

***STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
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OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
JULY 29, 2010***

Madame Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 1.2 million members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), I am honored to present this testimony in accordance with our congressional charter and DAV's mission to "advance the interests, and work for the betterment, of all wounded, injured, and disabled American veterans."

This Subcommittee's concern for the financial circumstance of veterans and their families is well-founded, given the economic downturn our nation's economy has taken. During this same time frame, our nation is involved in two wars and multiple deployments are no longer the exception, but rather the norm. Given this deployment pace, any previous opportunities military service members may have had to obtain additional education or training on their own in order to meet the requirements for licensing or credentialing for the time when they are no longer in the military have become difficult to find. Such self-effort is essential in most career fields when active duty personnel separate or when Guard and Reserve personnel are deactivated and they want to either find employment or return to earlier civilian careers. This is because most progression from apprentice to journeyman for enlisted personnel in most military career fields do not also result in civilian-equivalent licensure and certification.

Licensure and certification are a primary form of recognition of competency in job-related skills and are relied upon by employers for a host of occupations to ensure that employees have the skill and knowledge base necessary to effectively ply their trades. Private sector employers, federal, state, and local government agencies, professional associations, unions and the general public turned to credentialing to regulate entry into occupations and to also promote safety, professionalism, and career growth. The amount of private sector credentialing has grown tremendously and hundreds of professional and trade associations offer certification in specific fields. The past few years have shown a similar increase in occupational regulation by both the state and federal governments. As a result, over the past decade, the number of both mandatory and optional credentialing programs has increased steadily.

The education, training, and experience obtained by military servicemembers provide tangible benefits for our nation's defense. This same background can also provide a significant contribution to a skilled civilian work force. However, every year, skilled service members leaving the armed forces miss out on the chance to quickly move into good, high-paying, career-

building jobs because they typically must undergo lengthy and expensive retraining in order to meet civilian licensure and certification requirements, often for the same type of jobs they held in the military. This time-consuming and costly waste of valuable human resources costs the veteran through forced underemployment, costs business because skilled workers are unavailable, and it has a negative impact on the economy due to delayed job creation and consumer spending, and unnecessary unemployment compensation insurance payments.

Madame Chair, on January 14, 1999, former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi presented the final report of the Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance. The issues raised in that report more than a decade ago still hold true. The Commission asserted then, and DAV agrees, that Congress, the Administration and private companies must provide transitioning service members with the means and opportunity to succeed in their civilian lives and to invest their talent and ability in the American economy.

At that time, our nation had enjoyed several years of sustained economic expansion yet the unemployment rate for newly separated veterans remained comparatively high. Unemployment rates for male veterans aged 20 to 24 and 35 to 39; the ages when most servicemembers separate or retire were higher than rates for other veteran age cohorts and were higher than rates for similar nonveteran males. This unemployment pattern existed despite the fact that veterans have solid grounding in basic skills, are disciplined, have a demonstrated positive work history, are highly motivated, and have shown an ability to continually upgrade their skills.

Today, according to a July 2, 2010 article in *Army Times*, the unemployment rate for veterans rose slightly in June 2010, to 8 percent overall and 11.5 percent for Iraq and Afghanistan-era veterans. This information raises the concern that expanding programs aimed at helping veterans find work may not be working as quickly as hoped in this stagnant job market. June employment statistics released Friday by the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics show the overall unemployment rate for veterans rose slightly from 7.8 percent in May. For veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan era, the June unemployment rate was 11.5 percent, up from 10.6 percent in May. This is an improvement from March of this year when the unemployment rate was 14.7 percent. For new male veterans, the unemployment rate for June is 10.8 percent, compared with 15.5 percent for new female veterans. Previously, the rate was about equal for new male and female veterans.

Efforts are underway to improve the employment situation. On March 29, 2010 the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service announced a \$2 million grant competition to assist eligible veterans by providing employment, training, support services, credentialing and networking information in renewable and sustainable energy. The grants are intended to provide services to assist in reintegrating eligible veterans into meaningful employment within the labor force and to stimulate the development of effective service delivery systems that will address the complex employability problems facing eligible veterans.

The DOL has also been engaged with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to provide employment opportunities to wounded veterans while still in recovery. Job fairs have been held near the hospitals where these veterans are recovering. Employers meet with potential

employees to assess their skills and, if hired, establish a mentoring relationship to facilitate their transition from recovery and transition from military service to private sector employment. Just such a career fair was held at the National Naval Medical Center (NNMC) in Bethesda on June 4, 2010. The Fleet and Family Support Office, NNMC, in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Chamber Foundation hosted the event. The career fair included leading employers in various industries looking to fill a wide range of positions from entry-level to management. Service members from Bethesda, Walter Reed, Ft. Belvoir, Ft. Meade, and Quantico participated.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) also provides assistance to veterans seeking employment through its Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) services. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors work with eligible veterans to address impediments to future employment and locate other resources to address any rehabilitation and employment needs identified during the evaluation. Referral to other resources may include state vocational rehabilitation programs; DOL employment programs for disabled veterans; state, federal or local agencies providing services for employment or small business development; internet-based resources for rehabilitation and employment; and information about applying for financial aid.

