **transition assistance**.

With more than 1.5 million military men and women expected to discharge from service in the coming years, a wave of new veterans is entering the civilian ranks. They join millions more from previous eras.
They look to us to uphold the promises we – as a nation – made to them when they pledged their lives to protect our freedoms and keep us safe from harm.

I have visited hundreds of American Legion posts this year. When I speak of the Four Pillars of service our organization upholds – veterans, defense, Americanism and youth – one particular topic ALWAYS gets a collective nod of understanding.

That topic is effective treatment for the “signature wounds” of the Global War on Terrorism – post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

The American Legion has been personally helping veterans suffering from head injuries and mental health
conditions since the doughboys came home from the Great War with what was then called “shell shock.”

But it took about 60 years – and unbridled persistence from The American Legion – for PTSD to become recognized as a service-connected diagnosis by VA. The Vietnam generation shed light on the struggles families endure when their lives are up-ended by combat PTSD.

For the last 30-plus years, however, too often VA’s treatment plan for veterans coping with PTSD has been pharmaceutical.

The American Legion’s Task Force on PTSD and TBI has worked with top medical experts, VA, veterans and their families to offer a more effective strategy, one which recognizes that:
■ No two cases of PTSD/TBI are the same, so no magic pill is going to solve the problem.

■ The entire family must be involved in treatment programs, especially caregivers.

■ And non-pharmaceutical, alternative treatments really do work for individual veterans, and they must be recognized as such by VA.

Just as everyone’s stress experience is unique – including those who suffer with the distinct effects of Military Sexual Trauma – so too must be our compassionate response.

For tens of thousands of veterans, VA’s current prescription is not working.
A 2014 American Legion survey of more than 3,000 veterans with PTSD or TBI showed that:

- 59 percent of respondents felt no improvement as a result of their treatment plans.

- 30 percent said they terminated their plans because they were ineffective.

This breakdown contributes mightily to the high rate of veteran suicide, substance abuse and homelessness that our nation – and The American Legion – simply cannot abide.

We implore you to study alternative therapies. Many have proven much more effective than pills alone. Introduce and pass legislation that will require VA to recognize treatments
other than those that are measured in milligrams and doses per day.

This is just one among many opportunities we share to improve the lives of veterans and their families at this time of enormous urgency and transition.

Another opportunity: civilian careers.

For those who are getting RIFFed – military careers unexpectedly cut short due to budget-driven force reductions – and for those simply separating after honorable tours – it is not some act of charity to ease the path to civilian employment.

Veterans need careers as much as our economy needs veterans.
More than 200 representatives of specialized industries from across the country will soon gather in Washington for an American Legion summit to find ways for well-trained veterans to convert their military experiences into credits toward licenses, credentials and certifications in such fields as emergency medical response, nursing, transportation and skilled trades.

The Vow to Hire Heroes Act was a great step in this effort, and we thank Congress for passing it.

The American Legion is now taking this initiative to the states, to industry, and to the Department of Defense where credits can begin accumulating while personnel are still in the military. **We must all work together** to find the right formula to convert military experience into training credits.
Throughout the country, The American Legion sponsors and supports hundreds of veteran job and career events each year. We work with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Labor, big businesses and small ones to connect employers with veterans ready and willing to work.

We strongly encourage the continuation of tax credits for those employers – with expansion to companies that hire veterans of the National Guard and Reserves, so many of whom left their careers and families to serve in combat.

We all know how the original GI Bill – the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 – changed America. Today’s veterans are poised to have the same kind of impact.
One successful provision of the original GI Bill is often overlooked: low-interest business and farm loans that helped 20th century veterans across the land become engines of their local economies.

Today, we ask Congress to expand the Post 9/11 GI Bill so that unused funds can be applied to help veteran-owned businesses get off the ground.

On The American Legion website just this month, we told the story of Marine Corps veteran Travis Barnes of Indianapolis. He was in his first semester of college when terrorists struck the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Upon seeing that – like so many veterans of his generation – he suspended his life plan, stepped away from campus and stepped up to serve his country.
He came home from Iraq a changed man in 2006.

Multiple combat missions.

Traumatic brain injuries.

For two years after he came home, Travis relied heavily on family for support. He eventually finished college and entered law school but realized his true calling was business.

He opened a micro-distillery in Indianapolis and began a new life, as a “vetrepreneur.” In doing so, he joined a growing fold of veteran business owners who are making differences in our economy every day.
Precision, cleanliness and attention to detail are among the standards Barnes learned in the Marine Corps that are working at his business. Less than a year old, it’s already successful and growing.

He plans to hire 21 new employees.

