

The American Legion



OFFICE OF THE
NATIONAL COMMANDER

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June 17, 2016

Members of the United States Congress:

The American Legion has grown increasingly concerned over the past several months about egregious and politically-driven comments from some groups claiming to represent veterans' needs. Such comments show little concern for the millions of veterans who rely on VA care and support that they receive at their local facilities.

The American Legion wants lawmakers to completely understand that our more than 2 million dues-paying members support a strong and robust VA that puts veterans first.

Election sound bites, media hyperbole, hollow grandstanding and smoke and mirrors aren't going to correct the imperfections of a \$65 billion per year enterprise that employs well over 250,000 caregivers, and serves millions of veterans and their families. If there were a better health-care solution for veterans than VA, rest assured The American Legion would support it. But to suggest that the nation's largest veterans service organization, or any other major VSO, supports a strong and robust VA because we are either somehow "insiders" or uninformed is insulting and counterproductive. Quite the contrary, The American Legion is an organization with millions of dues-paying members who want and expect our advocacy and support.

The American Legion, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America, and American Veterans along with dozens of other VSOs across America demonstrate tireless concern for veterans every day through hundreds of effective programs and services. Collectively, these VSOs provide millions of hours and hundreds of millions of dollars in services at no cost to our nation's veterans and their families, nor to the American taxpayer, every year. Our congressional charters, constitutions, bylaws, operating procedures, funding and programs are all founded on grassroots membership. We are veterans representing veterans. The American Legion is the largest of these organizations.

The American Legion has proudly served the military veteran community and their families for nearly 100 years. We visit and evaluate VA medical facilities, VA regional offices and VA Vet Centers. We also host academic programs and provide scholarships for our nation's youth. We support veteran employment through hundreds of job fairs a year, and we advocate and support education programs, small business assistance, national security initiatives and foreign relations.

In addition to the more than 3,000 service representatives accredited by The American Legion who help more than 750,000 veterans file VA claims and appeals each year, The American Legion testifies before Congress routinely to share with elected leaders what we have found in local VA communities to be

successes and challenges alike. We are able to do this based on our expertise in observing and analyzing VA health care, compensation and disability claims, veteran benefits and entitlements, pension and insurance programs, debt management, discharge upgrade assistance and much more.

We have dedicated millions of hours and millions of dollars to advance such efforts as the modernization of lifetime electronic medical records, which will ensure interagency interoperability for VA health-care policy and regulatory procedures to aid in streamlining the disability claims and appeals process. Additionally, our contributions in dollars and time ensure updated and impartial eligibility through the VA's National Cemetery Administration. We also provide more than one million hours of volunteer service at VA facilities each year, serving millions of veterans through claims assistance, access to care, emergency aid, comfort items for recovering warriors, and much more.

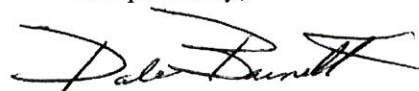
As leaders in providing adequate services and resources to our nation's military veterans, The American Legion is alarmed when politically-motivated groups masquerade as veteran-centric organizations, exploiting the public's generosity and patriotism by broadcasting fallacies and spouting half-truths.

The only mission of these groups is to influence policy decisions in favor of self-serving agendas to defund government programs, starting with VA. It is insulting and unfair to insinuate that the millions of veterans who use VA each year are not deserving or entitled to government-provided health care, despite their honorable service to defend and protect the very same government and the people of our nation.

The cost to privatize VA is one of many problems. Quality, access, and continuity of care are also jeopardized by scheming proposals to send veterans into the private sector, outside the system that was created for them, not only because veterans have unique needs, but also because a grateful nation expects nothing less for those who have sworn with their lives to protect our nation. Economists from the Congressional Budget Office have repeatedly estimated that the costs of privatization proposals will inflate the federal budget to unsustainable proportions. To support the multitude of services already provided by VA, a host of billion-dollar federal contractors, private medical enterprises and cottage-industry opportunists would need be summoned, at immeasurable costs. In addition, our country would lose the research, teaching and emergency preparedness that VA also provides.

The American Legion's integrity, history of advocacy, and impact on veterans through direct support is irrefutable. Some groups, meanwhile, are mouthpieces whose focus is to leverage the military veteran community to achieve selfish gains. Lawmakers should resist acting on calls for privatization. These calls are coming from groups that do not represent veterans, as do member-based organizations like The American Legion and other federally chartered VSOs. To act upon such propositions risks defrauding veterans out of services and benefits they have earned and deserve through honorable service to our country and protection of the freedoms we all enjoy.

Respectfully,



DALE BARNETT
National Commander