

STATEMENT OF
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THE AMERICAN LEGION
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
ON
“A TIME FOR CHANGE: ASSESSING THE NEED TO MODERNIZE
VETERAN ELIGIBILITY FOR CARE”

DECEMBER 2, 2020

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished members of the Committee; on behalf of National Commander, James W. "Bill" Oxford, and our nearly two million dues-paying members, we thank you for inviting The American Legion to testify today.

As the nation's largest wartime VSO, The Legion is a leading voice safeguarding veterans' hard-earned benefits and entitlements from erosion. We were founded back in 1919 to ensure that veterans who served their country and fought this nation's wars would be taken care of, especially those who were wounded or ill as a result of their service. And we have continually fought to make sure Congress appropriates the

necessary funds for VA to operate and take care of veterans properly as it is obliged to do. We are dedicated to ensuring veterans get the VA healthcare system they deserve and that it is optimally designed to meet their needs.

You have my written testimony, so in the time I have I'll just touch on a few points. Let me say up front that the Legion strongly supports the formation of an advisory commission to evaluate VA's eligibility system and sees it as an excellent opportunity to bring responsible changes to how VA determines eligibility.

Congress can and should exercise immediate action involving reforms to VA healthcare and eligibility, when possible. But setting up a multimember, bipartisan, independent structure that incorporates participation from across the veteran stakeholder community would be welcomed in this instance.

Throughout American history, Congress has found commissions to be useful in the legislative process. By establishing a commission, Congress can provide a highly visible forum for critical issues and assemble greater expertise than may be readily

available within the legislature. The complex policy issues involved here can be examined over a longer period and in greater depth. In addition, the nonpartisan or bipartisan character of the proposed commission would serve to minimize the politics of the issue, which has become charged in recent years. Finally, the changing healthcare landscape has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and consideration of its impact and meaning for the VHA is needed.

Therefore, we concur with the Commission on Care's recommendation in their 2016 Final Report that that an expert panel be convened to examine eligibility and recommend changes. We would welcome the opportunity to work with and on it.

The American Legion has multiple resolutions addressing possible veterans' healthcare eligibility reforms and has long advocated for improvements based on them. In the aggregate, our resolutions express that VA's current access standards are not inclusive enough for this nation's diverse veteran population, and have barred critical access to VA healthcare to many deserving veterans. Let me touch on two examples here.

First, The Legion stands behind providing access to VA healthcare to veterans regardless of their economic status. Over the past decade, the VA has shifted on whether to enroll veterans in Priority Group 8. In 2003, then-VA Secretary Anthony Principi disallowed VA enrolling any additional Priority Group 8-eligible veterans. In 2009, then-VA Secretary Shinseki proposed reopening VA health enrollment to veterans without a service-connected condition in Priority Group 8. Congress directed the VA to reopen enrollment to some veterans, but only in certain circumstances. The American Legion supports conducting a feasibility study to determine the impact and cost of reinstating the enrollment of more of these veterans. This decision could result in the gain of millions of dollars that could be used to support the delivery of healthcare to our nation's veterans.

Second, The Legion has a resolution calling for legislation that would ensure all World War II veterans are eligible for VA healthcare. Due to current limitations in the law, some are prevented from receiving this benefit. Those who made the "Greatest Generation" great are nearly gone. We can recognize these remaining heroes with actions far more meaningful than

words. A prior Congress exempted all veterans of the Mexican border period and World War I from the means test. It's time to do the same for these veterans and further open the VA's great system to all of our nation's remaining World War II veterans.

Senators Bob Menendez and Kevin Cramer have already introduced bipartisan legislation in the Senate which has Legion support, *The WWII Veterans Hospital and Medical Eligibility Act*. There is no companion bill in this chamber, so we call on a member of this committee to champion the measure in the House.

In conclusion, with veterans languishing behind access barriers to critical healthcare and services, it is incumbent on Congress and the veteran community to collaboratively evaluate the present eligibility system to ensure it properly supports the current needs of today's multi-generational veteran population.

After all, one of the Legion's purposes is to preserve and improve the VA healthcare system to ensure veterans get the care they have rightfully earned. The American Legion will continue to work to revitalize this system that not only serves the veteran

population, but also has other critical roles. It is truly a national asset and one that should not only be reformed, but preserved.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to take any questions you or the committee may have. Thank you.