

David L. Magidson, National Commander, Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A

LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES OF THE
JEWISH WAR VETERANS OF THE U.S.A.

As Presented By

David L. Magidson
National Commander

BEFORE THE SENATE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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Introduction

Chairman Craig, Ranking Member Akaka, Members of the Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs, and members of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs who are present, my fellow veterans and friends, I am David L. Magidson, the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. (JWV). JWV is Congressionally Chartered and also provides counseling and assistance to members encountering problems dealing with the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and other government agencies. JWV is an active participant in The Military Coalition, a group of over 30 military associations and veterans' organizations representing over five million active duty, reserve and retired uniformed service personnel and veterans on Capitol Hill.

I am accompanied today by the Chairman of our Coordinating Committee, PNC Robert M. Zweiman, who is also JWV's International Liaison, the President of our Ladies Auxiliary, Arlene Kaplan, the President of our National Museum of American Jewish Military History, PNC Jack Berman, Chairman of our National Executive Committee, PNC David Hymes and the Director of our National Service Office Program, PDC Ralph Bell, and our National Executive Director, Colonel Herb Rosenbleeth. In the audience today are those JWV members who are here to meet with their Senators and Representatives as part of JWV's Capitol Hill Action Day.

Members of the committee, it was a singular honor for me to present the JWV Medal of Merit to Senator Patty Murray (WA), at our Congressional Reception yesterday evening, in recognition of her truly outstanding work for America's veterans. It was equally rewarding to JWV to have so many of you participate with us!

Mr. Chairman, next week, on March 15th to be exact, we at JWV will celebrate JWV's 110th birthday. For these 110 years, JWV has advocated a strong national defense and a just and fair recognition and compensation for veterans. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA prides itself in being in the forefront among our nation's civic and veterans groups in supporting the well-earned rights of veterans, in promoting American democratic principles, in defending universal Jewish causes and in vigorously opposing bigotry, anti-Semitism and terrorism both here and abroad.

Today, even more than ever before, we stand for these principles. The Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A. represents a proud tradition of patriotism and service to the United States of America.

As the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA (JWV), I thank you for the opportunity to present the views of our 100,000 members on issues under the jurisdiction of your committee. At the conclusion of JWV's 110th National Convention in San Diego, CA our convention delegates adopted our resolutions for the 109th Congress. These mandates establish the legislative agenda for JWV during my year as National Commander.

JWV believes Congress has a unique obligation to ensure that veterans' benefits are regularly reviewed and improved to keep pace with the needs of all veterans in a changing social and economic environment. JWV salutes the Chairmen and Members of both the Senate and the House Veterans' Affairs Committee for the landmark veterans' legislation enacted over the past several years. Eligibility improvement, patient enrollment, long-term care, access to emergency care, enhanced VA/DoD sharing, improved preference rights of veterans in the federal government and other initiatives recognize the debt this country owes to those who have faithfully served our country.

We must improve access to veterans' health care, increase timeliness in the benefit claims process, and enhance access to national cemeteries and to state cemeteries for all veterans.

No Government Funding

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA, Inc. does not receive any grants or contracts from the federal government.

VA Budget For 2007

The administration's budget submission calls for a veterans' health care budget of \$34.3 billion, 'an increase of \$3.5 billion more than 2006', according to a VA release on the budget. While this seems like a big increase, this budget proposal does not request enough to meet the federal government's obligation to veterans. In fact, this budget will force increasing numbers of veterans out of the health care system. Both the Administration and the VA have repeatedly underestimated the number and severity of wounded service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, thereby repeatedly requiring supplemental appropriation requests.

The proposed VA budget for 2007 is another attempt to drive down demand, to further drive Priority 7 and 8 veterans out of the system. This is in addition to the more than a quarter of a million veterans who have already been shut out of the VA health care system. Denying earned benefits to eligible veterans is no way to solve the problems resulting from an inadequate budget.

Mandatory Funding For The VA

JWV's major legislative goal is the passage of Mandatory Funding for the VA, thus providing an assured adequate level of funding for veterans' health care. This legislation would require the Secretary of the Treasury to make available to the Secretary of Veteran Affairs for programs, functions, and activities of the Veterans Health Administration for FY 2007, 130 percent of the amount obligated during FY 2005. The current bill numbers are S. 331 and HR-515.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA strongly endorses and supports the efforts of Senator Johnson and Congressman Evans and other members of Congress to provide required funding for veterans' health needs through these measures.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA agrees in the strongest possible terms with these friends of veterans' contention that 'We can no longer allow the VA to be hostage to the administration's misplaced priorities and the follies of the Congressional budget process. This bill would place veterans' health care on par with all major federal health care programs by determining resources based on programmatic need rather than politics and budgetary gimmicks.'

