

STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES
BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WITH RESPECT TO
HEALTH-CARE LEGISLATION

WASHINGTON, D.C.

MAY 6, 2004

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of the 2.6 million men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Ladies Auxiliary, I would like to express our appreciation for being included in today's hearing.

One of VFW's Priority Goals aims to see that veterans everywhere receive timely access to high quality healthcare. Although the main crux of that goal centers on the appropriations process and the need for adequate funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the bills under consideration today would also improve health care for veterans. We are pleased to support them.

We strongly support H.R. 3849, the *Military Sexual Trauma Counseling Act*. This legislation would grant permanent authority for VA's sexual trauma treatment programs. Current authority for the program is set to expire at the end of the current year.

The sexual trauma program is one of VA's many successes. It compassionately cares for veterans who have suffered from the after-effects of this trauma. It provides them with a safe environment to help them understand what has happened and to help them deal with the complex and life-changing psychological effects of these traumas. This program provides the specialized kinds of medical treatment that VA excels at. The mental health services it provides give these men and women a measure of dignity as they recover.

Since its inception in 1992, the program has been extended several times due to expiring authorities, and it is again set to expire at the end of the year. VFW believes that this is a program that works well and serves many veterans. It should be extended permanently. We should acknowledge the good work VA is doing and the many lives this program has changed. This legislation would do just that.

VFW also supports H.R. 4020, the *State Veterans Home Nurse Recruitment Act*. This bill would apportion part of the grants VA provides to state veterans' nursing homes for programs that have an "employee incentive scholarship program or other employee incentive program...designed to promote the hiring and retention of nursing staff and to reduce nursing shortages." The legislation limits the maximum amount of money VA can earmark for these programs and requires an annual report detailing how these funds would be used.

We believe that long-term care is part of VA's mission to provide the full continuum of care to this nation's veterans. State nursing homes have served an increasingly integral part in VA's attempt to fulfill this mandate. It is estimated that there will be over 1.3 million veterans over the age of 85 in the next decade, up from the current 870,000. As this population ages, their need for care will skyrocket. VA must be up to the challenge of providing care.

We believe that this legislation will play a helpful role in addressing these needs. It will increase these homes' ability to recruit and retain the staff they will need to combat current and projected shortfalls.

We are pleased to support similar legislation, H.R. 4231, the *Department of Veterans Affairs Nurse Recruitment and Retention Act*. It differs from the previous bill in that this legislation focuses on increasing nursing staff at VA facilities. It would create a pilot program in a VISN that faces a shortage of qualified nurses. This program would require the use of private-sector recruitment practices to include the use of internet technologies and recruitment, advertising and communications agencies.

VFW believes that this would be a worthwhile pilot program and that it may provide answers to the shortage problem, which could then be used system-wide. If VA is able to find a reasonable program that increases the number of qualified nurses, our members are sure to benefit.

This legislation also includes a section that would provide several alternative work schedules for nurses. Again, we would support this in that it may improve the availability and quality of health care services VA can provide to our veterans.

VFW is pleased to offer our strong support for H.R. 4248, the *Homeless Veterans Assistance Reauthorization Act*. This legislation builds off of 2001's Homeless Veterans Comprehensive Assistance Act, which was so strongly championed by this Committee. H.R. 4248 would increase and extend the amounts available for grants under the program to \$100 million from fiscal year's 2005 through 2008.

As strongly as we applaud this Committee's actions, we must take exception with the actions of the Appropriations Committees and of the whole Congress with regards to this important legislation. Although the money was authorized in 2001, the proper level of funding was never actually appropriated. This is a travesty.

Estimates are that there are nearly 300,000 homeless veterans asleep on the streets of this country each night. This truly is unconscionable. These men and women once proudly wore the uniform of this country and have now retreated out of our sight. None of us should accept this. We as veterans' advocates, but especially as a grateful nation, have an obligation to seek out

these men and women and to provide them with the skills and specialized treatments they need to better themselves and to return them to productive society.

Many of these men and women are homeless through no fault of their own. They may be afflicted with mental illnesses or with substance abuse diseases. They can be treated and they can improve. They just need our help. That is precisely why we support this measure. With just a little help, we can restore a measure of dignity to those former service member's lives.

These men and women are silent veterans. We do not see them every day and they do not have a powerful voice as constituents. We must stand up for them and this entire Congress must do right by them.

The final bill under consideration is a draft bill, which would amend the qualifications for VA's Under Secretary for Health. This bill enjoys our strong support. Chiefly, this important legislative initiative would eliminate the requirement that the Under Secretary be a Medical Doctor. Additionally, it would eliminate the position's four-year term.

In the twelve years since the position was first created, VA's health care system has undergone dramatic changes. VA is now an outpatient driven health care system that has nearly 8 million enrolled veterans in over 5,000 different locations. This crucial position does not require specific medical knowledge so much as the ability to administer and oversee a complex medical operation spanning the entire country. While we would expect that the Under Secretary would have some experience in a medical setting, his or her skills as an executive must be of primary concern. The size and scope of the VA Health Care system as well as the diversity of staff and locations require an exceptional manager possessing extraordinary skill and commitment.

It is paramount that there be no impediment to seeking out and then securing the services of such an individual as Under Secretary for Health. In this regard we would also urge that a search committee is established toward this end. Along with members of the medical, managerial and scientific communities, it must also be comprised of members of our Veterans Service Organizations.

We also believe that this draft bill's section providing for the elimination of the four-year term represents an important improvement and safeguard. This would give the Department the ability to appropriately react if the Under Secretary is not performing up to standards. Further, it reduces some of the complications that can arise if the Under Secretary need be removed from office for not properly or fully fulfilling his or her duty.

Mr. Chairman, we again thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Veterans' health care is of paramount concern to our organization. VFW knows that our nation's obligation to provide timely quality health care is a result of the gratitude this nation has for its former defenders. This Committee clearly does an excellent job of living up to that obligation.

I would be happy to answer any questions you or the members of this Subcommittee may have. Thank you.