



Garry Augustine  
National Convention Remarks  
July 30, 2017  
New Orleans, Louisiana

---

National Commander Riley, National Adjutant Burgess, distinguished guests, and delegates to DAV's 96th 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 both National Commander Dave Riley and National Adjutant Marc Burgess for their personal support and commitment to helping us achieve so much over the past year. Commander Riley has been exceptionally committed to his role and has truly been at the forefront for DAV over the past year.

I also want to thank Auxiliary National Commander Fran Costa and National Adjutant Pat Kemper for the invaluable support you provide 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 every day to improve the lives of veterans, their families and survivors.

But the biggest thanks must go to DAV members—all you here today and all those who couldn't join us here in New Orleans.

We can't thank you enough for the countless hours you contribute to improving the lives of America's veterans, **so please give yourselves and all those watching back home a well-deserved round of applause.**

So as you know, things have been pretty quiet in Washington over the past year.

I'm kidding, of course.

With a new President, new VA Secretary, and new leadership at both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, we entered 2017 facing both new challenges and opportunities.

What would happen with those issues that most affect veterans and their families—VA health care reform, appeals modernization, caregivers, disability compensation and so many more?

Would the progress we had achieved in recent years continue or would we have to start all over again from square one?

Well, as a Cleveland native, I firmly agree with legendary Browns football coach Paul Brown who said:

***“Leave as little to chance as possible. Preparation is the key to success.”***

And that's exactly what we have been doing.

For the past several years, DAV has been ramping up our outreach and advocacy activities, and developing new relationships with leaders inside VA and throughout Congress on both sides of the aisle.

Whether testifying on legislation at hearings in the House and the Senate, meeting with congressional leaders on Capitol Hill to discuss programs and policies, or working directly with VA and the White House on new rules and regulations, DAV has been at the forefront of advocating for our nation's ill and injured veterans.

I'm pleased to report that despite difficult political gridlock, we were able to achieve some important victories last year. Just prior to adjournment, Congress passed legislation that will strengthen VA programs for homelessness, suicide prevention, vocational rehabilitation and employment, transition assistance, disabled veteran owned businesses and women veterans.

And already this year, DAV provided our expertise for a comprehensive bill-- the Deborah Sampson Act, new legislation designed to eliminate barriers to care and improve services for women veterans. This legislation includes a number of recommendations from DAV's special Report-- Women Veterans: The Long Journey Home released in 2014.

Rest assured that **we will continue fighting until every woman who serves has the same access to VA services and benefits as their male counterparts.**

We are also continuing work begun last year to reform the appeals process for benefit claims. In recent years, VA has made significant progress reducing the backlog of pending claims by more than 80 percent from over 600,000 in 2011 to under 100,000 today.

Unfortunately, as the claims backlog went down, the appeals backlog went up – today there are more than 450,000 pending appeals.

To break this logjam, over the past year DAV worked with other veterans service organizations, the Veterans Benefits Administration and the Board of Veterans Appeals to develop new appeals reform legislation that would help veterans get quicker decisions while fully protecting their due process rights.

Thanks to the advocacy of DAV members and our partners, appeals reform legislation was approved by the House in May, passed the Senate [VA Committee] in July, **and I am pleased to report that a final bill is finally expected to be signed into law this fall.**

While our focus on legislation makes a difference in the future, our National Service program is helping veterans, family members and survivors every day.

In 100 offices throughout the United States and in Puerto Rico, we employ a corps of 300 National and Transition Service Officers who provide free claims assistance.

We also train and certify another 2,400 Department and Chapter Service Officers – and accredit more than 1,000 County Service Officers – who extend our reach and assistance even further.

Our Mobile Service Office program takes DAV to hundreds more cities and towns across the country, as well as to colleges, universities and even job fairs.

For veterans whose claims are denied, we also provide free representation before the Board of Veterans Appeals and operate a program to connect veterans with pro bono attorneys who provide personal representation at the Court.

In total, VA holds power of attorney for more than 1 million veterans and family members and filed 200,000 new claims last year, making us **by far the largest VSO in terms of service.**

But the real value of our Service program is not found in the numbers but in the real life impact on those in need. Let's take a look at one now.

That's just one of thousands of stories each year illustrating how the service work we do is changing lives.

But we're not resting on our laurels. We know that the reason DAV has the best service program 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.