Under the current system, funding for veterans' health care is subject to reduction at any time due to political and programmatic pressures to take money earmarked for the care of those who have served the country, many on the field of battle, and divert those funds to other programs. In this way, the most deserving among us, those who have fought to defend our basic freedoms, are often denied the care which they have earned, which they have been promised, and which they deserve.

The lack of prompt access to the care they deserve and have earned is not acceptable. As the wounded come home in ever-increasing numbers from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, the problem will only worsen in the years to come. Therefore, it is imperative that all those who honor our brave fighting men and women come together to support Senator Tim Johnson's and Rep. Lane Evans' efforts.

It is not enough to mouth support for our current troops and those who fought the brave fight before them. We must all support mandatory funding to ensure their future needs as set out in the legislation proposed by our friends. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA urges everyone to contact his/her senators and representatives to urge their support for these bills. Our country owes health care to our veterans who must not be dependent on the whims of the political process to get the benefits they have earned.

User Fees

The Administration's budget calls for increasing veterans' prescription co-payments from \$8.00 to \$15.00 and proposes an annual \$250.00 VA health care user fee for Priority Groups 7 and 8. There are many veterans in these groups who have several prescriptions, sometimes ten or more, each month. Doubling their co-payments is too much for many of them to handle.

JWV adamantly opposes these proposals!

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

JWV is also focusing on legislation to improve programs for the identification and treatment of post-deployment mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder, in veterans and members of the Armed Forces. The current bill number is HR 1588, introduced by Congressman Evans.

The Military Coalition

JWV continues to be a proud member and active participant of the Military Coalition (TMC). PNC Bob Zweiman, JWV's Chairman of the Coordinating Committee, serves on the Board of Directors of the Coalition and our National Executive Director, Colonel Herb Rosenbleeth, USA (Ret), serves as JWV's Washington representative and as Co-Chair of the Coalition Membership and Nominations Committee.

JWV requests that the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs do everything possible to fulfill the legislative priorities of the Military Coalition which are applicable to your committees. These positions are well thought out and are clearly in the best interests of our military personnel, our veterans and our nation's security.

Priority Group 8 Veterans

Since January 17, 2003, access to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) care for new Priority 8 veterans has been prohibited. More than 260,000 veterans have applied to receive VA health care but have been turned away because of the cost-cutting decision to limit veterans' access to VA hospitals, clinics and medications. Citing the words of our National Commander, David L. Magidson: 'There is no reason for the VA to deny health care to veterans who have served our country honorably. We should never leave any veteran behind.'

Support For The National Guard And Reserve

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA recognizes the National Guard and Reserve as being essential to the strength of our nation and the well-being of our communities.

In the highest American tradition, the patriotic men and women of the National Guard and Reserve serve voluntarily in an honorable and vital profession. They train to respond to their community and their country in time of need. They deserve the support of every segment of our society.

If these volunteer forces are to continue to serve our nation, increased public understanding is required of the essential role of the National Guard and Reserve in preserving our national security. Their members must have the cooperation of all American employers in encouraging employee participation in National Guard and Reserve training programs.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA encourages all employers to pledge that:

1. Employment will not be denied because of service in the National Guard or Reserve;
2. Employee job and career opportunities will not be limited or reduced because of service in the National Guard or Reserve;
3. Employees will be granted leaves of absence for military training in the National Guard or Reserve, consistent with existing laws, without sacrifice of vacation;
4. Employers must recognize that their employees' rights must be protected when their workers are activated in the war against terrorism, regardless of whether that activation was for State or Federal service; and

5. Leading by example, the Jewish War Veterans of the USA, as an employer, has signed a pledge under the auspices of the National Committee for the Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, to be a good employer. We ask our members who are employers to do so as well.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA demands that all members of the National Guard and Reserves be treated as equal partners in America's total force structure entitled to all of the rights and benefits afforded to those in the active components and that they be equipped with all assets necessary to perform their mission.

Welcome Home GI Bill

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA enthusiastically supports a new veterans' rights bill now known as the 'Welcome Home GI Bill' as 'must' legislation currently pending before the Congress. Our nation owes a debt of gratitude to all who are currently serving as they protect our nation from the ravages of terrorism. This bill will go far in paying this nation's debt to our brave men and women in uniform.

