

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS**



Hearing of the Joint Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing on Pending Legislation

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Presented by

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Chairmen Bost and Moran, Ranking Members Takano and Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers, I extend our deepest gratitude for the opportunity to address this Joint session.

As you are aware, NACVSO is a unique organization in that all our leadership work as accredited VA representatives, advocating for veterans and their dependents in their local communities. We comprise the VA's biggest local partner resource as Governmental Veteran Service Officers (GVSO) that helps to ensure, as a nation, we continue to "care for those who have served". We understand the veteran's experience as well as how to better support VA. Furthermore, our members are often the first point of contact for your very own congressional offices as *you* assist your veteran constituents. It is through this lens that I offer this testimony in hopes that, together, we may all better support our nation's veterans.

NACVSO wishes to express our gratitude for the passage of the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act. This legislation includes several provisions aimed at improving services for veterans and their families. Notably, Section 302—the Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act, or CVSO Act—marks a historic first step in providing funding for local GVSOs. This acknowledges what NACVSO has long known: delivering veteran services is most effective when it collaborates with experts at the community level.

While we appreciate this progress, funding alone isn't enough. Stronger partnerships between the VA and local advocates remains essential. One immediate step would be to ensure that the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2024, Section 4, is completed expeditiously. This report can serve as a roadmap

for transforming veteran services into a "combined arms" approach by mobilizing all levels of government to meet veterans' needs efficiently and effectively.

As accredited VA representatives, our members work tirelessly to help veterans submit the best possible claims. However, there have been growing concerns about the overdevelopment of disability claims—an issue that delays decisions and wastes taxpayer dollars through the scheduling of unnecessary exams. We appreciate that VA leadership has engaged with stakeholders to address this. We recognize that these challenges stem from many complex factors and is not intentionally done. We encourage this body to amend how VA is required to implement toxic exposure risk activities, or TERA. For example, by ensuring that a confirmed TERA does not automatically trigger unnecessary examinations when other service connections are obvious, VA can reduce expenses while also streamlining a favorable outcome for the veteran. Similarly, we urge greater adherence to the Fully Developed Claim, or FDC, process, which was designed to improve efficiency and reduce the number of exams. NACVSO stands ready to work with VA and this body to improve TERA, and the restore the FDC process, to ensure claims decisions are timely, accurate, and fiscally responsible.

While not a matter immediately before this body, NACVSO strongly opposes any future policy or legislation that would seek to “means test” VA disability compensation. A veteran’s service-connected disability is not tied to exclusively to economic impediments but also considers social and familial impairments.

I am a veteran and the proud son of a Vietnam veteran who was disabled after he was severely wounded during the Tet Offensive. The wounds he sustained led to the amputation of his leg. With prosthetics provided by VA, my father was able to secure employment—all while waging daily battles to prepare himself physically and mentally for work each day. An economic means test would have penalized

my father for his decision to seek employment. My father paid the price for his country every day and this price lasted well after his service was over. What cost can we assign to his inability to teach my sister how to swim or ride a bike. Can we name the price for his 6-year-old son knowing what “phantom” pains are—for a leg that no longer exists?

In addition to disincentivizing veterans to seek vocational rehabilitation and participate in a robust economic society, any policy intending to means test these disabilities disregards the true price that veterans *and their families* paid; a price they will pay for the rest of their lives. Such means testing would break a sacred promise and shatter our commitment “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.” Which is why NACVSO stands firmly against any such proposals.

Lastly, NACVSO asks this body to continue working alongside VA to prevent—and hold accountable claims consultants who continue for-profit representation of initial VA claims. We believe that no person who has taken the oath of service should ever have to leverage their earned benefits to simply *gain access to those benefits*. As such, we humbly implore this body to look at every means to provide increased support-- and pro-bono access-- to these services.

Chairmen, Ranking Members, and members of the committees, on behalf of NACVSO, thank you for your attention to these important issues. I look forward to our continued work together to better serve our nation's veterans and their families.

Thank you.