



**Remarks of Garry Augustine, Washington
Headquarters Executive Director
94th DAV National Convention
Sunday, August 9, 2015
Denver, Colorado**

National Commander Hope, National Adjutant Burgess, distinguished guests, and delegates to DAV's 94th National Convention:

I am truly honored to present my annual report to the membership as Executive Director of National Service and Legislative Headquarters in Washington.

Let me begin by thanking National Commander Ron Hope and National Adjutant Marc Burgess for their personal support and commitment to helping us achieve so much over the past year.

I also want to thank Auxiliary National Commander Leeann Karg and National Adjutant Pat Kemper for all of the vital work you do to support the men and women who served.

Let me also acknowledge the amazing staff we have in Washington, DC and in Cold Spring, Kentucky, for what they do day-in and day-out to improve the lives of veterans, their families and survivors.

But without a doubt, the biggest thanks must go to the DAV members—all you here today and all those who couldn't join us in Denver. The number one reason that DAV has been so successful is because of what you do back home.

Thank you for the countless hours you volunteer and for all your efforts to improve the lives of America's veterans.

In my report this morning I will highlight some key accomplishments of our service and legislative programs from the past year, update you on the challenges and opportunities veterans and the VA face today, and share our vision for how we can help to fulfill our nation's promises to the men and women who served.

There is no doubt that the past year was an extremely difficult one for many veterans and especially for the Department of Veterans Affairs. The waiting list scandals and access crises were **inexcusable** and there has to be full accountability for everyone involved.

We know that VA has problems that need to be addressed. But I stand here today optimistic.

As Winston Churchill once said – and Churchill knew a thing or two about difficult times – “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

And that's what we have today – an opportunity – to use the attention that Congress, the media and the American public have focused on veterans' issues to finally create the VA that veterans need and deserve.

Now is not the time to dwell on failures of the past but to look toward successes of the future. I'm reminded of the words of General George S. Patton who said that:

“Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom.”

And while VA may have hit a low, DAV will continue working to improve federal laws, regulations and programs that support veterans until they bounce back even higher.

One of our biggest successes in recent years came this past December 16th when the President signed legislation to expand advance appropriations to protect all veterans benefit payments.

It took a year-long campaign --- culminating with Commander Hope and 2nd Junior Vice Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster leading a multi-VSO delegation in a series of high-level meetings with House and Senate veterans' leaders.

After two marathon days on Capitol Hill, and thanks to the continued support of our members across the country, we were able to get Congress to act.

As a result, even if Congress and the President get into another budget stalemate – or if the government shuts down again – veterans who rely on VA benefits can now be assured that **there will be NO interruptions in their payments.**

Building on that success, we relaunched **Operation: Keep the Promise** in 2015, focusing on two more key legislative priorities for DAV: supporting caregivers for veterans of all eras, and improving access to equitable health care and benefits for our women veterans.

Here's a short video on **Operation: Keep the Promise 2015.**

Already this year, there have been 4 bills introduced in the House and Senate which would expand the comprehensive caregiver assistance program to caregivers for all pre-9/11 veterans.

We are also working with Congress and VA to make it easier for veterans to hire family or friends as caregivers under the Veteran-Directed Home & Community Based Services program and expect to have some more good news in the coming months.

The other focus of Operation: Keep the Promise is to raise awareness and promote solutions for the unique challenges women face during their transitions from military service.

Today women comprise 15 percent of active-duty service members, 18 percent of reservists and almost 20 percent of new recruits. In just the past 15 years, the number of

women veterans using VA health care has more than doubled and their numbers are continuing to increase.

Last year DAV commissioned a special report entitled: “Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home”, which was released in September.

The DAV Report made 27 major policy changes and recommendations for action by VA and Congress to help break down barriers and fill gaps for women veterans in health care, specialized mental health and homeless services, transition assistance programs, housing options, community support services, employment assistance, and efforts to eradicate sexual assault in the military.

The Report generated tremendous media coverage – including a front page feature story in The Wall Street Journal – and DAV was invited to testify before both the Senate and House Veterans’ Affairs Committees.