Our new online training program, called iTRAK, went fully operational a couple months ago and is now training the next generation of DAV Service Officers.

We recently rolled out a new Case Management System that provides greater access to all of our accredited service officers across the country.

And thanks to a grant from the National Service Foundation we will be providing our NSOs with the equipment to serve veterans using video and web technology as more and more of our claims work move online in a virtual environment.

**I can unequivocally report that when it comes to service, no one does – and no one will – do it better than DAV.**

As we look ahead, one of the biggest challenges facing veterans, VA and DAV is the future of the veterans health care system.

As users of the VA system, we know firsthand the good, the bad and the ugly. But we also understand that VA – and the veteran-focused care it provides – is indispensable.

When Congress created the Choice program a few years ago, DAV supported it as a temporary response to an urgent access crisis, but Choice was never designed or intended to be a permanent solution.

Unfortunately, some political groups and politicians have been pushing Choice as the “be all – end all” solution to every problem facing VA. It’s simply not true.

In January we launched a new campaign to put “Choice” back into context by educating veterans, lawmakers and the new Administration. Take a look.

Working with our VSO partners, we put forward a plan that calls for building integrated networks of VA and community providers to increase access and expertise whenever and wherever needed. But to best meet veterans unique needs, VA must remain the coordinator and primary provider of care.

Despite growing support for our approach, there are still some pushing unrealistic promises concerning Choice. This would not only be financially unsustainable and clinically unsound, it would also threaten the viability of the entire VA health care system.

In fact just this past week we have been fighting to ensure that as the Choice program is funded for another six months, that Congress also continues to invest in the VA health care system. Thanks to all our hard work, including over 6,000 emails you all sent last week, the House on Friday passed legislation that will not only ensure veterans receiving care through the Choice program will not be interrupted in the short term, but will also make investments in VA clinics and employees for the long term.

Rest assured that as the debate over VA health care and Choice moves forward this year, **we will fight to ensure that veterans who choose and rely on VA NEVER lose that choice.**

We have also begun to see and hear a number of disturbing and dangerous proposals that would cut veterans benefits and services. You may have heard about the proposed change in Individual Unemployability, or the COLA Round Down in VA’s budget proposal.

There are also some on Capitol Hill talking about making major changes to VA’s disability compensation program; changes that could result in fewer disabled veterans getting the support they need.

Rest assured that we will continue to push back on these and any proposals that would take away any existing benefit **that veterans, particularly disabled veterans, have earned.**

But we can’t do it alone.

***Hubert Humphrey once remarked, “What we need are critical lovers of America—patriots who express their faith in their country by working to improve it.”***

That’s why we’re all here this week. And it’s why we have been working for the past year to strengthen DAV’s grassroots advocacy by revitalizing our Benefit Protection Teams.

We currently have one Benefit Protection Team leader for every Department, and each of them is working to develop networks of members in their States so that we can establish strong relationships with every Member of the House and Senate.

The dedication of those involved in our Benefits Protection Teams could not have come at a more crucial time as we seek to push back these dangerous proposals and advance DAV’s legislative priorities.

We’re grateful for every Benefit Protection Team leader and member and look forward to another year of strengthening DAV’s grassroots advocacy work with your collaboration.

Finally, I want to touch on an issue that’s important to all of us here today, and that’s honoring and supporting caregivers – America’s truly unsung heroes. This year, led by Commander Riley, we are taking this fight to the next level with a new campaign called The Unsung Heroes Initiative. Let’s take a look.

In the coming weeks and months – and for as long as necessary – **we will continue this fight until we truly achieve justice for caregivers of ALL generations.**

As I stand here before you, I realize as a Vietnam Veteran I am now part of the older generation of veterans.

I won’t say how old, but as Bob Hope used to say, you know you’re getting old when the birthday candles cost more than the cake.

As the next generation of veterans steps up, it’s gratifying to realize that working together we’ve achieved some important victories over the last year and laid the foundation for more to come. We have set the stage for future generations to continue this important work and build on our legacy.

The ancient Greek General ***Pericles***, said:

***“What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments but what is woven into the lives of others.”***

That’s what DAV aspires to do. That’s what all of us can do.

We can help to find the tattered threads of the lives of those who served and sacrificed and suffered for our nation.

And then – together – we can help to weave them back into lives filled with dignity and respect.

Thank you for your continued support and involvement and God Bless the DAV.

Commander Riley, that concludes my report.