



**Testimony of**  
**James W. Doran**  
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**Before the**  
**House Committee on Veteran Affairs**  
**334 Canon House office Building**  
**Washington, DC**  
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Evans, Distinguished Members of the Committee:

On behalf of National Commander Edward W. Kemp, I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to the House Committee on Veterans Affairs concerning the challenges and opportunities facing the disability claims process at the Veterans Benefits Administration. Neither AMVETS nor I have been the recipient of any Federal grants or contracts during the current, or two previous, fiscal years.

For almost 60 years, AMVETS has represented the needs of the American Veteran, working with this Committee and the Department of Veteran Affairs to ensure that those needs are met.

It is my unfortunate duty to report to you, that in our opinion, those needs are not being met. Not by the Department of Veteran Affairs, not by the United States Congress, and not by this Committee.

As of 26 November, the Veteran Benefits Administration reports that 117,766 claims for benefits have been pending for more than 180 days. That's 19,581 more claims pending than at this same time last year. There are, of course, reasons for that. Budgets that can't stretch to cover the needs of the VBA; experienced employees retiring and being replaced by novices requiring years of training; and the Global War on Terrorism.

However, none of these reasons are pertinent. General of the Army Omar Bradley summed it up in 1947, when he said "*We are dealing with veterans, not procedures – with their problems, not ours.*" That hasn't changed. The Department of Veteran Affairs is tasked with dealing with the problems our veterans have; physical, emotional, financial, and educational. Everything else is of secondary importance.

The key issues that you are interested in are the challenges and the opportunities facing disabilities claims processing. The challenge is simple, how can VA adequately process disability claims with the funds they've been given? The answer is that they can't. If you, as the Members of Congress having oversight over the Department, can't get them the funding they need to fully staff all VBA Benefits Offices and Regional Offices, then VA will never be able to do its job to the best of its ability. If VBA is going to reduce the claims backlog to zero; if VBA is going to have to process over three-quarters of a million claims per year; if VBA is going to *deal with veterans and their problems*, then you need to do your part. You need to get the funds they need to hire additional full time employees. You need to listen to all of your constituents, not just the registered voters of your party, but to the veterans in your districts as well. We have all been engaged by them. You to represent them here in Washington. The Veteran Service Organizations to give you all the help we can in representing them and resolving their issues.

The opportunities are heavily keyed into the challenges. The funding for, and creation of, additional full time equivalent employees for the VBA should provide additional employment opportunities for our veterans. Unfortunately, as of the most recent data published on the VA website, only 26.5% of all DVA employees are veterans preference

eligible. That's not something to be proud of. This is the United States Department of Veteran Affairs, the majority of all department employees should be veterans preference eligible.

An even more important issue within the veteran community hinges on partisan politics and trust. No one asked us which party we belonged to when you sent us off to war, playing partisan politics with our lives now is inexcusable. This Committee needs to go on the floor with one face – not split into party factions. As members of the House you represent Congressional districts and political parties. As members of the House Committee on Veteran Affairs you represent ALL American veterans.

On Veteran's Day, the Secretary of Veteran Affairs announced that a pending review of 72,000 approved disability claims for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder had been cancelled. This announcement was highly publicized and joyfully received by the veteran community. On 27 November we found out that only six days later, the Secretary of Veteran Affairs requested that the Institute of Medicine conduct a review of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis and treatment within the Department of Veteran Affairs. Is the IOM a recognized authority on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? Looking at the members of the IOM Committee that may be assigned this task, I found that there are NO Military Physicians, NO DVA Physicians, not one individual with an apparent background in combat related PTSD. One member of the Committee did, however, serve on the Task Force that wrote the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM-IV). A 27 member Task Force worked five years to develop the DSM-IV manual in a process that involved more than 1,000 psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. Now Secretary Nicholson wants the IOM to re-examine, and repudiate, the validity of the DSM-IV. Why?

A second committee will review, among other items, the compensation practices for PTSD, the criteria for establishing the severity of PTSD as published in the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities. Again, I ask why? If the goal is to find ways to reduce the amount of moneys spent on Veterans Disability Compensation, all you need to do is ask us. I can tell you, without reservation, that the only way to effectively reduce that expense is to stop sending our young men and women into combat!

In the meantime, you, as Members of the Congress of the United States of America have a Constitutional Duty *"To raise and support Armies...To provide and maintain a Navy...To provide for calling forth the Militia..."* We, the veterans you created, are a part of that cost, and the bill is fast becoming past due.