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NATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland
20706-4380
TELEPHONE: 301-459-9600
FAX: 301-459-7924
E-MAIL: amvets@amvets.org

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

STATEMENT OF

DAVID G. GREINER
AMVETS DEPUTY NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON

THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT
PROGRAM

THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 2006
334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
10:00AM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary of Findings

- Over the past two decades, the VR&E program has been reviewed, assessed, and audited at least 24 times in external and internal reports, often by GAO.
- The March 2004 Task Force report to Congress recommended changes to the VR&E program. Frankly, AMVETS has yet to see evidence that VR&E efforts to obtain jobs for rehabilitated veterans are successful.
- AMVETS is very concerned that VR&E puts an emphasis on training, not employment services and employment results.
- In October 2005, VA and DOL signed a memorandum of understanding committing to work together to maximize employment services to veterans.
- We are hopeful the MOU will form a bond between the two departments and enhance employment services to veterans.
- AMVETS certainly agrees with the points made in the MOU, and is hopeful the departments will follow through on their promises.

Recommendations

1. AMVETS recommends VR&E put more focus on employment services and needs for returning servicemembers, specifically the disabled.
2. AMVETS recommends Congress evaluate the impact of disabilities on immediate and long-term employment barriers in determining eligibility for VR&E services, including making extensions beyond the 12 delimiting date.
3. AMVETS recommends VR&E reduce the caseload from the current 145 cases to a more manageable level of 100 cases per counselor.
4. AMVETS recommends VR&E modernize its technology and file sharing systems to allow for better communication with agencies, contractors, employment services and outside partnership entities.

Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Herseth, and members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the nationwide membership of AMVETS, I am pleased to offer our views and recommendations to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program.

AMVETS applauds this Subcommittee and its efforts to again examine VA's VR&E program. AMVETS is a staunch advocate of providing veterans with appropriate benefits and services earned through honorable military service. As a leader 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.

Mr. Chairman, the VR&E program is designed to help veterans with service-connected disabilities to prepare for, find, and keep suitable employment. Disabled veterans rated at 10 percent or more can apply for VR&E training and services within 12 years from the date of their service-connected award rating. With thousands of disabled veterans returning home every month, it is critical that the VR&E program provide our injured soldiers with a seamless transition from the military to successful rehabilitation and on to suitable employment.

The federal government has a special obligation to disabled veterans. Veterans with disabilities often encounter barriers to their entry into the workforce, lack accommodations on the job, or have difficulty obtaining appropriate training, education, and job skills. These difficulties in turn can contribute to low labor force participation rates and high levels of reliance on public benefits.

Over the years, many critiques have been written about the VR&E program. In the past two decades, VR&E has been reviewed, assessed, and audited at least 24 times in separate external and internal reports, often by GAO. In response to the criticism, former VA Secretary Anthony Principi formed the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Task Force. The Secretary's intent was to

conduct an “unvarnished top to bottom independent examination, evaluation, and analysis” of VR&E. The Task Force interviewed countless VR&E counselors, heard testimonials from users of the system, and solicited many outside and independent opinions. AMVETS contends the solid recommendations suggested in the report will enhance the opportunities and services that can enable veterans to obtain and maintain suitable employment.

In March 2004, the Task Force released its report to Congress, recommending many needed changes to the VR&E program. AMVETS looks forward to seeing these recommendations implemented, but frankly, we still have seen little evidence that VR&E efforts are successful. In the report, the Task Force identified several key problem areas that still needs to be addressed. For example:

1. The VR&E program has not been a VBA priority in terms of returning veterans with service-connected disabilities to the workforce.
2. The VR&E program emphasizes education and not employment.
3. The VR&E program has limited capacities to manage the growing workload.
4. The VR&E program must be redesigned for the 21st century.

AMVETS annually comments on the VR&E program in *The Independent Budget*, and makes recommendations that would allow the program to meet its ongoing workload demand and implement new initiatives recommended by the Task Force. Since we have been examining VR&E, we have been concerned the program puts an emphasis on training, not employment services and employment results. Reports have shown that veterans were declared rehabilitated without providing sufficient follow-up activities to make sure that the goal of long-term suitable employment was achieved. And, VR&E did not prioritize veterans with severe service-connected disabilities.