I’m pleased to report that already this year 8 new bills have been introduced in Congress to implement the Report’s recommendations, and we will continue working to get Congress to pass all of them to ensure that women veterans – and all veterans – **receive the full array of benefits they have earned and deserve.**

At the same time, our National Service Program continues to provide direct assistance and representation to wounded, injured and ill veterans seeking their benefits.

In 100 offices throughout the United States and in Puerto Rico, we employ a corps of approximately 270 National Service Officers and 32 Transition Service Officers who counsel and represent veterans and their families with claims for benefits.

We also train and certify over 2,300 Department and Chapter Service Officers – and accredit more than a thousand Country Service Officers – who extend our reach and assistance even further.

Our Mobile Service Office program reached another 23,000 veterans in over 900 cities and towns. This past year we added a new focus on reaching veterans at more than 100 college campuses across the country.

We are also continuing to leverage social media and the Internet to expand awareness of our Service program. I am pleased to share with you a sneak preview of what will become the first in a series of outreach videos about the claims and appeals process.

And for veterans whose claims were denied, we also provide free representation before the Board of Veterans Appeals.

In fact, DAV represents almost 30% of all appeals decided by the Board and about 75% of those appeals resulted in new benefit awards or with the appeal being remanded for additional development before a final decision.

For meritorious claims that do not prevail at the Board, DAV also operates a program to connect veterans with pro bono attorneys who provide personal representation at the Court – including over 1,500 cases in the past year.

And I am very proud to say that overall DAV represents more veterans filing claims and appeals than any other VSO.

In fact, this past January we reached a milestone when we became the **first** and **only** organization authorized by **1 million veterans** as their accredited representative.

But the reason why DAV's Service Program is widely recognized as the best in the business is not due to the number of veterans we represent...

...it is because we find the best people, provide them with the best training and supply them with the tools they need to do their job.

But we are not resting on our laurels. DAV is continuing to embrace new technologies and electronic networks to deliver service and advocacy to injured and ill veterans, and their families.

For example, we are developing a new generation training program, called iTRAK – which stands for interactive, Training, Research, Advocacy, and Knowledge. iTRAK will incorporate the newest information technology and afford our NSOs an interactive training platform that will allow them to remain on the leading edge of veterans' advocacy.

In addition to providing direct service and representation, your National Service Staff in Washington are also working to help VA's digital transformation of their claims and appeals processing systems.

I'm proud to say that we have filed more electronic claims than **every other VSO combined**.

We are also working to protect our benefits and to block any proposed policies or rules that would infringe on our rights. For example, earlier this year VA put out a new regulation that made it mandatory to file every claim's or appeal's action – even informal claims – on standardized forms – without any exceptions for extenuating circumstances. We knew this rule might leave some veterans behind.

Because the rule was set to take effect on March 24th, we mobilized our grassroots communication networks and social media to educate veterans about the important changes soon to take effect. Here's one of the ways we helped to spread the word. Run the video. <VA Napkin Video played>

By the way, that was our own Peter Dickinson and Paul Varela from the DC headquarters doing the voices, another example of our multi-talented staff.

Using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media tools, we were able to get this viral video in front of hundreds of thousands of veterans and supporters around the country. And we are continuing to work to change this policy.

Whether it is at VA or on Capitol Hill, DAV has been driving policy change to break down barriers for veterans since our founding in 1920.

And during the past two decades, one of the main people leading that charge has been Joe Violante, our recently-retired National Legislative Director.

During Joe's tenure, DAV and veterans achieved some great victories and he leaves behind a legacy that we will continue to build on.

Someone once said that, "people wonder all their lives if they've made a difference but that Marines don't have that problem." And Joe, neither do you.

So for a lifetime dedicated to helping America's veterans we say **THANK YOU!**

Today, America's veterans stand at a critical crossroads. Over the next couple of years Congress and VA could permanently change the essential nature of veterans programs, services and benefits.

There is a growing debate in Congress about the future of the VA, with some calling for it to be privatized, downsized or even eliminated altogether. Some even question whether our nation can afford to provide future generations of veterans the health care and benefits VA provides today.

However, we believe our nation cannot afford to break its promises to the men and women who serve

– **not today, not tomorrow, NOT EVER!**

_Veterans need and have earned timely, quality and coordinated medical care...
...and only a healthy VA can best meet both their routine and specialized needs.

