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**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Chairwoman Kiggans, Ranking Member Mrvan and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to testify at today's hearing of the Subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs Oversight and Investigations—
"Ensuring VA's Security: How Can Congress Best Support VA's Law Enforcement?"

DAV, a congressionally chartered non-profit veterans service organization (VSO), is comprised of over one million wartime service-disabled veterans. Its single purpose is to empower veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity. DAV is pleased to provide our perspectives on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) police force and security issues being discussed today by the Subcommittee.

The VA operates one of the largest health care systems in the nation, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and offers training for a majority of America's medical, nursing, and allied health professionals. The VA health care system includes 172 VA Medical Centers (VAMC) and 1,138 community-based outpatient sites of care. With more than 371,000 employees, these health care facilities ensure comprehensive care for over 7 million veterans every year.

With utmost appreciation, DAV would like to extend thanks to the law enforcement men and women who make up the VA's police and security support teams for their dedication and commitment to serving and protecting our veteran community.

To protect VA's physical infrastructure, the Office of Emergency Management collaborates with relevant VA departments and external agencies to safeguard veterans, employees, visitors, and property at VA facilities. The Office of Security and Law Enforcement (OS&LE) offers guidance, consultation, and direct operational support to all elements of VA.

The VA Police Service is one of the three main sections that the office is organized into, responsible for conducting police program oversight, policy development and strategic planning, physical security standards and practices, protection of VA

Central Office buildings, and executive protection of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary. The Security and Investigations Center (SIC) oversees the management of the VA's personnel suitability and security investigation programs. To meet the needs of all VA entities nationwide, quality, and timely background investigations and adjudications are ensured for VA employees and contractors in sensitive positions. The SIC oversees both the processing of fingerprints and the design and production of identification badges and access cards for Central Office employees.

The VA Law Enforcement Training Center fulfills its crucial role through the provision of professional training and development for VA police officers across the system. The VA maintains a well-trained police force to enforce the law and protect patients, visitors, employees, and property at VA facilities. Approximately 2,700 trained VA police officers are shouldering these duties at all major VA medical facilities and many VA outpatient clinics. They also serve VA's National Cemetery Administration and Veterans Benefits Administrations, including locations in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.

The primary role of the VA police is to deter and stop crime, keep order, and investigate crimes that may have happened within the authority of the VA. Individuals wanting to become VA police officers must possess specialized law enforcement experience and undergo a variety of background checks and meet basic medical standards related to performing law enforcement duties, as set by the Office of Personnel Management. These standards require experience with basic laws and regulations, as well as law enforcement operations, practices, and techniques.

The VA Fiscal Year (FY) 2023 Annual Performance Plan and FY 2021 report noted that the VA Office of Human Resources and Administration/Office of Operations and Administration tracks and reports the number of violent crimes committed on VA property. Violent crimes are defined as assault, aggravated assault, sexual assault, attempted murder, homicide (murder), kidnapping, manslaughter, robbery, terroristic threats to US officials, and workplace violence. The total number of violent crimes reported on VA property for FY 2021 was 6,538—steadily increasing, from the previous years of 2020 at 5,002; 2019 at 4,420; and 2018 at 3,131.

In February 2023, the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) released its report (22-03770-49) and assessment of 70 VA medical facilities to determine if they had established minimum security plans that met VA's security requirements. The OIG evaluated security of doors, staffing levels, the use of security cameras and if there was an active security presence at VA medical facilities. The OIG noted VA generally complied with security training requirements and demonstrated general emergency response planning and preparedness; however, it identified multiple security vulnerabilities and deficiencies at the 70 facilities assessed to include: unlocked doors in sensitive areas, significant police officer vacancies and inoperable security cameras. Staffing challenges were considered a significant factor to security issues identified—particularly, "...the lack of a visible and active police presence." It was noted that having a police and security personnel presence at facility entrances acts as a deterrent to

crime and comports with overall security of a facility. Yet due to staffing challenges, “OIG teams identified that 93 percent of the facilities [monitored] had at least one public access door without the required security presence.” We were pleased to see that 69 of the 70 facilities assessed had required contingency plans in place for serious security issues to include active shooters, bomb threats and hostage situations.

Additionally, despite VA issued guidance in May 2022 requiring facilities to have an active security presence in emergency departments at all times by May 2023, 58% of facilities did not meet this mandate. Finally, the OIG found that surveillance cameras were not consistently operable or monitored and recommended more oversight to ensure these surveillance systems are regularly tested, maintained and managed as another counterpoint for deterrence to potential bad actors. The OIG also suggested VA set a national standard for monitoring, periodic review and storage of surveillance camera footage.

To address the increase of violent crime on VA property will require oversight and identifying the unique challenges and security weaknesses that exist at each VA facility. We need to ensure VA police have quality and functional equipment to mitigate risks from possible threats, with an emphasis on training and adoption of appropriate processes and protocols to address violent crimes as well as the privacy and safety of all veterans with a special focus on the safety of women veterans using VA services. Congress should consider legislation to ensure the VA Police force and its officers have the proper staffing, resources and training they need to ensure all medical facilities are safe and secure for veterans, staff and visitors.

Security and safety measures should be standardized but also tailored and measured to meet the specific needs of each VA facility and its respective location and risk level. There may be a need to prioritize facilities or areas with higher crime or incidents of violence or security breaches. When making and implementing new policies and procedures, it is also important to have the ease of access to VA facilities for our disabled veterans at the forefront.

Veterans understand the importance of security from their time in the armed forces in conducting and sustaining operations for this nation. It is only fitting that this nation, in return, provides ill and injured veterans secure sanctuary from internal and external threats when seeking health care at VA facilities.

For these reasons, DAV is pleased to support H.R. 3504, the VA Medical Security Report Act, legislation that would require VA, in coordination with the Office of Security and Law Enforcement, to conduct an annual survey to collect information about security at each VA medical care center. Types of information to be collected include: frequency and type of criminal activity; number of vacant positions for police officers; availability and adequacy of required security equipment; and availability and adequacy of training—including training for responding to serious threats. The bill would also require the Secretary to provide an action plan describing how the Department would address any identified security weaknesses.

Another security bill referred to the Subcommittee is H.R. 7765, the VA Security Screening Pilot Program Act, legislation that would direct the VA to carry out a pilot program to use weapon screening technology at VA medical centers. While we don't have a resolution from our members regarding security screening, we certainly appreciate the intent of this legislation and the goal to safeguard veterans, employees and VA property. As with any changes to security at VA facilities, this would have to be done in a manner that avoids creating unnecessary barriers to care for veterans – especially aging and service-disabled veterans – who are more likely to have medical devices, prosthetics, assistive equipment, and service animals. As such, it is critically important to mandate robust consultation with veterans and veterans service organizations before finalizing any changes to security protocols at VA health care facilities.

In closing, we appreciate the Subcommittees attention to the issue of security and urge continued oversight to address identified areas needing improvement. Our veterans and the VA staff dedicated to caring for them deserve a safe, harassment free environment that is well ordered and free of crime. We must ensure the VA police have the staff, resources and tools to address the security challenges of today and that they have the support to make necessary changes to prevent crime and safeguard these essential facilities and veterans using them.

This concludes my testimony on behalf of DAV. I am pleased to answer questions you or members of the Subcommittee may have.