

JOHN FURGESS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE  
UNITED STATES

STATEMENT OF

JOHN FURGESS  
COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF  
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

JOINT HEARING OF THE  
COMMITTEES ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND  
UNITED STATES SENATE

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Messrs. Chairmen, distinguished members of these Committees, honored guests, comrades:

It is privilege for me to sit here before you today to present the legislative priorities of the 2.4 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. and our Auxiliaries. We are this nation's largest organization of combat veterans. The VFW has had an excellent working relationship with the members of these Committees and your hard-working and dedicated staffs, in part, because of open communication. Although we haven't won every battle we would have liked, knowing that there are those in Congress who would listen to and give careful attention to our priorities is an excellent first step.

With the changes in the leadership in these two Committees, as well as at the Department of Veterans Affairs, we sincerely hope and trust that our relationship with these Committees will be just as fruitful as it was last session. Chairman Craig, Chairman Buyer, we sincerely look forward to working with you and your staffs on behalf of America's 25 million veterans.

Last Friday was the 100th anniversary of the inaugural ceremony for President Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt is a man I admire very much because he understood the power of service and the sacrifices that all-too frequently come with it. Throughout his entire career, he selflessly dedicated himself to this nation, benefiting all Americans.

VFW is honored to have called Teddy Roosevelt a member, one of eight Presidents to have donned this cap. Many of the same traits that Roosevelt exhibited that cause us to remember him so fondly 100 years later are shared by our great organization, especially our celebration of service.

VFW takes service to this country very seriously. The members you see before you, just as Teddy Roosevelt did, have served this nation by wearing her uniform at a time of conflict. And now that most of us have hung up that uniform for the last time, we have rededicated ourselves to a different kind of service: community service.

The men and women of the VFW devoted over 19 million hours of volunteer service to this nation in the last year. All across the country we are active partners in the local community promoting patriotism and a love of service.

Through programs such as Operation Uplink, which distributes free phone cards to deployed or hospitalized servicemembers so that they can call home, or Unmet Needs, which provides assistance grants to help family members in need, we are especially focused on the heroes of today.

Teddy Roosevelt once said that, 'all of us who give service, and stand ready for sacrifice, are torch-bearers. We run with the torches until we fall, content if we can pass them to the hands of some other runner.'

From the thirteen men who met in a tailor shop in Columbus, Ohio, in 1899, and who founded the VFW, to the faces you're seeing before you, the torch has been passed generation after generation. The VFW will be there to pass the torch long into tomorrow.

This is why we of the VFW play such an active role in the service of those young men and women in uniform today. And this is why there can be no doubt here in the halls of Congress, nor anywhere in this country, that the Veterans of Foreign Wars stands completely behind the men and women of the United States Armed Forces.

It is a priority that these brave men and women are afforded every opportunity and every advantage they need to prosecute the war on terrorism and to protect us from danger, wherever it may lay. Losing is not an option.

Military readiness must be a priority. The men and women in uniform must have the most modern equipment, the newest technologies, and the proper training to instill confidence and knowledge, all of which translate to success.

I wish I could say that the success of our armed forces was guaranteed by an investment in equipment alone. It is not so easy. We must redouble our efforts and make a meaningful impact in the lives of the servicemembers themselves. An investment in them is an investment in the security of this country.

We must keep their morale high and improve the quality of the lives they lead. If we treat them well, we will retain experienced servicemembers and ensure a steady stream of high-quality recruits.

To this end, we support the many accomplishments of the previous Congress. There can be no doubt that today's servicemembers have advantages and benefits I would have loved, but I also know that more can be done. And I know you can do it.

Today's servicemembers are different from those of even ten years ago. Increasingly, they have families. Our priorities must adjust accordingly.

We must increase their pay. At the lower levels, pay is far too low, especially for someone who has, or who wants a family. At the mid-career ranks improvements have been made, but we need to ensure that it is economically viable for these men and women to stay in service. Losing them and their experience is a heavy price to pay.

Military housing options need to be improved. They must be modernized and all essential maintenances funded to provide a clean and safe living environment. You must end the era of substandard housing. Additionally, you must address the growing demand for proper workplaces and support structures, such as schools and hospitals.

