



*We exist to help those who cannot help themselves*

STATEMENT OF  
CHARLES A. SUSINO  
NATIONAL DIRECTOR/LEGISLATIVE OFFICER

AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. SENATE/U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

MARCH 7, 2019

Chairmen and members of the House and Senate Veteran's Affairs Committee and guests, my name is Charles A. Susino, National Director/Legislative Officer of the American Ex-Prisoners of War. I thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns today. Many of you knew my father, Charles Susino, Jr., National Commander of our organization for many years. It was his voice that urged many of you to do the right thing on behalf of all veterans. I will attempt to channel that voice today. This past July, my family and I, and the veteran community as a whole, lost the strongest advocate on behalf of those who cannot speak to you directly. Many of you knew my dad from his years of testifying. He professed to me and others, "it's about the deserving veterans receiving what they earned".

So it is on that theme that I proceed.

First, we wish to acknowledge the passing of a great American, the 41<sup>st</sup> President of the United States, George H. W. Bush this past November who proudly served this country both in the military and in public office.

We are grateful for your efforts over this past year. This Congress has stepped up and passed several key pieces of legislation in support of our veterans with respect to health care, compensation, and public awareness. We look forward to a productive 2019-2020 as the 116<sup>th</sup> Congress works on our behalf.

If you disagree with us – either here today in testimony – or as we work for our fellow veterans – please say so and we will respect your position. Otherwise we ask for your unwavering advocacy on these issues.

We draw your attention to several bills which we believe have special merit and request your active support.

- The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act HR 299 & 203 needs to be passed. It is beyond reasonable when the exposures endured by servicemen and women to dangerous chemicals and toxics takes decades for the government to acknowledge and act. There is a long track record with Agent Orange and other chemicals, yet exposure, treatment, and compensation from 50+ years ago is still being debated. Fortunately the courts have agreed with the navy servicemen who were located within the waters of affected southeast Asia country that certain diseases should be a presumptive.
- The previous Bill S 1990, Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Improvement Act must be reintroduced. Its purpose was to amend Title 38, United States Code, to increase amounts payable by the Department of Veterans Affairs for dependency and indemnity compensation, to modify the

requirements for dependency and indemnity compensation for survivors of certain veterans rated totally disabled at the time of death, and for other purposes. For many of our veteran's spouses, DIC is the only source of income and critical to their quality of life. We need to do better by them.

- We must reintroduce the National POW/MIA Flag Act to amend Title 36, United States Code, to require that the POW/MIA flag be displayed on all days that the flag of the United States is displayed on certain Federal property. We must honor those who have served our nation courageously, including those who have not made it home.
- Full Military Honors Bill has been reintroduced in this session and needs to be quickly passed. The Bills, in both the House and Senate, would provide full military honors for the funeral of an eligible veteran who:
  1. is first interred or inurned in Arlington National Cemetery on or after enactment of this bill,
  2. was awarded the medal of honor or the prisoner-of-war medal, and
  3. is not currently entitled to full military honors because of such veteran's grade.

We understand that Arlington Cemetery has quietly adopted the provisions of these Bills for Medal of Honor recipients; however, they are using the excuse of long waiting periods to deny expansion to former POWs. We feel it should be up to the families to make that decision.

4. "Gold Star- Families Remembrance Day". March 2, 2019 marks the 90<sup>th</sup> year to honor and recognize the sacrifices made by the veteran and their families who gave their lives to defend freedom.

While all present would agree it is demanding work to get the support to provide Bills to Congress for their consideration and ultimate passage however that is only the first step. The veteran's health benefit experience and improvement to their quality of life is a measure of Congressional action and the VA's timely and effective implementation. Implementation within a high performing organization. A high performing organization can only exist within a framework and culture of strong and accountable leadership and employees, modern systems to support the information needs, and continuous improvement. We believe these shortcomings continue to prevent the veteran receiving what they deserve.

- It is not modern for a IT system to allow you to schedule a physician appointment yet does not allow to cancel or reschedule
- It is not modern for a treating physician to explain that I know the medicine you need but you need to see a different specialist to receive that care.
- It is not modern for veterans to be denied multiple medications because the physician explains, “that is the VA policy”.
- It is not modern for a veteran to wait weeks for an appointment with their primary physician for a routine illness. Does the public wait weeks to see their physician for routine illnesses such as an ear ache or a sinus infection? Of course not and neither should the veteran.

Many would agree the modernization and culture are the most difficult to achieve. If that is the case than we need to provide the approach including the appropriate metrics to measure the level of attention both from within the VA and its oversight - Congress.

In 1981, Congress and the President passed Public Law 97-37. It mandated VA health care for veterans with service connected disabilities as well as other special groups of veterans. It included veterans up to WWI, some 58 years after the end of the war. WWII ended over 75 years ago. We have asked you for the better part of the last decade to revisit the special groups and update to include veterans of WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Cold War, and our recent conflicts in the Middle East. We have requested for many years with no movement on the part of Congress. The political landscape is ever changing and this President may see it appropriate and fair treatment for those that have kept our country free.

Thank you for your attention.