

Opening Statement

of

Bob Jones

**AMVETS National Executive Director and
Chairman of *The Independent Budget***

before the

**Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives**

on

The Independent Budget

and

**The Department of Veterans' Affairs Budget
for Fiscal Year 2003**

**Wednesday, February 13, 2002, 10:00 AM
334 Cannon House Office Building**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Evans, and Members of the Committee.

I am Mr. Bob Jones, Executive Director of AMVETS and Chairman of *The Independent Budget* for Fiscal Year 2003.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to present *The Independent Budget*, co-authored AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed American Veterans and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. As you know, this is the 16th annual budget presented by our coalition, and we are proud that more than 40 veteran, military and medical service organizations endorse these recommendations. In whole, these recommendations provide Congress with a rational, rigorous and sound review of the budget required to support the vital programs for our nation's veterans.

In developing this document, we believe in certain guiding principles. Veterans must not be forced to wait for the benefits promised them. Veterans must be assured of access to high quality healthcare. Veterans must be guaranteed access to a full continuation of healthcare services, including long-term care. And, veterans must be assured burial in state or national cemetery in every state.

It is our firm belief that the mission of the VA must continue to include support of our military in times of emergency and war. Just as this support of our military is essential to national security, the focus of the VA medical system must remain centered on specialized care. VA's mission to conduct medical and prosthetics research in areas of veterans' special needs is critical to the integrity of the veterans healthcare system and to the advancement of American medicine.

In addition, it must be recognized that VA trains most of the nation's healthcare workforce. The VA healthcare system is responsible for great advances in medical science, and these advanced benefits all Americans. The VHA is the most cost effective application of federal healthcare dollars, providing benefits at 25 percent lower cost than other comparable medical services. In times of national emergency, VA medical services can function as an effective backup to the DoD and FEMA. In the State of the Union Address, the President stated his support for increased funding for VA healthcare services.

After mentioning the important mission of the VA, I must now point to the areas where VA funding must be increased. The VA budget must address the pending wage increases for VA employees. It must also address VA's large casework backlog. There are severely disabled

veterans and those needing home-based healthcare in those backlogs and I think we can all agree that this situation should be reversed.

Without adequate funding, healthcare services may need to be rationed. The funding shortfall of the FY '02 budget, paired with continued open enrollment makes it very difficult for VA to provide quality healthcare in a timely manner.

On the administration's legislative proposal, we call on Congress to provide adequate funding to avoid implementation of the \$1,500 deductible on priority seven veterans.

The bottom line Mr. Chairman is that VA is an excellent investment for America. Proper funding levels for the VA makes good fiscal sense to maintain a well functioning system. To this end, the administration must increase VA medicalcare funding to \$24.5B for FY '03, an increase of \$3 billion over last year's VA budget.

One more point that deserves comment is the proposed transfer of the Veterans Employment and Training Services (VETS) to VA. Clearly, VA has its own challenges with healthcare waiting lists and backlogs in claims processing. VA is ill prepared to accept a program, which is so naturally suited to the Department of Labor (DOL). DOL has the departmental knowledge regarding the job-market. It knows where the jobs are and the skill required to fill them. Shifting VETS from one department to another is not a "magic bullet," and it will not serve veterans better. Now is not the time to cut VETS programs from DOL.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my remarks. I will now introduce the gentleman who will testify to specific recommendations of *The Independent Budget* for FY '03. Rick Surratt, representing the Disabled Americans Veterans, will brief you on *The Independent Budget's* benefits priorities. Harley Thomas, of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, will address the vital needs in the VA healthcare system. Fred Burns, of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, will inform you of the critical problems of the VA's infrastructure and construction needs, and Rick Jones, of AMVETS, will offer you *The Independent Budget* concerns regarding our nation's veterans cemeteries.