



**SERVING
WITH
PRIDE**



A M V E T S

NATIONAL
HEADQUARTERS
4647 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, Maryland
20706-4380
TELEPHONE: 301-459-9600
FAX: 301-459-7924
E-MAIL: amvets@amvets.org

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

OF

**DIANE M. ZUMATTO
AMVETS NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR**

FOR THE

SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

U.S. SENATE

***ONE HUNDRED FOURTEENTH CONGRESS
FIRST SESSION***

CONCERNING:

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON:

S 290; S 563; S 564; S 1450; S 1451; S 1460; S 1693; S 1856; S 1938

&

DRAFT LEGISLATION

WEDNESDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER 2015

Distinguished members of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, on behalf of the 23 million American Veterans in this country, AMVETS, a leader since 1944 in preserving the freedoms secured by America's armed forces and providing support for Veterans, Active Duty military, the National Guard/Reserves, their families and survivors, it is my pleasure, to offer this 'Statement for the Record' concerning the following pending legislation:

S. 290 Increasing the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability Act of 2015- Even though AMVETS made a conscious decision to elevate the issue of VA accountability to the very top of our list of legislative priorities, we do not believe that this bill is goes far enough to the do the necessary job.

While there are a couple of provisions which we approve of in this bill, we cannot endorse limiting the number of annual 'Outstanding' or 'Exceeds-Fully-Successful' performance ratings, as this seems counter-productive. The last thing VA should do is 'punish' their best employees through the application of this provision; instead AMVETS would recommend focusing more on the ill-performing employees.

As far as the provision for reassigning SES employees 'at least once every five years . . . to a position at a different location that does not include the supervision of the same personnel or programs', AMVETS sees both positive and negative outcomes.

- On the positive side: this would ensure that SES employees have a broad range of both personnel and programmatic experiences which could conceivably be beneficial.
- On the negative side: this would seriously curtail any form of institutional memory and the development of any real expertise in any specific area.

AMVETS believes that if, or until, each and every VA employee, not just SES personnel as stipulated in S. 290, can be held accountable for their actions or lack thereof, the VA system will remain broken, unsatisfactory and unsafe. AMVETS believes that HR 1994, while perhaps not perfect, is currently the best option available to address the VA accountability problem.

S 563, the Physician Ambassadors Helping Veterans Act – While AMVETS doesn't doubt the good intentions of this legislation, we do not believe that it will have a substantive effect on VA patient wait times or quality of care.

S 564, the Veterans Hearing Aid Access & Assistance Act – we heartily offer our support for this legislation which would allow licensed hearing aid specialists to provide hearing aid services to veterans as VA providers.

Many of the wounded veterans who have returned from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan sustained sensory injuries, including hearing loss and tinnitus, the treatment of which may require the use of hearing aids or other prosthetic items to help those injured rebuild their lives and gain independence.

This much needed legislation would improve hearing healthcare access, service and outcomes for veterans, as well as:

- reduce treatment and follow up costs;
- improve quality of life;
- shorten appointment wait times;
- strengthen the VAs hearing healthcare team; and
- shorten veteran travel time by providing access in rural and urban settings.

As a hearing impaired veteran myself, both AMVETS and I would like to take this opportunity to thank Senator Moran and Senator Tester for introducing this important piece of legislation and for all you do in support of American Veterans

S 1450, the Department of Veterans Affairs Emergency Medical Staffing Recruitment & Retention Act – AMVETS supports this legislation, but believes this is might be more appropriately a policy, rather than a legislative issue.

S 1451, the Veterans' Survivors Claims Processing Automation Act of 2015 – AMVETS supports this legislation which would take the burden of filing a claim for benefits from the surviving spouse of a recently deceased veteran and, if there is sufficient evidence in the record to warrant such payment, would automatically pay those benefits.

S 1460, the Fry Scholarship Enhancement Act of 2015 – AMVETS supports this legislation which seeks to extend the Yellow Ribbon G.I. Education Enhancement Program to cover recipients of the Marine Gunnery John David Fry Scholarship.

S 1693, a bill to expand eligibility for reimbursement for emergency medical treatment to certain veterans that were unable to receive care from the VA in the 24-month period preceding the furnishing of such emergency treatment – AMVETS thinks this bill is too limiting and that during a medical emergency, a veteran should be able to seek care at the nearest facility regardless of whether it is a VA facility or not and if that

facility is a non-VA hospital, the veteran should be reimbursed for their expenses without the 24-month caveat.

S 1856, the Department of Veterans Affairs Equitable Employee Accountability Act of 2015 – AMVETS cannot fully support this bill because it only calls for the suspension or removal of VA employees *if* their performance or misconduct is a threat to public health or safety. What about instances of unethical, fraudulent, improper or poor performance which isn't a threat to public health or safety? AMVETS also believes that all employees should be held accountable for their behavior and actions, or lack thereof, not just managers.

