

Issue: THE MAJORITY OF VETERANS DO NOT SUPPORT PRIVAZITIZING THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

- Two years ago, a scandal over VHA employees' data manipulation to cover up long appointment scheduling delays made headlines and left the veterans' health care system reeling. Congress established the Commission on Care to conduct a comprehensive review of the VA health care system to look more expansively at how veterans' care should be organized and delivered during the next two decades.
- On June 30, 2016, the Commission on Care released their independent assessment. The Independent Assessment report provided a detailed analysis of the assessment and associated findings.
- On July 16, 2016, The American Legion issued a statement following the release of the report. To access the statement visit: <http://www.legion.org/veteranshealthcare/233170/legion-statement-regarding-commission-care-report>

Through the voice of The American Legion System Worth Saving program, veterans have stated time and time again they prefer VA health care over NON-VA health care.

To this end, The American Legion remains committed to ensuring the VA health care system remains a world-class health care system for current and future veterans.

Issue: LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE VA

- In the Spring of 2014, an outpatient wait time scandal of grand proportion at the Phoenix VA Medical Center and later extending across the Department of Veterans Affairs VA Health Care system shocked the nation.
- The VA Inspector General was called to investigate the VA health care system. The IG found a lack of transparency and accountability on VA's part.

- The American Legion calls for transparency throughout the VA health care system. VA employees must be held accountable when a veterans is harmed or dies as a result of negligence, or willful misconduct on the part of a VA employee.

Issue: RESTORING VETERANS TRUST

Message Points

- Veterans trust remains shattered following the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) scheduling scandal of 2014. The American Legion, through its System Worth Saving conducted 11 VA hospital site visits in 2016, and plans to visit 12 VA hospitals in 2017. The American Legion supports a strong, robust VA health care system. In spite of the challenges facing the VA health care system, the VA health care system remains a “System Worth Saving,” and the first step is restoring veterans trust in the VA health care system.

Issue: MEDICARE REIMBURSEMENT

Message Points:

- The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) continues to seek other revenue streams to supplement annual federal appropriations.
- VHA is authorized to bill, collect and retain payments from enrolled veterans and their health insurance insurers for inpatient and outpatient care, outpatient medications, and long-term care services, except Medicare.
- Medicare is a prepaid, federally mandated health insurance program for all eligible Americans.
- Medicare-eligible veterans should have the same opportunity as every other Medicare participant, to use their Medicare coverage in the health plan of their choice.

- Veterans pay into Medicare their entire working lives and should not be penalized because they choose to have their care in VA, which is a system designed to meet their unique health care needs.
- The Indian Health Service has demonstrated the ability to bill and collect Medicare Reimbursement.
- The American Legion seeks to amend Title 18 of the Social Security Act, to allow Medicare Reimbursement for VA on a fee-for-service basis for the treatment of non-service-connected medical conditions of enrolled, Medicare-eligible veterans.
- Enrolled, Medicare-eligible veterans should be authorized to participate in the Medicare Advantage option by choosing VA as their primary health care provider.

Issue: TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY (TBI) AND POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

Message Points:

- The American Legion remains concerned with the unprecedented numbers of veterans returning from the current conflict with Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
- Over the past several years, veterans returning from combat operations with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) have been thrust into the forefront of the consciousness of the medical community.
- Decades of study in the academic medical world produced a complex constellation of medical consequences including physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive deficits.
- About 20 years ago, scientist discovered a system in the brain called the endocannabinoid system that responds to 60 chemicals in marijuana, also known as cannabis.

- This system plays a role in many of the body's functions, such as in the heart, along with the digestive, endocrine, immune, nervous, and reproductive systems. This discovery sparked interest in finding specific chemicals made from marijuana that could be targeted for specific conditions.
- Marijuana is classified as a schedule I drug. Drugs such as cocaine, methamphetamine, methadone, hydromorphone (Dilaudid), meperidine (Demerol), oxycodone (OxyContin), fentanyl, Dexedrine, Adderall, and Ritalin are scheduled II drugs.
- In April 2016, the Drug Enforcement Agency gave its approval to a study on the effect of medical marijuana on post-traumatic stress disorder. It is the first randomized, controlled research in the U.S for PTSD that will use the actual plant instead of oils or synthesized cannabis.
- By Resolution Number 11, entitled, "Medical Marijuana Research," The American Legion urges the Drug Enforcement Agency to license privately-funded medical marijuana production operations in the United States to enable safe and efficient cannabis drug development research
- Furthermore, The American Legion urges Congress to amend legislation to remove Marijuana from Schedule I, and reclassify it in a category that, recognizes cannabis as a drug with potential medical value.

