

**STATEMENT OF
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NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION
THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
COMMITTEE ON VETERAN' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ON
BENEFITS-RELATED LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES**

JULY 27, 2005

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

The American Legion appreciates this opportunity to express our views on the many important bills being considered today by the Committee. We applaud the Committee for holding hearings on these vital issues.

H.R. _____, A draft bill to authorize the Secretary of Labor to establish professional qualifications for disabled veterans outreach program specialists and local veterans' employment representatives.

This draft bill is to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Labor to establish professional qualifications for disabled veterans' outreach program specialists (DVOP) and local veterans' employment representatives (LVER). The LVERs and DVOPs are the heart and soul of VETS (Veterans Employment Training Services). The mission of VETS is to promote the physical, emotional and economic security of America's veterans. The vision of the VETS program is to create a seamless transition back to civilian life for veterans. It is composed of many dedicated professional veterans who struggle to maintain a quality, veteran-oriented program. The role of VETS is to augment local employment service offices and handle the hard-to-place veterans.

The LVER's role is to:

- Ensure veterans are receiving quality services from local employment services employees;
- Maintain regular contact with community leaders, employers, labor unions, training programs, and veterans' service organizations;
- Conduct job search assistance workshops
- Provide job development and job referrals.
- Provide labor market information
- Provide referrals to training and supportive services
- Facilitate guidance and counseling service to certain veterans

The LVER has no counterpart in a local employment service office. Their only supervisory responsibility is any assigned DVOP. As taxed as the LVER may be, the DVOP's job is just as demanding. DVOP's can be relied on to:

- Develop jobs leads and job training opportunities through contacts with employers;
- Promote and develop apprenticeship and on-the-job training opportunities with employers;
- Carry out outreach activities to locate veterans in need of job assistance;
- Provide assistance to employers in securing job training opportunities for eligible veterans;
- Assist local employment services office employees with in their responsibilities for serving veterans;
- Promote and assist in the development of entry-level and career job opportunities;

With the dramatic increase in the number of veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan being discharged, and the unacceptable unemployment rates among female veterans and all veterans between the ages of 20 and 24, the roles and professionalism of the DVOPs and LVERs in assisting all transitioning veterans to the civilian workforce are increasingly important. Furthermore, The American Legion believes there is a direct correlation between the successful placement of veterans into training programs and job placement with having professional qualifications standards set for DVOPs and LVERs.

The unique experience of military service serves as a benefit to veterans who are employed as DVOPs and LVERS. That shared experience enables DVOPs and LVERS to better understand the needs of the veterans seeking assistance and ultimately results in more timely and efficient assistance. The American Legion strongly supports the hiring requirement of both DVOPs and LVERS to be veterans.

Additionally, VA Vocational Rehabilitation Service has long been criticized for emphasizing training over job placement. The American Legion believes that VETS should be required to work more closely with VA VocRehab because of VETS' expertise in the field.

H.R. 3082, "The Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act of 2005."

This legislation would amend title 38, United States Code, to require that 9 percent of procurement contracts entered into by the Department of Veterans Affairs be awarded to small business concerns owned by veterans, and for other purposes. Veterans' benefits have always included assistance in creating and operating veteran-owned small businesses. This assistance dates back to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. The American Legion supports this bill that adds value to the nature of military service and transfers that service into the federal market place.

H.R. 1773, A bill to make permanent an existing "pilot" program of direct home loans to Native American Veterans, and for other purposes.

This legislation amends title 38, United States Code, to make permanent the Native American Veteran Housing Loan Program, (set to expire after December 31, 2008) under which the Secretary of Veterans Affairs may make direct housing loans to Native American veterans; to include limiting the amount of any increase in the principal amount of any direct housing loan made to a Native American; and extend the eligibility for such direct loans to a non-Native American veteran who is the spouse of a Native American. The American Legion supports the purpose of this loan program to give Native American veterans an opportunity to purchase, construct, or renovate homes on trust lands, and applauds the success this program has had in ensuring that qualified Native American veterans have the opportunity to purchase homes on trust land. Before this pilot program was implemented, commercial home loan institutions would not give individuals home loans on trust lands due to the unique relationship between the trust land and the federal government. The government actually owns the land, but will lease the land to Native Americans for an extended period of time. However, with VA currently having the authority to make direct loans to Native Americans, there is no need to have commercial lending institutions involved in the lending process. Since the pilot program's inception, over 468 loans have been disbursed, resulting in a sharp rise of homeownership within the Native American veteran community. By making this program permanent and with continued outreach efforts by VA to the Native American veteran community, the number of home loans made to Native American veterans will continue to increase in the coming years.

H.R. _____, A draft bill to establish at the Department of Veterans Affairs an Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events.

This legislation requires the Department of Veterans Affairs establish an Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events that would encourage and facilitate disabled veterans in participating in sporting events. The American Legion supports any bill that would enhance the quality of life for our nations disable veterans.

H.R. _____, A draft bill to increase the amount of assistance for certain disabled veterans for specially adapted housing.

This bill increases the maximum available grant to eligible veterans for specially adapted housing from the current \$50,000 to \$55,000 and special home adaptations from \$10,000 to 12,500. Specially adapted housing grants are made available for the installation of wheel chair ramps, chair lifts, modifications to kitchens and bathrooms and other adaptations to homes for veterans who cannot move about without the use of wheelchairs, canes or braces or who are blind and suffer the loss or loss of use of one lower extremity. Special home adaptation grants are available for veterans who are legally blind or have lost or lost the use of both hands. Given the rising costs of construction materials and services, The American Legion is pleased to support this legislation.

H.R. _____, A draft bill to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide adaptive housing assistance to disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by a parent or sibling.

This legislation authorizes VA to provide adaptive housing assistance to disabled veterans residing temporarily in housing owned by a parent or sibling. As in all wars, the majority of disabled veterans returning home are young persons who have not yet established themselves in their own homes and who return to their families of origin. This enlightened legislation would mitigate the financial burden to parents, brothers or sisters who make needed home modifications to accommodate these deserving veterans. The American Legion fully supports this bill.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.