We have a responsibility to our military families. The cost of providing family support is a critical piece of the entire mission. Failure cannot be tolerated in this mission either.

Congress must be mindful of the particular stresses that the nature and length of today's deployments create. Programs to provide counseling, to assist with financial stability, and even to help support communication among dispersed family members are worthwhile objectives. This nation owes the same obligations to their families that it does to the servicemembers.

Part of the obligation sometimes sadly extends to survivors. For this reason, we applaud the actions of Congress towards improving the death gratuity and Servicemember's Group Life Insurance. The number of bills introduced to this point indicates strong, bipartisan support for increasing the amounts payable under these programs. Although no amount can truly make up for the devastating loss of a loved one, the proposed increases would help survivors carry on with their lives, and is more in line with what this nation expects to provide for those who have paid the ultimate price.

With all that is going on in this world, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the unique sacrifices of two groups especially dear to me: the Reserves and the National Guard. I am proud to have served twenty-three years in the Tennessee Army National Guard. I have a pretty good understanding of the different stresses this kind of service creates. But, I also have a good idea of the strong spirit and character these men and women possess. Their frequent and long deployments may seem difficult to bear, but the VFW will stand by their side, fighting for them. The VFW celebrates their service.

Currently, Reserve components make up over 40% of the force in Iraq. Many of those who are serving have been over there for many months. The Reserve components are intended to

supplement the Active-Duty force and were never intended to replace them. Increasingly frequent and lengthy deployments indicate this may be changing.

The relentless operations tempo is having a detrimental impact upon the morale of these men and women, and may lead to retention problems down the road. For many of them, serving in the Reserves comes at a heavy financial price and can create difficulty in their personal lives. Congress must be mindful of how these men and women are being used, and make according adjustments in their benefits to ensure that morale stays high and that recruitment and retention do not fall by the wayside.

To that end, we urge this Congress to enact legislation that would allow Reservists and National Guard members to begin drawing their retirement at age 55. The lifetime of service they have provided to this nation is invaluable, especially as the Reserve components play an increasingly integral role as part of the Total Force concept. Improving their retirement benefits acknowledges this and, perhaps more importantly, serves as a powerful retention tool.

While I'm on the subject of retirement benefits, I want to publicly thank the members of these Committees and all of Congress for your efforts in fixing concurrent receipt. While we are not all the way towards our ultimate goal of fully and immediately eliminating the offset of retired pay for all disabled military retirees, your efforts over the last few years are a giant first step. For this, the VFW salutes you.

On the same vein, I would also like to acknowledge the improvements you have made in the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP). The Social Security offset unfairly penalized the surviving spouse, often when they could least afford it. Again, we thank you. However, there is still another inequity and that is the unfair offset of SBP with a survivor's Dependency and Indemnity Compensation. We look to you to correct this inequity in the law as well.

Whether they served twenty or more years or just a few, a time comes when these young men and women leave the service. When they do leave, they receive a new title: veteran.

Our goal, a goal we share with your Committees, is to make this transition from military to veteran status as seamless as possible. Responsibility for the veteran's well-being shifts from the Department of Defense to VA and, while the majority of veterans slide smoothly to the new department, we have all heard sad stories of individuals falling through the cracks. This is unacceptable. It doesn't matter who is responsible. What matters is that it does not happen again.

DoD and VA must better process the handing-off of veterans, especially through improvements in their Information Technology. It is inexcusable that, after years of trying, the two Departments still cannot fully communicate with each other and transmit data electronically. The sooner this gets done, the more efficient the process, and the greater the number of veterans who will benefit.

Along those same lines, a greater emphasis must be placed on pre-deployment health screenings. These screenings, especially when combined with the improved electronic health records, would be an invaluable baseline for assessing a servicemember's health and would help

facilitate the knowledge of and diagnosis of any future health problems, enabling VA to more rapidly and efficiently process disability claims. With these improvements both VA and the veteran would benefit. It makes sense fiscally and lives up to our moral obligation to the veteran.

