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Testimony

of

Richard "Rick" Jones
AMVETS National Legislative Director

presented to the

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Health
U.S. House of Representatives

on

- 1.) **H.R.4020, the State Veterans' Homes Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act;**
- 2.) **H.R.4231, the Department of Veterans Affairs Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act;**
- 3.) **H.R.3849, Military Sexual Trauma Counseling Act; and,**
- 4.) **H.R. 4248, Homeless Veterans Assistance Reauthorization Act.**

Thursday, May 6, 2004
9:30 am, Room 334
Cannon House Office Building

Chairman Simmons, Ranking Member Rodriguez, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of AMVETS National Commander S. John Sisler and the nationwide membership of AMVETS, I am pleased to offer our views to the Subcommittee on Health regarding the legislative matters at hand: H.R.4020, the State Veterans' Homes Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act; H.R.4231, the Department of Veterans Affairs Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act; H.R.3849, Military Sexual Trauma Counseling Act; and, H.R. 4248, Homeless Veterans Assistance Reauthorization Act. Thank you for this opportunity.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS is a staunch advocate of providing veterans with appropriate benefits and services *earned* through honorable military service. As a leader since 1944 in helping to preserve the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces, our organization continues its proud tradition, providing not only support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements but also an array of community services that enhance the quality of life for this nation's citizens.

AMVETS applauds this Subcommittee and its effort to identify, examine and pursue legislative initiatives to implement solutions necessary for veterans to obtain the services, benefits and assistance they merit, earned and richly deserve.

H.R. 4020, the State Veterans' Homes Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act;

H.R. 4020, the State Veterans' Homes Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act, introduced by Chairman Chris Smith, would establish a program to enhance the employee incentive program used by States to recruit and retain quality-nursing staff. The program would allow States, on acceptance of application, to

enhance their veterans' home budgets by up to 50 percent of the annual cost of their current incentive program, but not greater than 2 percent of their overall per diem payments. The additional funds to State nursing homes would come from VA's health care budget.

For many senior veterans, the State veterans home is both first choice and last resort for those veterans no longer able to fight life's battles alone. In many cases, the home offers nearly everything from independent living to skilled nursing care.

We clearly recognize the growing need for long-term care. While the veterans population is projected to decline from 24.3 million to 20 million over the present decade, those aged 75 and older will increase from 4 million to 4.5 million and those over 85 will more than double, from about 640,000 currently to nearly 1.3 million in 2012.

AMVETS supports H.R. 4020 because it presents an enhanced pathway toward a Federal-State partnership that would improve the workplace of the State-run veterans nursing home. In supporting this legislation, AMVETS wishes the subcommittee to understand that we strongly support VA's effort to provide extended care services to enrolled veterans, and we will continue to support legislation that holds the potential to improve VA's response to the care needs of an aging veterans population.

Of course, the challenge ahead is for Congress and the administration to ensure VA is provided the necessary resources that improve delivery and enhance the measure of care for elderly veteran patients.

H.R. 4231, the Department of Veterans Affairs Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act;

H.R. 4231, introduced by Chairman Rob Simmons, seeks to authorize a set of new initiatives aimed to attract and retain nursing personnel at the Department of Veterans Affairs. First, the legislation would authorize the use of non-governmental recruitment teams, advertising agencies, and available internet resources to provide better tools and strategies for recruiting quality VA nurses.

Second, the bill would direct VA to establish more flexible work arrangements aimed to accommodate nurses' work schedules and improve the attractiveness of VA's workplace for experienced nurses. Third, it would amend VA's current hiring policies that judge an applicant specifically on their educational background without giving full merit to a nurse's career experience in clinical competency and direct patient care. Finally, the bill makes technical corrections to permit direct appointment of blind rehabilitation specialists.

AMVETS agrees that VA needs to do all it can to recruit the nurses necessary to provide quality, timely care to America's veterans. As today's nurses retire, VA must be in a position to stave off nursing shortages. They must become more proactive and H.R. 4231 has the potential to help VA update and upbeat a more aggressive recruiting effort to reach the market place with more modern tools. AMVETS supports H.R. 4231.