AMVETS believes that VR&E needs to put more focus on employment services and needs for returning soldiers, specifically the disabled. Initial service-connected disabilities or conditions may increase in severity over time and adversely effect the earning capacity or employability for the veteran. We have heard reports that some disabled veterans who have applied for, and were awarded, a higher disability rating were denied VR&E services because they were beyond the 12

year rule from their initial rating date. We recommend that Congress evaluate the impact of disabilities on immediate and long-term employment barriers in determining eligibility for VR&E services, including making extensions beyond the 12 delimiting date.

The success of transitioning disabled veterans to the workforce relies heavily on VR&E's ability to provide services in a timely and effective manner. Unfortunately, the demand and expectations being placed on staff are exceeding the capacity to effectively deliver a full continuum of services. VR&E has been experiencing a shortage of staff nationwide due to insufficient funding, which has caused delays in providing services to disabled veterans. There are currently 65,000 veterans applying for VR&E services, compared to 45,000 in FY2000. At present, there are more than 96,000 veterans in various phases of VR&E compared to 70,000 in FY2000. Furthermore, there is a waiting list of more than 8,000 veterans wanting to access VR&E services. To meet these growing demands, AMVETS recommends VR&E reduce the caseload from the current 145 cases to a more manageable level of 100 cases per counselor.

AMVETS believes the VR&E program needs to drastically modernize its technology and file sharing systems. VR&E implemented its current case management and information system, WINRS, in 1997. WINRS refined and expanded the functions of the VR&E system to allow management and sharing claims information by VA offices nationwide. This was a good start. However, in today's information technology age, VA now needs a web-based system to allow for a more efficient way of sharing information with agencies, contractors, employment services and outside partnership entities. We recommend Congress provide the necessary resources in FY07 to expand and implement new technologies to VR&E's case management and file sharing information systems.

Some reports raised concerns about the failure of coordination between federal departments and agencies. Recognizing the need for a collaborative effort between the VA and DOL, the two departments signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in October 2005, committing to work together to maximize employment services to veterans. We are hopeful the MOU will form a bond between the two departments and enhance their employment services. The MOU promises data

sharing activities, establishes management information systems, forms three joint working groups, and appoints a point of contact for the provision of employment services. AMVETS certainly agrees with all the items in the MOU and is hopeful the departments will follow through on their promises. We will continue to reach out to VA and DOL-VETS and gladly offer them any assistance we can provide.

For the service-connected disabled veterans returning home, and for those who served before, we must do all we can to strengthen the VR&E program and learn from its shortcomings. It is now time that the suggestions and recommendations made by the VSOs and the Task Force be seriously considered. It is our hope that immediate and concrete actions will be made so veterans have access to service that is timely, effective, and efficient. It is good public policy and it is the right thing to do.

In closing Mr. Chairman, AMVETS looks forward to working with you and others in Congress to ensure we continue to update and improve the earned benefits of America's veterans and their families. As we find ourselves in times that threaten our very freedom, our nation must never forget those who ensure our freedom endures. AMVETS thanks the panel for the opportunity to address this issue.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I thank you again for the privilege to present our views and recommendations.

Thank you.

David G. Greineder
AMVETS Deputy National Legislative Director

David Greineder joined AMVETS (American Veterans) on May 10, 2004. As the Deputy National Legislative Director (currently serving as Acting National Legislative Director), he is the primary individual responsible for promoting AMVETS legislative, national security, and foreign affairs goals before the administration and the Congress of the United States.

Prior to assuming his current position, David worked nearly five years on Capitol Hill as a legislative staff aide in the offices of Pennsylvania Reps. George W. Gekas and Timothy F. Murphy. He was a key policy advisor for a wide range of issues, including veterans' affairs, and helped manage federal appropriations efforts in both congressional offices.

David completed undergraduate work at Millersville University of Pennsylvania, where he was an assistant of data collection for the Keystone Poll.

AMVETS National Headquarters
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, MD 20706
Telephone: 301-459-9600
Fax: 301-459-7924
Email: dgreineder@amvets.org



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March 9, 2006

The Honorable John Boozman, Chairman
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Boozman:

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 March 9, 2006 Subcommittee hearing on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Rehabilitation and Employment program.

Sincerely,



David G. Greineder
Deputy National Legislative Director



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NATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS
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