For the millions of veterans who choose and rely on the VA – we must make sure that they can access VA health care when and where they need it.

Let me be clear:

...**NO** veteran should have to **wait too long or travel too far for the care they need!**

We agree that too much of what has transpired in the VA health care system is inexcusable, and that VA must be held accountable.

However, many of the current proposals for reform may look good on the surface, but in reality, could be devastating for veterans and their families.

Rather than give up on a VA health care system, we need to remain optimistic and continue working towards success. Despite all of the recent problems, VA has been -- and can be -- the best, most accessible choice for veterans -- capable of delivering high-quality, high-value health care.

To help accomplish this, DAV has developed a framework for reform:

First, VA needs to **rebuild** its internal capacity to provide timely, high-quality care. We need enough doctors, nurses and other health care professionals – along with sufficient treatment space – to meet the rising demand for care.

Second, VA needs to **restructure** and consolidate all non-VA care programs, including the Choice program, into a single Integrated Extended Care Network that provides seamless access for veterans wherever they live.

Third, VA needs to **realign** its health care services to increase access to care for all veterans, particularly for women veterans and those in rural America.

Fourth, VA needs to **reform** its management and culture by increasing transparency and creating real accountability.

This is our vision for the future of the VA health care system and what we will be working towards.

Tomorrow we are very excited that both VA Secretary Bob McDonald and House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller will be here to discuss their visions for the future of VA. That will take place during the Service and Legislative Seminar, which follows directly after the Benefits Protection Team Workshop beginning at 9:00 AM.

We expect a thoughtful conversation with these two leaders and I urge all of you to arrive early, remain throughout and be ready to stand with us to strengthen and implement our vision.

Finally, let me close by asking a question.

What would life be like for us without VA?

Not just any VA, but a fully integrated, financially solvent VA?

Like many of you, I returned from my combat tour in Vietnam severely wounded, bedridden, facing multiple surgeries and unsure of my future at the tender age of 19.

My life had been changed forever.

Fortunately, the VA was there for me.

After 18 months at Walter Reed, I was medically retired and turned over to the VA hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, who made sure my medical needs were met.

The VA there also granted me disability compensation so I could meet my financial responsibilities.

After 6 more months of hospitalization and more surgeries, the VA got me walking by providing special shoes and orthosis bracing for my leg. After I started getting up and around, I was able to go to college on the GI bill through the VA.

I even worked for the VA for a while when they offered me a job through a special program to hire veterans.

When I bought my first house, guess where I went... to the VA for a veteran loan with no money down.

And as I continued to have medical issues due to my combat injuries throughout my life, I went back to the VA for treatment and adaptations to my car and my house to allow me to function even when more surgeries relegated me to a wheelchair.

And guess what all that VA help cost me? That's right, it was all provided without charge.

Sound familiar?

I know many of you have similar stories.

Are we really convinced that the private sector would have had the expertise -- much less the capacity -- to take care of me and all of my returning comrades who were wounded, injured or ill from their service?

Would I have been able to get an education, find a good job or even buy my first home without a VA that offers an integrated array of health care and benefits?

Would I even be here today if all I got was a card and some cash and told to fend for myself in the private sector?

Maybe, but it would have been much more difficult.

Like many of you, I continue to turn to the VA for help as I approach my senior years. It's not perfect but in my opinion it's worth the effort to save and fix for those who depend on it.

After all, less than 1% of our citizens serve in the military.

But isn't that the 1% that should matter the most?

For our generation and those who came before us, the VA will be here through the end of our journeys. But what about the next generation?

Will future soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines have a healthy VA ready to support them when they return home...and throughout their lives?

Or will they be on their own?

We have an obligation to do all we can to ensure that future generations of veterans -- especially disabled veterans -- have the same opportunities we had -- even better ones.

But the only way that will happen is if we are willing to stand up for what we believe.

We need to **stand up** to fix and reform the VA

We need to **stand up** to support and preserve the VA from those who would destroy and dismantle it.

But most importantly, we need to **stand up** for those veterans who will one day need to rely on the VA.

And I'm optimistic that with the strength and support of DAV members across the country...

...**we CAN, we MUST and we WILL SUCCEED!**

Commander Hope, that concludes my Report to the Convention. Thank you.

<END>