The bill should provide benefits to anyone who has served at least six consecutive months in a combat zone since 9/11 or was injured as a result of his/her service regardless of duty station. This bill must address the areas of improved health care, education, job-training assistance and housing, and include a tax-free \$5,000 down payment on a home in addition to other existing VA home loan guarantees.

One of the most important aspects of any bill is that it ensures benefits for all who have served, not just for members of the active duty component. Under the current benefits structure, those benefits due to Reserve and National Guard troops are far fewer than those given to members of the active duty components. This disparity has resulted in a system wherein the National Guard and Reserve troops have come to be treated as second-class citizens even as they are putting their lives on the line to defend our country in the same way as the active duty personnel.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA urges the Congress to pass appropriate legislation immediately.

Presumption Of Service-Connection For Gulf War Veterans

A well known study conducted in the state of Kansas on the Gulf War veterans found that certain medical conditions exist among Gulf War veterans that do not exist in non-Gulf War veterans.

The National Gulf War Resource Center can substantiate and confirm that these medical conditions exist among Gulf War veterans. The U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Chemical Defense also conducted studies that support the premise that low-level Sarin exposure causes long-term health effects. The studies reveal abnormal changes in the brain as well as suppression of the immune system in laboratory testing. The Government Accountability Office has estimated that as many as 35,000 U.S. military personnel may have been exposed to nerve agents released from the demolition of an Iraqi munitions storage complex at Khamisiyah.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA urges that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs recognize the following medical conditions as a presumptively service-connected for Gulf War veterans: Skin Condition(s) other than Skin Cancer, Stomach or Intestinal Condition(s), Depression, Arthritis, Migraine Headaches, Bronchitis, Asthma, Heart Diseases, Lung Diseases, Thyroid Condition(s), Seizures, Disease of the Nervous System, and any other related conditions.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA also requests that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs add the aforementioned illnesses to the list of presumptions of service-connection for Gulf War veterans under PL 103-446.

Women In The Military

Sexual assaults have not been eliminated in Department of Defense facilities. These assaults have taken place at such bases as the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs and have become only too common in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

The military fails to recognize that women have become a major source of military strength at the war fronts and make up a considerable percent of students at the academies. As proof of the

destructive effects of assaults we now know that over 40% of our homeless women veterans were victims of such assaults.

Women in the Military are giving their lives for their country just as well as are men. By June, 2005 there were over 40 women's deaths reported in Iraq and Afghanistan and the number is growing rapidly.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA acknowledges that women in the military are frequently not given fair treatment at the resulting hearings. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA demands that adequate measures be taken to give women a proper degree of respect and when these measures are violated that a fair and just hearing be convened without any derogatory fanfare surrounding such hearings. The military must take measures to ensure that women are not intimidated so that they hide these assaults.

Meeting The Special Needs Of Women Veterans

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA (JWV) recognizes that there are service-related problems unique to the woman veteran which continues to be inadequately met by the Department of Veteran Affairs. JWV supports the allocation of VA resources to fully fund women's centers at all major VA medical facilities and provide specially trained medical professionals at each veteran's outreach clinic. The services required include access to gynecologists, mammograms, mental health and rape counselors, as well as PTSD and Agent Orange screening.

State Veterans Homes

State veteran homes were founded for Civil War veterans in the late 1800's and have served veterans for over 100 years. Under the provision of Title 38, United States Code, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is authorized to make aid payments to states maintaining state veteran homes subject to the provision of 38 CFR 18.13, Part 3, Section 51.40 (1).

Currently there are 119 state veteran homes operating in a total of 48 states and territories, providing hospital, skilled nursing, skilled rehabilitation, long-term care, Alzheimer's care, domiciliary care, respite care, and end of life care to veterans and their families.

The VA promotes the care and treatment of veterans in state veteran homes as one means to attain the goal of developing and maintaining the highest possible quality of patient care for eligible veterans. The VA can increase its share of state home per diem to 50 percent of the national average cost of providing care in a state veteran home.

Title 38, United States Code, authorizes the State Home Construction Grant Program which is funded by VA at 65 percent of total costs for construction of new state veteran home and renovation of existing facilities. The VA has not even kept pace with states' grant applications for construction of new state veteran homes and renovation projects, which VA itself considers to be top priority projects.