But what is our obligation to the veteran? By all accounts, that's a question that Congress wants to ask. We are ready and prepared for that dialogue.

Let there be no mistake that the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. believes that this nation has a most sacred obligation to all of its veterans. Those who have worn the uniform of this nation are the reason there is a United States of America. Our nation must honor her commitment to care for those who are ultimately responsible for the liberties we enjoy today. That includes all veterans, not just those this Congress feels are worthy.

All too often, politicians are happy to wrap themselves in the flag, talk about their patriotism, and speak glowingly of the greatest generation and all who so faithfully serve. We gladly stand by your side then in your worthy tributes. But, we will continue to stand by your side to remind you of those words. Speeches are not enough. The VFW demands action.

If veterans really are a priority with this Congress, then look around this room. The faces looking back at you represent the 25 million veterans who demand that you improve upon the President's paltry VA budget request for fiscal year 2006.

At a time when this nation is at war, thousands of men and women are fighting and casualty numbers sadly continue to grow, this Administration feels that it is appropriate to give VA a scant four-tenths of one percent increase in medical care funding. We ask, do you think that that's appropriate? Is that the right message to send to the 2.2 million Americans currently serving in uniform? I can confidently say that the 2.4 million members of the VFW believe that this budget request is woefully inadequate and inappropriate. In fact, at a time of war, it is shameful.

The father of this country, President George Washington once said that, 'the willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive veterans of earlier wars and how they were treated and appreciated by this country.' We completely agree.

Sadly, we are starting to see the negative implications of Washington's prediction. The Army Guard and Reserve, for example, are falling way short of their recruiting goals. Even the Marine Corps missed their monthly recruiting goal in January. That's the first time that has happened in ten years, back at the height of mid-1990s economic boom.

We're seeing that the actions you take here in Washington do matter, not just the speeches you make. That's why it's so vitally important that you improve upon the Administration's request.

When you strip out all the legislative proposals, all you have is a \$100 million increase for health care. That is not enough. The VFW, as part of the Independent Budget calls for a \$3.5 billion increase over last fiscal year's funding level. This is a fair amount and a number well-grounded in facts. It represents what all veterans need to continue to have high-quality health care in a timely manner.

If the President's budget were approved, waiting times for basic health care appointments would again skyrocket, returning us to the era of the six-month waiting period. You would not tolerate this in your health care plan. Neither will the VFW.

The budget is troubling in many ways. It guts VA's ability to provide long-term care to veterans. It slashes over \$351 million from nursing home care and projects caring for 28,000 fewer veterans. Meanwhile, every demographic survey we've ever seen indicates that the veterans population is growing older. How are we to take this?

Further, this proposal completely eliminates grants to state long-term care facilities. The states have been excellent partners with VA in caring for aging veterans and have picked up VA's slack for the last few years. And now, VA plans to abandon the states, which will result in dramatic cuts in the number of available nursing home beds at the state level.

The budget proposal even takes back provisions of the Millennium Health Care Bill by calling for dramatic changes in long-term care eligibility. It would limit it just to veterans in priority categories 1-3 and catastrophically disabled veterans in category 4, removing eligibility for long-term care from thousands of veterans.

VA has an obligation to provide for the full continuum of health care for those who served this country, and long-term care is an essential part of this. This budget abdicates that responsibility. We look to you to restore it.

Another area of great concern with the budget is its increased user fees. We view this as an attempt to reduce the nation's deficit on the backs of veterans. We have already demonstrated our dedication to this country. We have already given so much for it. We will not stand for this.

We view these fees as an attempt to drive veterans from the health care system. VA even forecasts that one-quarter of a million veterans will cease care at VA. These fees will result in veterans paying thousands of extra dollars for their health care. Despite reports to the contrary, these are not affluent veterans. Yes, some enrolled veterans in Category 8 probably do have sufficient incomes, but Category 8s are already precluded from enrolling in the system.

Despite being described by some, veterans in Category 7 are hardly affluent. They can make as little as \$25,000 a year and the dramatically increased fees would adversely affect them.

