

STATEMENT OF

JAMES N. MAGILL, DIRECTOR
NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT SERVICE
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WAR OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

WITH RESPECT TO

THE GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE'S SEPTEMBER 2001 REPORT ON
THE VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE AND THE
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND
REHABILITATION PROGRAM

WASHINGTON, DC

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 2.7 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its Ladies Auxiliary, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to express our views on these important issues. We appreciate your continuing concern for our nation's veterans and their ability to be gainfully employed.

As representatives of the VFW travel throughout our nation and military bases overseas, one of the most frequently expressed concerns is whether these individuals will be able to find a job. Soon to be released Armed Forces personnel worry that they will

not be able to transfer their skills to the private sector. In today's economy, veterans are concerned about lay-offs and whether they will be able to find a new job. And finally, veterans who reach retirement age and realize they need to supplement their retirement income are concerned they may not be able to find employment.

Mr. Chairman, veterans deserve and have earned an Employment Service dedicated specifically to them. They do have such a system and while the VFW does not believe that system is broken, we do believe it should and can be improved.

In its report to the House Veterans Affairs Committee, the General Accounting Office made several recommendations, which parallel the VFW's views. Ironically, the title of the report mirrors our two greatest concerns; that being "Accountability" and "Flexibility." For years, the VFW has called for the Veterans' Employment and Training Service to be held accountable in ensuring that veterans receive priority of service in all federally funded job-training programs. Likewise, VETS must have the flexibility to accomplish this mandate.

In order for a program to be successful, a set standards and measurements must be implemented in order to assess its effectiveness. As stated in the GAO report, while veterans' do receive more services and in a more timely fashion than non-veterans, the effectiveness of these programs and those that administer them cannot be verified. A set of standards and measurements must be implemented to identify when success is being achieved as well as where improvements need to be initiated. We do not believe, however, that a single set of standards and measurements can be adopted by all states – one size cannot fit all. Each set of measurements and standards must reflect the demographics unique to each state.

The VFW understands the difficulties associated with assisting hard to place or severely disabled veterans and the increased workload, which must be preformed to support the needs of these veterans. Still, because of more staff operation and the increased intensive service required, standards that reflect this type of casework must be used to maintain and enforce superior service to our nations veterans who need the best service available.

Once a set of measurements and standards is adopted, there must be a consistent system for evaluation that will allow flexibility and expansion for future needs and requirements. VETS has established the will to address standards, but maintaining them with consistency between states is a hurdle that must be overcome.

Another area addressed in the GAO Report was “ Rewards” and “Sanctions”. Currently, states are neither rewarded for meeting or exceeding their performance measures nor penalized for failing to meet these measures. The VFW supports a system of rewards and sanctions. We do believe, however, that sanctions should be positive in nature. While rewarding states that meet or exceed measurements with increased funding, we see withholding or decreasing funding to those states that do not meet or expected measurement as inappropriate. The withholding of funds, in all likelihood, will only exacerbate the situation and ultimately do harm to the veterans the states are trying to help. States not meeting the measurements need guidance and assistance in improving their performance. If states continually fail to meet standards, then additional measures must be taken.

In your letter of invitation to participate in this hearing, we were asked to comment on VA’s Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Programs.

The VFW believes The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Service has made major improvements in quality of service since incorporate its name change. With this change has come an increased focus on follow-up and end goal results rather than creating a warehouse of veterans who have college degrees and nothing in the way of opportunities for meaningful employment.

An improvement that cannot be overlooked is that over 10,000 veterans have been benefited through focusing on quality control and after action reporting, through not only educating the veteran, but making them employable within the past three years. The VFW sees this, as a quantifiable measurement that shows education, preparation and opportunity, followed by aftercare, will equal success for our nations disabled veterans.

To assist VBA in processing claims for these veterans, VR& E has become proactive in supplying copies of their assessments, which helps adjudicators process claims quicker dealing in cases of unemployability. Through their "Corporate WINRS" program, VR&E has been able to expand accessibility to case notes, important documents and current activities on veterans to stream line the service process, allowing for increased service capability and reducing waiting time through errors.

As a result of these improvements in service and mission focus, the VFW is currently entering into an agreement to create the National Service Officer Program. This program, while still in the planning stage, will allow for training of new service officers at discharge points to assist newly separating veterans. The VFW will assist in developing and implementing an On-The-Job-Training program, along with a training syllabus and the criteria needed to establish a structured block of instruction that will give veterans the opportunity to enjoy a meaningful second career.

Opportunities like this one are valuable in offering the veteran an avenue to restarting their lives. In addition, the independent living service program is another critical tool in enabling the veteran to succeed. Yet, the 500-limit cap on this program places a ceiling on this highly successful program. The VFW urges that there be support to removing or at least raising this limit to a level that many more veterans will be able to benefit.

We are encouraged by the progress VR&E has made and look forward to working with them in the future, in helping to make further improvements in this valuable program to assist Americas' Disabled Veterans.

This concludes my testimony. I will be happy to answer any question you may have.