Furthermore, Title 38, United States Code, authorizes VA to make per diem payments for veterans residing in state veteran homes, and the State Veteran Home Program is recognized as a low cost alternative among all nursing care alternatives available to VA.

Recognizing the growing long-term health care needs of older veterans, the State Veterans Home Program must continue to be a vital health care provider and a low cost but high quality alternative for veterans needing long-term nursing care.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA fully supports the legislative objectives of the National Association of State Veteran Homes (NASVH) that the States receive from VA a per diem payment for veteran residents that equals 50 percent of the national average cost of providing care in a state veteran home.

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA urges the Congress of the United States to fully fund state veterans home construction grant priority one projects for fiscal year 2006 and we urge the President and Congress to pledge their full support to the State Veteran Home Program as it is the most cost-effective nursing care alternative available to VA.

The Independent Budget

Jewish War Veterans is an endorser of the Independent Budget and we want to continue to emphasize the following points from the writers of this document;

Veterans must not have to wait for benefits to which they are entitled.

Veterans must be ensured access to high-quality medical care.

Veterans must be guaranteed access to the full continuum of health-care services, including long-term care.

Veterans must be assured burial in state or national cemeteries in every state.

Specialized care must remain the focus of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system.

VA's mission to support the military medical system in time of war or national emergency is essential to the nation's security.

VA's mission to conduct medical and prosthetics research in areas of veterans' special needs is critical to the integrity of the veteran's health-care system and to the advancement of American medicine.

VA's mission to support health professional education is vital to the health of all Americans.

Back-Up To DoD

VA Hospitals must be adequately funded, staffed and equipped to perform their vital role as this nation's only back-up for DoD medical facilities. U.S. military personnel could possibly suffer casualties exceeding the capacity of the combined military medical treatment facilities.

In such a case, the VA would be vital to the nation. JWV strongly urges the Congress to fund the VA to handle this potential workload.

Homeland Security

In addition to being the back-up for DoD, VA medical facilities are the nation's primary medical resource for Homeland Security. Should there be another catastrophic terrorist attack, especially in more than one location as occurred on 9/11, the VA would be utilized by the Department of Homeland Security.

Already, VA hospitals are preparing to handle mass casualties as well as victims of chemical, biological or radiological attack. JWV urges the Congress to fully recognize this mission of the VA and to fund the VA accordingly.

Veterans Health Administration

With young American service members continuing to answer the nation's call to arms in every corner of the globe, we must now, more than ever, work together to honor their sacrifices. Those men and women who return from battle with career ending injuries and life changing memories will turn to VA for their health care; health care they have earned through their service to this country. VA must be funded at levels that will ensure that all enrolled eligible veterans receive quality health care in a timely manner

Today, there are nearly 26 million veterans. As more veterans choose to use VA as their primary health care provider (over 8 million veterans enrolled or waiting to enroll), the strain on the system continues to grow. JWV fully supported the enactment of Public Law (PL) 104-262, the Veteran's Healthcare Eligibility Reform Act that established an enrollment system and uniform benefits package in the VA health care system. All eligible veterans should again be entitled to enroll. Veterans recognize that VHA provides affordable quality care that they cannot receive anywhere else.

Third Party Reimbursement And Medical Care Collections Funds

Many veterans, especially those in Priority Groups 7 and 8, have private health insurance through employment and many of those veterans would choose VA as their primary health care provider were they able to do so. VHA is now authorized to bill most fee-for-service and point-of-service insurance carriers, such as Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Not so with Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) and Preferred Provider Organizations (PPOs). These payers simply reject VHA claims for reimbursement as 'out of network.' If these providers are federal contractors, they should not be allowed to reject VA care as part of their network.

As do all working citizens, veterans pay into the Medicare system without choice. A portion of each earned dollar is allocated to the Medicare Trust Fund and although veterans must pay into the Medicare system they cannot use their Medicare benefits at any VA health care facility. VA cannot bill Medicare for the treatment of Medicare eligible veterans' non-service connected medical conditions. JWV does not agree with this policy and supports Medicare reimbursement for VHA for the treatment of non service-connected medical conditions of enrolled Medicare-eligible veterans. As a Medicare provider, VHA would be authorized to bill and collect allowable third-party reimbursements from the Medicare Trust Fund for the treatment of non service-connected medical conditions of enrolled Medicare-eligible veterans.