Messrs Chairmen, when we were on the battlefield, we worked as one team and looked out for each other. The bonds that united us then are the bonds that unite us now. That's why this obligation to help our fellow veterans is so strong. Increasing these fees to a level that will drive hundreds of thousands of veterans, including many who have no other form of health insurance, from the VA health care system is unacceptable. It is a dereliction of duty, for which we will not stand.

We sincerely appreciate what Congress has done in recent years to improve the veterans health care budget. The much-needed increases you have shepherded have improved the quality of health care that millions of veterans receive. You have come through in the past. And we look to you to do the same this year.

The disappointing funding request leads us to question what else can be done. When eligibility reform was enacted in 1996, there were two key aspects that we believed were necessary to ensure its success. VA has accomplished neither.

The first is collections. Although VA has made great strides in their third-party billing, there leaves much to be desired. As two July, 2004 GAO studies suggest, VA's medical records coding and billing procedures need to be improved both in timeliness and accuracy. With VA on the forefront of integrated electronic medical records, this is something that we are optimistic will improve. But, in the meantime, it has produced a funding shortfall, especially as the health care budgets have increasingly relied on collecting money from veterans, and not on appropriated dollars.

The second aspect that we said was needed for financial stability is Medicare subvention. To put it simply, Medicare cannot provide any money to VA for services VA provides to veterans. Medicare is benefiting at the expense of veterans, especially when you consider that multiple studies have show that VA provides care at a much cheaper rate than does Medicare. The extra money VA would collect would go a long way towards closing the shortfall.

Another potential solution for the funding problems is reform of VA's pharmaceutical benefits. The VFW believes that VA should be allowed to fill prescriptions written by veterans' private physicians. With this reform, both VA and the veteran benefit.

Many veterans, due to the sometimes lengthy waiting times for health care appointments, have turned to their private physicians. Many of these veterans then return to VA to fill these prescriptions because, for some, VA's prescription drug benefit is more generous than their private plan. VA, however, is unwilling to accept the outside diagnosis and requires veterans to be seen by VA physicians.

This policy is frustrating for the veteran and ill-advised from a resource standpoint. Why, when VA is unable to meet the current demand for services, primarily because they do not have the financial resources, do they ask for duplicate tests? This is a huge waste of vital health care resources that could be better used. Several years ago, VA's Inspector General estimated that this duplication of service wasted more than \$1 billion in health care services each year and, because of increased demand, this number is probably higher today.

VA recently tried a temporary pilot program, the Transitional Pharmacy Benefit, which allowed veterans who were waiting for health care to use outside pharmaceutical scripts. By all accounts, the program was a success. We believe that all veterans should be allowed to use scripts from their private physicians, and we urge you to enact reform. VA would benefit from reduced costs and increased health care resources. Veterans would benefit from improved access. It simply makes sense.

In a related issue, it is absolutely shameful that the managed health care industry--certain HMOs and PPOs--continue to deny VA payments for care provided to veterans insured by them because VA isn't deemed to be a 'participating provider' in a particular health plan. The VFW supported legislation introduced in the 108th Congress to correct this inequity and we urge the introduction and swift passage of such legislation by this Congress.

These reforms would help augment the discretionary funding process. If VA cannot get the money it needs to adequately care for this nation's veterans, then the VFW again renews its call for mandatory funding of the veterans health care system. Mandatory funding would address the fundamental mismatch between the increasing demand for veterans' health care and the administration's and Congress' ability to provide appropriate financial resources to VA.

When we were in uniform, this country never had to beg us to do our duty, so why are veterans now forced to stand in line, cap in hand, begging for our proper share of scant federal resources amongst hundreds of agencies and thousands of federal projects.

I hesitate to call these pork-barrel projects because I know that one man's pork is another man's essential project. But, the fact remains that veterans should not have to compete for funding with aquariums, carousels or swimming pools. What kind of message does that sent to those currently in uniform? It should not be this way. We've already paid the price for our health care.

Mandatory funding would not create any new entitlements nor would it open up the system to new veterans. In fact, the VA Secretary would continue to have the authority to make enrollment decisions on a yearly basis. Congress would even maintain its essential oversight authority.