Issue: VOLUNTEERING

Message Points:

- The American Legion is an organization of wartime veterans dedicated to service of the community, state, and nation.
- Service does not end when we take the uniform off.
- Veterans can continue their service in the community as an American Legion volunteer.
- The American Legion is a staunch supporter of the Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Program, the largest volunteer program in the federal government.

- As of September 2016, there are over 7,008 regularly scheduled volunteers and who serve veterans in VA Medical Centers, Clinics, Vet Centers, Fisher Houses and State Veterans Homes across the nation.
- The American Legion volunteers contributed 645,012 hours which is valued at over \$14 million in savings to the federal government.
- Volunteering to support America's veterans and their families is what The American Legion has done since our founding in 1919, and the proud tradition we carry on today.
- To register, please visit any VA Medical Center's Voluntary Service Office.

Issues: IDES REPRESENTATION

Message Points:

- The American Legion believes that service members who are being medically retired or separated should be treated fairly and receive the proper ratings from the Department of Defense and the Department of Veteran Affairs.
- The American Legion currently has two representatives that assist service members as they navigate the medical board process at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, WA and the Washington DC capital region.

Issues: DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE DISCHARGE UPGRADE AND CORRECTION BOARDS

Message Points:

- The American Legion is the only Veteran Service Organization that assists former service members in trying to upgrade their discharge and correct their official military record.
- This is a valuable service and due to our representation veterans can qualify for many department of Veteran Affairs benefits.

Issues: DEBT MANAGEMENT AND VA LIFE INSURANCE

Message Points:

- The American Legion employs three debt management representatives that act on the veterans best interest when an overpayment is created and a veterans benefits are in danger of being garnished.
- The representative assists by filing the appropriate application to create a payment plan or get VA to grant a waiver so as not to create a financial hardship to the veteran.
- The American Legions insurance representative handled the following claims during the last calendar year. Disability insurance applications 2, 804, death 447 and opened over 5,000 new insurance accounts.

Issues: BENEFITS DELIVERY AT DISCHARGE (BDD)

Message Points:

- The American Legion believes that transition to civilian life after service should be smoothly and seamless as possible, that a warm hand off should exist from DoD to VA. In an effort to assist transitioning service members The American Legion has responded by hiring two Assistant Directors for pre discharge claims (BDD).
- The American Legions BDD Representatives ensure that transiting service members receive the benefits they have earned through their service in a timely manner. They review claims to ensure they were properly rated and explain any additional benefits they are entitled to based on their level of service connection.

Issue: CLAIMS BACKLOG AND APPEALS MODERNIZATION

Message Points:

- The American Legion urges all eligible veterans to use the Fully Developed Claim Process when possible. The FDC process can sever the wait time by 120 days.
- The American Legion urges all veterans to establish an account with VA's eBenefits. eBenefits provides veterans with useful information to include, applying for benefits, updating personal information, and retrieving military documents.
- The American Legion urges Congress to extend the presumptive period for service connection for Gulf War Veterans with undiagnosed illness.
- The American Legion urges VA to continue to research the adverse effects of veterans with exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides. For those veterans suffering from medical conditions that are related to herbicide exposure, we insist those claims be added to the existing list of presumptive conditions associated with herbicide exposure.
- The American Legion support legislation that VA include as part of the Republic of Vietnam, for purposes of the presumption of service connection for diseases associated with exposure by veterans to certain herbicide agents while in Vietnam, such Republic's inland waterways, ports, harbors, waters offshore, and airspace.
- The American Legion urges VA to conduct an epidemiological study of the long-term health outcomes of veterans that were "Blue Water Navy," compared to their brown water and ground troop counterparts to evaluate "Blue Water Navy" veterans' current illnesses and injuries that may have manifested to herbicide exposure.
- The American legion urges DoD & VA to allow Department Service Officers to participate in the Transition Assistance Programs at all military installations.
- The American Legion will continue to press the VA to reach the Secretary's 2015 goal of no claim older than 125 days and accuracy of 98 percent. Currently, as of 21 September 2015, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) has 369,352 claims pending with 81,881 pending over 125 days. This number does not reflect claims in the appeal status, which can add years to processing of the claim. If one is to consider all claims currently pending within VBA, there are over 1.4 million claims awaiting adjudication, according to the September 2015 report.

- The American Legion urges VA to develop a work credit system that places more weight on the accuracy of claims decisions rather than the present system which rewards the number of claims processed.
- The American Legion urges VA's work credit system adequately applies negative credit to work found to be in error, whether by decision overturned on appeal, through internal reviews within the VA, such as the Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR), or by other means that are applicable.
- The American Legion also urges Congress to pass the Appeals Modernization Act. Currently, nearly half a million veterans are awaiting decisions on appealed claims; most of these veterans have been waiting years for their decisions. The American Legion supports this key legislation to streamline the appeals process meanwhile providing increased ownership and would result in timelier decisions.