Long-Term Care

JWV believes that VA should take its responsibility to America's aging veterans seriously and provide the care mandated by Congress. Congress should do its part and provide adequate funding to VA to implement its mandates.

Asbestos Trust Fund

The Jewish War Veterans of the USA supports the establishment of a Trust Fund that would include veterans, their dependents and survivors which will ensure that claimants are adequately compensated for the illnesses and deaths arising out of their exposure to asbestos. Moreover, we believe it is only appropriate that any payments received from such Fund be in addition to and not offset by any compensation received from the Department of Veteran Affairs for service-connected disability.

JWV supports the Fairness in Asbestos Injury Resolution (FAIR ACT) (S.852) that will establish a Trust Fund for victims, including veterans, who were exposed to asbestos during their military service.

The FAIR Act offers sick veterans a way to receive the compensation they deserve. Presently, it is difficult for veterans to turn to the courts for help with their asbestos related medical costs. Veterans are barred by law from suing their employer (the federal government) for compensation. By taking asbestos claims out of the court system, the FAIR Act will ensure veterans will have a speedy and just avenue for receiving compensation.

Senate Action On Flag Amendment

Mr. Chairman, JWV strongly supports the passage of the Flag Amendment, Senate Joint Resolution [SJ Res.] 12, which is now only one vote away from approval.

JWV asks those in the Senate who have not yet endorsed the Amendment protecting our flag to do so immediately! Let's move the amendment to the states for ratification!

Veterans Benefits Administration

The Department of Veterans Affairs has a statutory responsibility to ensure the welfare of the nation's veterans, their families, and survivors. Each year, the 58 regional offices of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) receive over 100,000 new and reopened benefits claims. A majority of these claims involve multiple issues that are legally and medically complex and time consuming to adjudicate. Whether a case is complex or simple, these offices are expected to develop and adjudicate veterans' and survivors' claims in a fair, legally proper, and timely manner.

VBA has, over the last three years, begun aligning its policies and procedures and has directed most of the regional offices' time and effort toward reducing claims processing time and reducing the backlog of pending claims. Achievement of former VA Secretary Principi's stated goal of 100 days to process a claim, on average, and a backlog of 250,000 pending claims has been and continues to be VBA's number one priority. To fulfill mandated production quotas, regional office management and adjudicators have been put in the difficult and unenviable position of having to choose between deciding thousands of cases as quickly as possible or going through more time consuming steps and provide the claimant full due process.

Unfortunately for thousands of veterans and their families, their rights have been subordinated to bureaucratic convenience for the sake of an arbitrary administrative goal. This persistent disregard of the law prompted thousands to file otherwise unnecessary appeals. Since judicial review of veterans' claims was enacted in 1988, of those cases appealed to the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC), the remand rate has been above seventy percent. In a series of precedent setting decisions by the CAVC and the United States Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit, the courts have invalidated a number of longstanding VA policies and regulations because they were not consistent with the statute. In response to these decisions, VBA, less than a month ago, provided the regional offices with revised templates to conform to the directives of the court.

These court decisions added thousands of cases to regional office pending workloads, since they require the review and reworking of tens of thousands of completed and pending claims. As of February 25, 2006, the number of pending rating claims was 370,428 with a total of pending workload (including non-rating claims) of 580,378. While the number of claims has been

increasing, the percentage of claims appealed has also increased. As of February 25, 2006, the number of appeals pending in the regional offices was 152,303 . Data on regional office performance appear to contradict VBA's description of improvements in service to veterans. JWV urges the Committee Chairmen and Secretary of the VA to give this issue their highest attention possible.

Concurrent Receipt

JWV greatly appreciates Congress' action to date, but strongly urges Congressional leaders and members to be sensitive to the thousands of disabled retirees who are not yet included in concurrent receipt legislation enacted over the past years. Specifically, as a priority, JWV urges the Congress to expand combat-related special compensation to disabled retirees who were not allowed to serve 20 years solely because of combat-related disabilities.

Additionally, JWV urges the Congress to ensure the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission protects the principles guiding the DoD disability retirement program and VA disability compensation system.

JWV applauds the Congress for all of the work that resulted in the landmark provisions in the FY 2004 National Defense Authorization Act that expand combat related special compensation to all retirees with combat-related disabilities and authorizes for the first time ever concurrent receipt of retired pay and veterans' disability compensation for retirees with disabilities of at least 50 percent. The FY 2005 National Defense Authorization Act provided additional relief to those with disabilities rated at 100 percent by immediately authorizing these retirees full concurrent receipt, effective January 2005. Disabled retirees everywhere are extremely grateful for this action to reverse an unfair practice that has disadvantaged disabled retirees for over a century.