H.R. 3849, Military Sexual Trauma Counseling Act;

H.R. 3849, introduced by Ranking Member Ciro Rodriguez, would permanently extend VA's authority to offer counseling services to women experiencing sexual trauma while serving in the Armed Forces. AMVETS clearly sees a need for making this program permanent. We agree that VA and the Federal government should give increased attention to the problem of sexual assault in the military.

In February, the Denver Post reported that dozens of women in combat zones were returning from deployment seeking sexual trauma counseling and reporting sexual abuse by fellow soldiers. While it is our understanding that officials at the Pentagon are finalizing a report to respond to the concerns on troops being sexually assaulted, victims of sexual trauma need present support and current treatment options. In this regard, we believe that the military could do a better job providing services for victims of sexual assault.

Given the fact, however, that VA already struggles with an inadequate budget, we recognize that providing the best possible health care to our Nation's veterans remains a difficult task. Without reinforcing and strengthening the VA healthcare system, VA will have to make difficult choices regarding the number of professionals whose work and lives assist those veterans in the sexual trauma programs. The legacy of the program and its potential to compassionately care for these veterans is at stake.

AMVETS supports H.R. 3849 and supports the provision of counseling support to veterans suffering from the ill affects of sexual trauma.

H.R. 4248, Homeless Veterans Assistance Reauthorization Act;

H.R. 4248, introduced by Chairman Chris Smith, would extend VA's grant making authority to provide assistance to programs for homeless veterans. Without this legislation the authority for this program would expire in September 2005. The bill also would increase the grant and per diem program-spending limit to \$100 million from \$75 million.

According to Department of Veterans Affairs estimates, more than a quarter-of-a-million veterans have no place to call home on any given night in America. Bringing homeless veterans in off the street and empowering them to become

productive individuals is a goal of AMVETS.

It is important to understand that we do not place the burden of helping our veterans solely on the federal government. AMVETS' departments and posts are engaged across the country in various programs aimed at helping homeless veterans and providing them with shelter, transportation, and help in combating their dependency on drugs and alcohol. Nevertheless, AMVETS clearly recognizes that authorizing and extending the Homeless Grant and Per Diem Program is critical in getting the job done. AMVETS strongly supports this bill.

Mr. Chairman, the membership of AMVETS knows that the members of this panel will do all they can to help veterans overcome homelessness. We applaud you for holding this hearing and thank the Subcommittee for extending us the opportunity to present our views on these legislative matters. We look forward to working you and other congressional champions to strengthen, enhance, and improve the earned benefits of our nations' veterans and their families.

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Richard “Rick” Jones
National Legislative Director

Richard “Rick” Jones joined AMVETS as the National Legislative Director on January 4, 2001. As legislative director, he is the primary individual responsible for promoting AMVETS legislative, national security, and foreign affairs goals before the Departments of State, Defense, and Veterans Affairs, and the Congress of the United States.

Rick is an Army veteran who served as a medical specialist during the Vietnam War era. His assignments included duty at Brooke General Hospital in San Antonio, Texas; Fitzsimons General Hospital in Denver, Colorado; and Moncrief Community Hospital in Columbia, South Carolina. At Moncrief Hospital, Rick was selected to assist in processing the first members of the all-volunteer Army.

Rick completed undergraduate work at Brown University prior to his Army draft and earned a Master Degree in Public Administration from East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, following military service.

Prior to assuming his current position, Rick worked nearly twenty years as a legislative staff aide in the offices of Senator Paul Coverdell, Senator Lauch Faircloth, and Senator John P. East. He also worked in the House of Representatives as committee staff for Representative Larry J. Hopkins and Representative Bob Stump.

In working for Rep. Stump on the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, he served two years as Republican minority staff director for the subcommittee on housing and memorial affairs and two years as Republican majority professional staff on funding issues related to veterans affairs’ budget and appropriations.

Rick and his wife Nancy have three children, Sarah, Katherine, and David, and reside in Springfield, Virginia.

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May 6, 2004

The Honorable Rob Simmons, Chairman
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Health
Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Simmons:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program relevant to the May 6, 2004, hearing on issues before the Subcommittee

Sincerely,

Richard Jones
National Legislative Director



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