The only thing that mandatory funding would do is ensure that veterans' health care receives the proper funding level to meet the demands placed upon the system by veterans and nothing more. We understand that money isn't the only answer -- we also want accountability so that when dollars are spent, it's on the right equipment, services and people -- but clearly, the discretionary funding process isn't working. The VFW feels it's time for a change.

An essential aspect of the delivery of health care is providing modern and up-to-date health care facilities. For this reason, we are also disappointed with the administration's request for construction. Despite needed increases in the major construction account, the budget only increases by three percent and still falls far short of the \$1.4 billion we call for in the Independent Budget.

Of particular concern is the lack of separate funding for CARES, the Capital Assets Realignment for Enhanced Services project. VFW has long-supported CARES, but we remain distressed that needed construction projects are not being performed, even if the project has continuously been called for in every step of the process.

We realize that CARES may result in the closing or reassignment of some facilities, but we remind Congress that our emphasis is on the -ES in CARES, enhanced services. To this point, we've seen little enhancement.

As part of that enhancement, CARES must better prepare for long-term health care needs and for mental health services. Both were missing from the initial projections, something VA admits. As the plans are being revised, VFW will, and Congress must, monitor to see that there are no gaps in coverage.

Another thing to be mindful of is how CARES will be funded. Much time, effort and funding have already gone into the project and CARES-related delays have caused much needed



construction and maintenance to lag. When CARES is complete, this Congress and this Administration must be willing to properly fund the improvements. If action is not taken, the last half decade of construction delays, the millions of dollars of resources that went into the planning process, and all the efforts put into the project shall have been wasted. Neither you, nor I will accept this.

While much of our focus to this point has been on medical care, this nation's obligation does not end there. The physical and psychological wounds of battle often take long times to heal, if ever, and can have a lasting impact upon the lives veterans lead when they are no longer in uniform. And sometimes, that obligation extends to the veterans' survivors. VA's own motto, taken from the words President Abraham Lincoln spoke at his second inaugural address, acknowledges this: 'To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.'

For this reason, the VFW is mindful of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). The primary mission of VBA is to provide compensation and pension (C&P) services to veterans. These benefits are intended to lessen the economic burden of service-connected disabilities. This represents this nation's attempt to live up to its obligations and to ensure that those who have given to this country are fairly compensated for their wounds and scars.

Delivering these benefits in a timely manner is necessary. Many veterans rely on these payments to help provide the basic necessities in life. They suffer undue financial hardships every time VA makes an incorrect decision, or when it unnecessarily delays a decision. It has been our shared goal that VBA improve the quality and timeliness of its ratings decisions. Sadly, these delays and problems with accuracy persist.

As of February 5, VA has 499,474 C&P claims pending, with over 20% of them pending for more than six months. This number is 6.1% higher than the number pending last year. This is inexcusable. The VFW demands better.

Despite VA's attempts to expedite the claims process, the workload continues to increase and evidence suggests that the accuracy of ratings decisions has not improved.

The major reason for this lack of progress is the lack of resources devoted to the system. Just last year, the budget called for a decrease in the number of employees available to adjudicate claims. The President's budget proposal does call for a slight increase in the number of employees, which is needed because of an expected eight percent increase in disability claims in 2005, but it's not sufficient. As has been demonstrated before, new claims adjudicators require at least two years of experience before they can reasonably process claims.

Just as critical is the VBA's massive pending retirements of the large workforce that started their careers during the Vietnam era. Within the next few years, VA will soon lose this great experience, such as Decision Review Officers and Master Rating Specialists, and the current budget personnel requirements have no transitional planning. We estimate it takes four years of intensive training and experience for one to become somewhat proficient as a Rating Veterans Service Representative. The inadequate personnel level staffing requirements now makes this a crisis situation concerning the disability compensation claims processing system.

On top of staffing needs, another area that needs to continue to be pursued is the use of Information Technology. We must monitor and ensure that VA's IT programs, such as VETSNET and Virtual VA, continue to be funded and that they work properly. A short-term investment in these projects will pay huge dividends for many years into the future.