While the concurrent receipt provisions enacted by Congress benefit tens of thousands of disabled retirees, a greater number are still excluded from the same program that eliminated the disability offset for those with 50 percent or higher disabilities. The fiscal challenge notwithstanding, the principle behind eliminating the disability offset for those with disabilities of 50 percent is just as valid for those with 40 percent and below, and JWV urges Congress to be sensitive to the thousands of disabled retirees who are excluded from current provisions.

As a priority, JWV asks the Congress to consider those who had their careers cut short because they became disabled by combat, or combat-related events, and were medically retired before they could complete their careers. For these retirees, the disability offset still exists and it is difficult to explain to a lengthy career service member, disabled in combat, why his or her service (perhaps as much as 19 years) seems to have had no value. JWV urges the Congress to expand Combat Related Special Compensation to those medically retirees who had less than 20 years of service.

Filipino Veterans

The Jewish War Veterans fully supports the passage of H.R. 302 and S. 146, the 'Filipino Veterans Equity Act' introduced by Congressmen Issa and Filner in the House and Senator Inouye in the Senate. This legislation will restore to all Filipino World War II veterans their benefits that were rescinded by Congress in 1946.

It is sixty years since the war in the Pacific ended. Sixty long years in which the Filipino World

War II veterans and their sons and daughters have waited for equity. These are the soldiers who lived in a territory of the United States, who were drafted into service by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and who fought along side American forces in the titanic battles of World War II ? Bataan and Corrigidor. Their courage and bravery must be recognized.

Progress was made in the 108th session of Congress with the passage of legislation to improve health care and compensation for Filipino World War II veterans living in the United States. The Jewish War Veterans applauds this action and urges Congress to pass further legislation that lives up to the promises made to Filipino World War II veterans.

Bills introduced in the 108th Congress to grant benefits to Filipino World War II veterans were supported by 21 Senators and 207 Congress members. The bills in the 109th session are quickly gaining co-sponsors. The Jewish War Veterans urges Congress to pass both bills ? H.R. 302 and S. 146.

Ex-Prisoners Of War

Mr. Chairman, JWV asks the Committees' support for our ex-prisoners of war! Illness such as diabetes and osteoporosis should be presumed to be service connected for ex-POWs as they are Vietnam Veterans.

JWV supports the passage of HR 1598 and S 1271 which would accomplish the above goals.

POW-MIAs

There is one issue that has long been the focus of our attention, and that is the POW/MIA accounting issue. Initially begun with sole focus on those missing and unaccounted for from the Vietnam War, the effort has expanded dramatically over the years since President Reagan raised the priority, thanks in no small measure to the National League of POW/MIA Families, our JWV and other veteran-related NGOs. We in the JWV fully support the POW/MIA families who have remained vigilant and serve as the conscience of our nation in this regard.

We urge Congress to give thoughtful oversight to this issue of national concern. Together, we must work to ensure that assets and resources needed are in place to account for those who serve ? past, present and future. Our commitment to the principles of the POW/MIA mission is a signal to the world that we, as a nation stand fully with those who are fighting for the cause of freedom and against terrorism around the world.

National Cemetery Administration (NCA)

The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is charged with meeting the interment needs of the nation's veterans and their dependents. There are approximately 14,200 acres within established installations in NCA. Just over half are undeveloped and, with available gravesites in developed acreage, have the potential to provide more than 3.6 million gravesites. More than 301,050 full-casket gravesites, 58,500 in-ground gravesites for cremated remains, and 37,900 columbarium niches are available in already developed acreage in our 120 national cemeteries. JWV commends the NCA in its efforts to meet its accessibility goal of 90 percent of all veterans living within 75 miles of open national or state Veterans cemeteries.

Conclusion

Senator Craig and Senator Akaka, on behalf of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA, we sincerely thank you for scheduling our presentation at a time when our National Executive Committee members will be present.

At our annual national conventions our members work diligently to develop our legislative priorities. Our dedicated resolutions chairman, PNC Michael Berman, works hard to develop our resolutions and to bring them before our convention delegates. Following further fine-tuning by our convention delegates, our resolutions are finalized, and become our legislative priorities for the coming year. We thank you for the opportunity to present them to you today.