He says, and I quote, “It’s our personal mission to hire as many vets as we can.”

For veterans like Barnes – and there are thousands – GI Bill benefits are better spent capitalizing business opportunities that create jobs in our communities.

And to him, the opportunity to convert military experience into business success was the best medicine for TBI.
But no two cases are alike. That’s what makes our shared mission so complicated.

We have certainly learned that this year, as The American Legion has personally interacted with thousands of veterans who **did not receive effective transition assistance**.

**They have come to us frustrated and in need** at our Veterans Crisis Command Centers and Benefits Centers, which we have conducted across the country in the aftermath of VA’s meltdown of trust last April.

We all know what happened. Falsified appointment records revealed by whistleblowers. Performance bonuses paid on the basis of those records. Veterans dying waiting for unscheduled appointments.
Change was needed at the highest levels of VA. And change was effected. Thus began the journey we’re all now on.

Over the last eight months, The American Legion has conducted no fewer than 14 different command centers and town hall meetings in some of the hardest-hit VA communities.

The American Legion was able to respond immediately. We deployed a team of specialists in health care, benefits and counseling to VA locations in great need of assistance.

Within the first 30 days after the scandal broke, The American Legion had established its first Crisis Command and Centers. Within 120 days, The American Legion conducted outreach at 12 centers and served more than 3,000 veterans. We also helped veterans and their families recoup WELL over
a million dollars in benefits that they were due, that should have been received much sooner.

Through these interactions, we have discovered that transition assistance is needed for veterans of all ages, whether you’re a 30-year-old officer looking for a new job after getting RIFFed or a Vietnam War veteran wondering why your VA claim for Agent Orange exposure is mired in the backlog.

We have met with the surviving spouses of veterans of all ages – unsure of their VA benefits.

A full report of these events, which will continue through 2015, has been distributed to you. Titled “Crisis to Confidence,” it illustrates the many CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES for all of us – The American Legion, VA and our elected officials – to get this right.
One key observation from the centers was that the backlog of delayed VA claims remains a major frustration.

VA reports that it is making headway against the overall backlog of claims 125 days old or older.

But The American Legion is equally concerned about the growing number of appeals and remands. This suggests that quantity is trumping quality in many cases, and we all know where that kind of thinking led VA last year.

At the centers, we also are working alongside VA staff to improve access to care for veterans who still wait too long for medical appointments.
The American Legion applauded emergency legislation to allow VA patients to use non-VA providers if they were waiting a month or longer to see doctors, or if they lived far from VA facilities.

But let me be clear. The American Legion supports Choice Cards only as a temporary fix to the bigger problem of VA access. We adamantly oppose privatization or the vouchering out of VA care as a long-term solution. Veterans need VA. It’s up to us to repair the access problem and restore trust, not send veterans down the road for help somewhere else.

The timing for change is upon us, as new VA leadership, looks to shift a culture that was decades in the making. The need is urgent with so many veterans entering the system right now.
And the need is not going away soon, as our nation is once again is deploying troops into a theater of war to fight Islamic State terrorists.

Sadly, some will come home from the fighting having made the ultimate sacrifice. They will arrive at Dover Air Force Base in coffins draped by our nation’s enduring symbol of freedom.

I will ask once more for Congress to support the supermajority of Americans in co-sponsoring and passing a bill introduced in the House last month that would amend the U.S. Constitution to protect our flag from desecration.

If ever there were a time for our elected officials, VA, DoD, The American Legion and veterans of America to unify under the colors of our nation, it’s now.
It is not enough to identify problems and Tweet out blame in 140 characters or less. **We must all work together to achieve substantive solutions to the frustrations veterans everywhere are expressing.**

Above all that, let us unite in our prayers for U.S. service men and women who today are in harm’s way. Let’s be sure we are providing them the resources they need to succeed in the war theater.

**We cannot let sequestration** harm them, or our national security.

Before I take questions, I would like to introduce my team who can provide more specific answers if I can’t. They are:
Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission Chairman Ralph Bozella and Director Lou Celli.

Veterans Employment and Education Commission Chairman Denise H. Rohan and Director Joe Sharpe.

National Legislative Commission Chairman Brett Reistad and Director Ian DePlanque

Together, we will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Before the questions I would like to acknowledge some very important people who are in attendance today:

I will ask the following people to please stand and be recognized:

American Legion National Officers serving with me this year

American Legion Past National Commanders in the audience
Janet Jefford, National President of the American Legion Auxiliary

Mike Moss, National Commander of the Sons of The American Legion

Past National Presidents of the American Legion Auxiliary

And Past National Commanders of the Sons of The American Legion.

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