The rating decisions and the standards for those decisions have distressingly come under scrutiny over the last year. Key leaders of the House of Representatives made an attempt to undermine the definition of service connection. Although we were able to rebuff their scheme, there is a commission looking into veterans' disability benefits, presumably with the unstated goal of redefining and weakening disability compensation. Let me be clear. The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. strongly urges this Congress to reject any revision of these standards that would weaken the definition of service connection.

Our servicemembers are on call around the clock, regardless of whether they are engaged in duties pertaining directly to their job. Think about, for example, the number of people who live at or near their work station, such as those on submarines or in remote outposts. Even for those who don't live around the clock at a military facility, they are still subject to being on-call, and are still bound by the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Further, there are stresses, both physical and mental, and unknown risks that far exceed what happens in civilian life. Civilian life is simply not comparable.

To weaken and degrade the definition of service connection to a point where only diseases or disabilities incurred while directly on duty concludes that the time away from the active performance for duty has no bearing on what happens during that performance. It demeans the round-the-clock level of service these men and women provide to this country. Further, it would represent a bureaucratic nightmare that would unfairly penalize veterans, who would find it exceedingly difficult to demonstrate how some diseases and disabilities manifested themselves solely during 'on-duty' hours. With the difficulties many veterans already face proving that something is service connected, it would further erode veterans right to compensation for their injuries, a right they earn by virtue of their service. This notion is an affront to veterans and the sacred promise this nation has made. The VFW will not stand for it.

The benefits provided to veterans extend beyond just compensation and pension. VA also has an obligation to provide readjustment benefits to better enable our former warriors to transition back into society and to lead productive, meaningful lives.

As the number of disabled servicemembers returning from overseas increases, we should be mindful of the kinds of benefits we provide to them. Of particular importance are the adaptive housing and adaptive automobile grants.

Advances in body armor and technology are creating changes in casualties. Technology has improved such that servicemembers who previously would have died from blast impacts are surviving with the core of their torso intact, but sadly, often at the expense their limbs.

VA has been at the forefront of prosthetic research and does amazing things to help these survivors out. I would note, however, that the President has proposed to slash medical and

prosthetic research by over two percent. I would hope I wouldn't need to point out the folly of this.

Even with the improvements in prosthetics, these former servicemembers still have a need for these important housing and automobile grants. Whether it is to construct handicapped ramps to the porch, to install an elevator, or to provide a lift in a vehicle, these grants make a powerful difference in the quality of lives for the disabled veteran. They should be indexed so that they annually adjust to keep up with inflation. We also believe that veterans should be allowed a second housing grant, should they ever need to move, whether because of changing space needs or out of necessity. Another benefit we strongly support would increase the automobile allowance to 80% of the average cost of a new automobile. These simple changes truly live up to the powerful words of President Lincoln's inaugural address.

Another important readjustment benefit is one of VA's finest programs, the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB). The benefits of this program, as well as its predecessors, have enabled millions of veterans the opportunity to better themselves and all of society, by providing them with the education and training they need to rightfully assume their roles as the leaders of government and the private sector. Fiscally, the Education Committee has shown that the program has more than paid for itself through increased revenue. The VFW believes that the MGIB should provide the full costs of attendance, which includes tuition, books and living expenses, to any school of a veteran's choosing, just as the World War II-era GI Bill did.

Great strides have been made to increase the GI Bill to its current amount, but because the stepped-increases of the Veterans Educational Benefits Act have ceased, the only adjustments in the rate of payment is the annual index for inflation. At the same time, the College Board says that the costs of attendance are increasing over 8% a year, on average. Without any increases, the purchasing power of the GI Bill will further erode and college will become increasingly unaffordable for many.

The GI Bill is important for national security. The Hart-Rudman Commission on National Security cited the GI Bill as an essential component of maintaining this nation's security. Its ability as a recruitment and retention tool for high-quality men and women is unquestioned. This is increasingly important, as various service branches are finding it more difficult to meet their recruiting goals.