While much has been accomplished, work still remains. The Department of Defense (DoD) indicates that each year approximately 25,000 active duty service members are found “not fit for duty” as a result of medical conditions that may qualify for VA disability ratings and eligibility for VR&E services.

In response to criticism of the VR&E Service, former VA Secretary Anthony Principi formed the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Task Force. The Secretary’s intent was to conduct an “unvarnished top to bottom independent examination, evaluation, and analysis of the VR&E program.” The Secretary asked the task force to recommend “effective, efficient, up-to-date methods, materials, and metrics, tools, technology, and partnerships to provide disabled veterans the opportunities and services they need” to obtain employment. In March of 2004, the task force released its report, with 110 recommendations for VR&E service improvements. By the end of fiscal year 2007, only 89 of the 110 recommendations had been implemented.

Citing several studies of VR&E done within the past decade, the Veterans’ Disability Benefits Commission (VDBC) in 2007 identified a host of ongoing problems with the program, including the following:

- A need for a more aggressive and proactive approach to serving veterans with serious employment barriers;
- Limited numbers of VR&E counselors and case managers to handle a growing caseload;
- Inadequate and ineffective tracking and reporting on participants;
- Employment outcomes that are measured no further than 60 days after hiring; and
- The current 12-year limit for veterans to take advantage of VR&E, which may be unrealistic.

The coauthors of the *Independent Budget*—AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States—continue to support the recommendations of the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Task Force, as well as the following recommendations of the VDBC:

- Expand access to all medically separated service members;
- Make all disabled veterans eligible for vocational rehabilitation and counseling services;
- Screen VR&E counselors and all applicants for Individual Unemployability ratings;
- Increase VR&E staffing and resources, track employment success beyond 60 days, and implement satisfaction surveys of participants and employers; and
- Create incentives to encourage disabled veterans to complete their rehabilitation plans

DAV notes that more must be done to ensure that our highly trained and qualified service members do not face unnecessary barriers as they transition from the military to civilian life. We recommend that DoD, DOL and VA work with employers, trade unions, and licensure and credentialing entities to provide a means for military personnel to receive the necessary civilian equivalency to their chosen career fields when receiving military education and training, thus honoring their military service and allowing them to more easily transition into a civilian occupation without the need for complex and repetitive training or apprenticeships.

This recommendation is in line with Resolution No. 047, passed at the DAV's most recent National Convention, which supports licensure and certification of Active Duty service personnel. DoD provides some of the best vocational training in the nation for its military personnel. It establishes, measures, and evaluates performance standards for every occupation within the Armed Forces. There are many occupational career fields in the Armed Forces that can easily translate to a civilian occupation and there are many occupations in the civilian workforce that require a license or certification. These occupational standards meet or exceed the civilian license or certification criteria. Yet, many former military personnel, certified as proficient in their military occupational career, are not licensed or certified to perform a comparable job in the civilian workforce. This situation creates an artificial barrier to employment upon separation from military service. DAV supports efforts to eliminate employment barriers that impede the transfer of military job skills to the civilian labor market. Additionally, we ask DoD to take appropriate steps to ensure that service members be trained, tested, evaluated, and issued any licensure or certification that may be required in the civilian workforce. We urge Congress to enact legislation making the Chapter 33 Post-9/11 GI Bill available to pay for all necessary civilian license and certification examination requirements, including necessary preparatory courses. Last, we support efforts to increase the civilian labor market's acceptance of the occupational training provided by the military.

We must also encourage that additional attention be given to perceptions about veterans held by the public. As noted in the January 1999 final report of the Congressional Commission on Servicemembers and Veterans Transition Assistance, there is a fundamental lack of awareness by civilian employers of the positive personal and professional characteristics possessed by most service members and veterans. Previous attempts to inform the public and

employers of these attributes have been short-lived and limited. There is also a general lack of awareness among employers of where and how to recruit veteran applicants for civilian jobs.

A sustained national marketing program must be undertaken to favorably influence employer perceptions of veterans, and subsequent hiring decisions as well as where to recruit veteran applicants. Veterans bring skill sets that readily fit into practically every area of economic enterprise in our nation's economy, yet many private employers may perceive us to only have skills suited to security or law enforcement while an examination of the hundreds of career fields in the military would certainly indicate otherwise.

Madame Chair, I again want to thank you and Subcommittee for the opportunity to present the views of DAV.