

**STATEMENT OF
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OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JULY 27, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 1.3 million members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), I appreciate the opportunity to present our views on the following bills and draft bills:

H.R. 3082, the Veteran-Owned Small Business Promotion Act of 2005: would require the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to award nine percent of its procurement contracts to small businesses owned and operated by veterans. The bill would further stipulate that at least one-third of the total value of all such contracts be awarded to small businesses owned and operated by veterans with service-connected disabilities. Disabled veteran owned businesses would be given greatest preference for awarding prime and subcontracts, and non-disabled veteran owned businesses would have the next highest priority. The amendments made by this Act would apply to contracts awarded after September 30, 2006.

This commendable bi-partisan bill, which was introduced by Chairman John Boozman and co-sponsored by Ranking Member Stephanie Herseth, Congressman Michael Bilirakis, Congressman Dan Burton, and Congressman Terry Everett, would be a revolutionary step forward for veteran and disabled veteran business owners. Previous legislative efforts encouraging the federal government to increase its utilization of such businesses (Public Law 106-50) merely set a three percent goal without including additional incentives. Since goals by themselves are little more than rhetoric, the intentions of Congress went unmet.

Because H.R. 3082 would require, rather than just encourage, the VA to award nine percent of procurement contracts to veteran owned businesses, we would expect to see much greater adherence to the intent of this bill. H.R. 3082 rightfully intends to establish the VA as the role model for other government agencies to emulate. If it is successful in attaining the nine percent requirement, the VA would far surpass other agencies' utilization of veteran and disabled veteran owned businesses.

Though we have no resolutions from our membership specific to this bill, the DAV acknowledges the positive impact it would have for disabled veteran business owners, and we would not oppose its favorable consideration.

H.R. 1773, the Native American Veteran Home Loan Act: would authorize a permanent program for direct housing loans to Native American veterans.

Some Native American veterans face difficulty in obtaining conventional financing for the purchase or construction of homes because they cannot own federal reservation land, and trust lands cannot be used to secure loans. Though the DAV has no resolution calling for this legislation, we firmly believe Native Americans who have served in our Armed Forces should have equal opportunities to share in the American dream of home ownership, and we appreciate the necessity of special provisions authorizing the VA to provide direct loans to Native Americans. We have no objection to the favorable consideration of this meritorious legislation.

Draft bill to establish, in statute, the Office of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events: This legislation would statutorily establish a VA special events director and office to provide for, facilitate, and encourage participation by disabled veterans in rehabilitative programs and events. Additionally, it would authorize an appropriation of \$5 million each fiscal year to carry out the activities of the office.

The VA, along with several veterans' service organizations (including the DAV) as co-sponsors, hosts annual national rehabilitative special event programs for veterans receiving health care from VA medical facilities. These four programs, which include the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, National Veterans Wheelchair Games, National Veterans Golden Age Games, and the National Creative Arts Festival, focus on rehabilitation and enhancement of the physical, social, and emotional well-being of many severely disabled veterans. These programs showcase the therapeutic value of sports, fitness, and recreation, which are key factors in VA's extensive rehabilitation programs, and are profoundly beneficial in helping veterans overcome or mitigate the physical and emotional impact of severe disabilities.

In addition to supporting rehabilitative events through co-sponsorship, the membership of the DAV has adopted a resolution calling on Congress to provide a separate line-item appropriation in the VA budget to ensure the continuance of these worthy programs. Therefore, we are pleased with the comparative intent of this draft legislation. Adequate resources designated specifically for the special events office would eliminate the VA's need to raise funds and allow it to focus exclusively on rehabilitation and therapy for disabled veterans. The responsibility for raising additional funds can and should be left to co-sponsors.

Along with our support of this draft bill, we encourage the Subcommittee to include language to place the special events office under the Veterans' Health Administration (VHA). Currently, the programs are under the authority of the VA Office of Public Affairs and the VHA is almost completely removed from administrative decisions. Though the Public Affairs Office certainly has a role to play, the ultimate purpose of these special events is to provide rehabilitative therapy to severely disabled veterans. Since VHA is the department responsible for providing such care, it should be the designated controlling authority for the four rehabilitative programs mentioned above.

As the administrative authority, the VHA should be required to develop a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with co-sponsors, and to provide detailed accountability for all special events office funds, including co-sponsorship fees. Without such financial support from the DAV and other co-sponsors, substantially fewer disabled veterans would benefit from

these uplifting special events. Therefore, co-sponsors should be allowed at least some level of input regarding the programs.

The DAV applauds the Subcommittee for recognizing the value and importance of National Disabled Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events, and for having the foresight to ensure they are available to severely disabled veterans in the future. The DAV supports this commendable bill and hopes the Subcommittee will consider our suggestions for improvement.

Draft bill to increase assistance amount for Specially Adapted Housing: This legislation would increase the specially adapted housing grant from \$50,000 to \$55,000, and the special home adaptation grant from \$10,000 to \$12,000.

These provisions would partially fulfill recommendations by both *The Independent Budget (IB)*, and DAV Resolution No. 113, which calls for an increase in the specially adapted housing and home adaptation grants. The *IB* is a budget and policy document that sets forth the collective views of the DAV, AMVETS (American Veterans), the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW). As reported in the 2006 *IB*,

Providing assistance to the most seriously disabled servicemembers who need special home adaptations to enable mobility within the home is an important part of assisting them with the transition from institutionalization to independent living in their own homes.

In addition to providing immediate increases, both the DAV and the *IB* recommend that legislation be enacted to provide automatic annual cost-of-living adjustments to specially adapted housing grants. While we hope the Subcommittee will consider adding such a provision to this legislation, the DAV fully supports this draft bill.

Draft bill to create a new Adaptive Housing Grant: This legislation would create a new Adaptive Housing Grant for veterans who do not own a house but live with parents or relatives and need certain adaptations to living space.

Although the DAV has no resolution calling for this legislation, we recognize its merit and applaud the Subcommittee for its consideration of severely disabled veterans who reside with their parents or other relatives. The DAV fully supports this draft bill because it is within our mission of building better lives for our nation's disabled veterans and their families.

Draft bill to encourage greater qualifications and standards for Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists, and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs): This legislation would direct the Department of Labor (DOL) to establish professional qualifications for DVOP/LVER personnel that are consistent with the duties and functions of their positions.

DVOP/LVER personnel help disabled veterans make the difficult and uncertain transition from military to civilian life. They help provide jobs and job training opportunities for disabled

and other veterans by serving as intermediaries between employers and veterans. They maintain contacts with employers and provide outreach to veterans. They also develop linkages with other agencies to promote maximum employment opportunities for veterans.

Though the DAV has no resolutions specific to professional qualifications for DVOP/LVER employees, we acknowledge the importance of filling DVOP/LVER positions with capable individuals. Disabled veterans deserve to have employment representatives who are trained specifically to meet their unique requirements. As such, the DAV recommended in earlier testimony that DVOP/LVER training programs receive adequate funding. We hope that our recommendation will be considered along with the Subcommittee's consideration of establishing professional qualifications for DVOP/LVERs. The DAV has no objection to the favorable consideration of this draft bill.

Closing

The several bills before the Committee today would enhance, expand, or make beneficial adjustments to benefits and services for veterans. The DAV appreciates the ongoing efforts of this Committee to improve and strengthen veterans programs, as well as the efforts and continuing support of the sponsors of these bills.