

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**



**Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees**

**Hearing on Pending Legislation**

*March 13, 2024*

*Presented by*

*Mr. Michael McLaughlin*

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Chairman Bost, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Takano, Ranking Member Moran, and distinguished members of the committees, on behalf of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers, commonly referred to as NACVSO, I extend our gratitude for the opportunity to address this Joint session. My name is Michael McLaughlin and, as the Legislative Director for NACVSO, I am honored to speak before you today.

NACVSO is a unique organization in that all our elected or appointed leaders, as well as our majority of our members, are currently serving as VA accredited representatives-- in the field-- assisting veterans and their dependents, daily. Once again, it is my honor to share with you the issues that are important to NACVSO.

### **“Federal Support and Coordination with Local Governmental VSOs”**

Last year, I testified before this Joint session on the critical issue of federal support and coordination with local Governmental Veterans Service Officers (GVSOs). Since that testimony little has changed in terms of supporting frontline GVSOs working at the State, County, Tribal, and Municipal levels. Unfortunately, there has been more discussion on expanding paid services for veterans, neglecting the essential partnerships between GVSOs, traditional Veterans Service Organizations, and the federal government. Just as we would never expect our active-duty military to have to purchase their own ammunition, veterans should not be expected to purchase their own access to their EARNED VA benefits.

GVSOs serve as the frontline advocates in their communities, offering support that extends beyond disability claims. While we handle a significant workload representing disability claims, our duties encompass a wide range of services.

Despite the invaluable role GVSOs play in supporting veterans, there appears to remain misunderstandings regarding the scope of our responsibilities. Disability claims are just one aspect of our work; we also provide essential services that veterans need to thrive beyond their military service. We help coordinate care, whether at VA or in the community and then help them resolve billing issues that can arise from that care. When a veteran must access emergency services through the community, it is us that they call to help notify VA. When a veteran is placed on hospice by private health care facility, social workers call us to come to their bedside for enrollment help. When a veteran needs a 2-hour ride to an appointment, it is us they call. When a homeless veteran is identified after hours on Friday night, we get the call to get help secure a hotel when no shelters exist. We are the ones with whom our veterans attend church, school, and see at the grocery store. It is the GVSO who gets the call on their personal cell to find out that, yet another veteran has lost the battle in their struggle with PTSD.

Disability claims are what we do, and we are good at them, but it doesn't stop there. GVSOs are not incentivized by profiting from a veterans claim, we are incentivized by improving the lives of those we serve in our local communities.

In recent years, historic legislation has expanded benefits and care for veterans with little consideration being given to the resources needed to provide access to these benefits at the local level. Initiatives such as the Veterans Appeals and Modernization Act, the MISSION Act, Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, and PACT Act have placed additional demands on GVSOs without adequate support. The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the need for robust local assistance for veterans. We encourage and commend efforts by Congress to support and collaborate with GVSOs. Efforts like Representative Levin's Commitment to Veterans Support and Outreach Act, which aims to make grants available to GVSOs for the first time and would provide federal resources to

communities in underserved regions that suffer from critical shortages of GVSOs, high rates of suicide, and high rates of crisis line referrals.

We further applaud efforts such as Representative Luttrell's Veterans Benefits Improvement Act, which aims to strengthen upstream communication and review support between VA and GVSOs. Similarly, Representative Van Orden's TAP Promotion Act represents positive steps towards enhancing cooperation between the federal government and GVSOs/VSOs during military transitions.

Governmental Veteran Service Officers are a force multiplier. We should be creating a system where we empower them to generate efficiency within the system.

To use a metaphor, a forward operating base in a combat theater should seek to strengthen and support the fighting positions of the troops in the field holding the line. This requires communication, sharing of intelligence and supportive resources. If the FOB fails to support the fighting positions, then the mission fails.

Chairmen, Ranking Members, and members of the committees, on behalf of NACVSO thank you for your attention to these important issues. I urge this committee to consider the critical role GVSOs play in supporting veterans and their families. By investing in local assistance and fostering collaboration between federal and local agencies, we can ensure that no veteran is left behind. I look forward to our continued work together to better serve our nation's veterans.

Thank you.