AMVETS does, however like the provision that would require an annual performance plan for political appointees and, though as already stated, we think all employees need to be held accountable, we are glad to see some added accountability for hiring well-qualified people and improved training for managers.

S 1938, the Career-Ready Student Veteran Act of 2015 – AMVETS support this legislation.

Draft Legislation, to make improvements in the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs relating to educational assistance – AMVETS is completely and utterly opposed to this draft legislation which claims it would make improvements in the laws administered by the Secretary of Veteran Affairs relating to educational assistance.

AMVETS strongly believes that since veterans 'earn' their G.I. Bill benefits, no one, neither Congress, nor the VA should be able to control, how those benefits are utilized. Unfortunately, this appears to be nothing more than an ill-conceived, unjust and prejudicial attempt to reduce our veterans' earned benefits and curtail their freedom to pursue aviation training.

Additionally, if this bill gets signed into law, it will be the start of a very 'slippery slope'. Down the road I can see the law being expanded to add further limits on how educational benefits may be utilized. Maybe the next cap will apply to medical school and the next might be for law school, etc.

The only purpose I can attribute the drafting of this legislation to, is cost savings for the VA. This situation highlights, what to AMVETS is one of the biggest problems with the VA – and that is that there seems to be more focus on VA employees and what's good for them, than on the needs of veterans. If cost-savings truly is the impetus behind this bill, I can suggest a number of other options which would bring about the same end result.

Before we start legislating what veterans can and cannot study with their G.I. Bill benefits, let's review and eliminate all inconsistencies, inefficiencies and duplications in VA's educational policies and procedures. Additionally, we **must** require continuity throughout the VA so that policy is appropriately and equitably applied and enforced throughout the country. We also should look for consistency in all the schools, to ensure that we're comparing apples-to-apples.

Some additional cost saving suggestions, include:

- require some form of pre-enrollment qualification and testing to ensure student success. Think of how this is done in the military, many apply and would love to get into military flight schools, but very few are accepted and even fewer successfully complete their programs;
- limit the number of times a class can be repeated;
- require successful, on-going progress throughout the program; and
- allow schools to issue short-term 'incomplete' grades to students who are within a number of flight hours

Perhaps the most important point I'd like to make, is that there are three individual components involved in this situation:

- the VA;
- the School; and
- the veteran

Let's make sure we deal with the first two, before we take anything away from our veterans.

This completes my statement at this time and I thank you again for the opportunity to offer our comments on pending legislation. I will be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.



Diane M. Zumatto

AMVETS National Legislative Director



Diane M. Zumatto of Spotsylvania, VA joined AMVETS as their National Legislative Director in August 2011. Zumatto a native New Yorker and the daughter of immigrant parents decided to follow in her family's footsteps by joining the military. Ms. Zumatto is a former Women's Army Corps/U.S. Army member who was stationed in Germany and Ft. Bragg, NC, was married to a CW4 aviator in the Washington Army National Guard, and is the mother of four adult children, two of whom joined the military.

Ms. Zumatto has been an author of the *Independent Budget* (IB) since 2011. The IB, which is published annually, is a comprehensive budget & policy document created by veterans for veterans. Because the IB covers all the issues important to veterans, including: veteran/survivor benefits; judicial review; medical care; construction programs; education, employment and training; and National Cemetery Administration, it is widely anticipated and utilized by the White House, VA, Congress, as well as, other Military/Veteran Service Organizations.

Ms. Zumatto regularly provides both oral and written testimony for various congressional committees and subcommittees, including the House/Senate Veterans Affairs Committees. Ms. Zumatto is also responsible for establishing and pursuing the annual legislative priorities for AMVETS, developing legislative briefing/policy papers, and is a quarterly contributor to '*American Veteran*' magazine. Since coming on board with AMVETS, Ms. Zumatto has focused on toxic wounds/Gulf War Illness, veteran employment and transition, military sexual trauma, veteran discrimination and memorial affairs issues.

Zumatto, the only female Legislative Director in the veteran's community, has more than 20 years of experience working with a variety of non-profits in increasingly more challenging positions, including: the American Museum of Natural History; the National Federation of Independent Business; the Tacoma-Pierce County Board of Realtors; The Washington State Association of Fire Chiefs; Saint Martin's College; the James Monroe Museum; the Friends of

the Wilderness Battlefield and The Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States. Diane's non-profit experience is extremely well-rounded as she has variously served in both staff and volunteer positions including as a board member and consultant. Ms. Zumatto received a B.A. in Historic Preservation from the University of Mary Washington, in 2005.

AMVETS, National Legislative Director

4647Forbes Blvd, Lanham, MD 20706

301-683-4016 / dzumatto@amvets.org