Congress should also improve upon the benefit provided to members of the Reserve components. With the large increases in the Active-Duty benefit, there was no corresponding increase for the reservist education benefit. While Congress appropriately saw fit to improve upon the reservist benefits in last year's defense bill, those generous improvements are only for those Guardsmen and Reservists who are actively supporting contingency operations. Many surveys have shown that educational benefits are one of the key reasons people sign up for the Reserves. The VFW wants to ensure that these benefits are sufficient enough to keep these high-quality recruits joining up in service of this country.

Another important aspect of the MGIB we would like to see modified involves the enrollment fee. Currently, a new servicemember must pay \$1,200 out of his or her own pocket during their

first year. This is at a time when the servicemember is barely grossing \$13,000 a year. \$1,200 may not seem like a lot to you or I, but to them, it is a significant financial burden.

This is a burden that shouldn't be. No other form of federal financial aid program requires the user to buy into the program. No other program requires a financial sacrifice. Further, if servicemembers later choose to not utilize their educational benefits, they forfeit the enrollment fee. It is not refundable. The VFW urges this Congress to repeal this \$1,200 eligibility fee today.

An essential part of a successful transition involves the servicemember being able to obtain gainful employment. Often, former Armed Forces personnel express concern about the transition, because sometimes, the skills and training do not perfectly mesh with the civilian world. It is in the best interest of veterans that the Department of Labor's Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) be strong and viable. Without such a system, it is likely that vital services currently provided to veterans would be diminished or abolished. But we must hold VETS accountable for the quality and effectiveness of the service it provides.

Another important employment issue centers around the increasing role that Reservists and members of the Guard play. This nation has a moral obligation to ensure that their jobs will still be there when they return to civilian life. To that end, we must ensure that all employers live up to the obligations of the Uniformed Service Employment and Reemployment Rights Act.

Further, the VFW will continue to watch to ensure that all eligible veterans retain their veterans preference rights.

For some veterans, unfortunately, the transition into civilian life is exceedingly difficult. No matter the cause of their troubles, we must also extend a helping hand to homeless veterans. It is estimated that there are nearly 300,000 homeless veterans in this nation. They have struggled for this country and now find themselves with little. We all have an obligation to see that they receive the treatment, training, and skills they need to get them back on their feet and into productive society. The increase in funding for homeless assistance grants that passed Congress last year, was a good first step. We look to you to do more for these silent former heroes, because nothing less will do.

Before I conclude, I would be remiss if I didn't reaffirm the VFW's unwavering commitment to obtaining the fullest possible accounting of all of our MIAs and POWs. The bonds of battle instill within us a sacred obligation to bring home every single one of our missing defenders, or when they have made the ultimate sacrifice, their remains. Until that time, the mission is not truly complete.

The vital mission the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command plays is essential, and we urge Congress to continue to support and fund such operations wherever our men and women in uniform have stood in harm's way.

Messrs. Chairmen, the priorities I have presented to you today are simply an extension of what this nation has always provided to its veterans. When we put on the uniform of this nation for the first time, and swore our oaths to this nation, we were affirming our dedication and our

loyalty to its causes, the causes we were proud to have defended at times of great conflict. Some of us lost a part of ourselves out there on the battlefield. Others lost good friends. This is the human cost of war, which lasts long after the final shots are fired.

This entire nation must strive to see that these costs are paid and that all who so selflessly gave of themselves for the freedoms, liberty and security we enjoy today are provided for in their time of need.

Messrs. Chairmen, the 2.4 million men and women of the VFW come to you not looking for special treatment. We just want those obligations that this nation makes to its defenders to be fulfilled. In the words of Teddy Roosevelt, we are looking for a Square Deal. He once said that, "A man who is good enough to shed his blood for his country is good enough to be given a square deal afterwards. More than that no man is entitled, and less than that no man shall have."

This is all we are looking for.

Tonight, we will be hosting our VFW Legislative Reception at the Omni-Shoreham Hotel. Senator Ted Stevens will be honored with our 42nd Annual VFW Congressional Award, which illustrates his many years of exemplary service on behalf of America's veterans. The reception will convene at 5:30 p.m. and the award will be presented at 6:30 p.m. I trust you will find time in your busy schedule to share in this special moment, and I look forward to welcoming you there personally.

This concludes my testimony. I would be honored to answer any questions you or the members of these committees may have.