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**STATEMENT OF
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FOR THE RECORD OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
DECEMBER 8, 2020**

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to provide written testimony for this oversight hearing of the Subcommittee of Economic Opportunity, entitled "Identifying Congressional and Administration Priorities for the Next Congress: How we can support our Veterans through and after COVID-19."

DAV is a congressionally chartered national veterans' service organization of more than one million wartime veterans, all of whom were injured or made ill while serving on behalf of this nation. To fulfill our service mission to America's injured and ill veterans and their families, DAV directly employs a corps of more than 260 National Service Officers (NSOs), all of whom are themselves wartime service-connected disabled veterans, at every VA Regional Office (RO) as well as other VA facilities throughout the nation. Together with our chapter, department, transition and county veteran service officers, DAV has over 4,000 accredited representatives on the front lines providing free claims and appeals services to our nation's veterans, their families and survivors.

Our mission begins with the principle that this nation's first duty to veterans is the rehabilitation and welfare of its wartime disabled. This principle envisions vocational rehabilitation and/or education to assist disabled veterans to prepare for and obtain gainful employment so that the full array of talents and abilities of disabled veterans are used productively. Today, as our nation continues to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and the after effects of prolonged economic shutdowns, our vision must also include those service-disabled veterans who have lost their employment due to the public health crisis to ensure they can re-establish secure employment and a long lasting career or occupation.

COVID-19 and Veteran Employment

As 2019 came to a close, the veteran unemployment rate was better than it has been since the Great Recession, dropping to a low of 2.9 percent. When compared to

the non-veteran unemployment rate of 3.4 percent during this same period, it was clear that the economic outlook for veterans was the best it had been in over a decade.

As the novel Coronavirus took hold in the United States in March 2020, all of the previous gains quickly vanished and by April over one million veterans had filed for unemployment benefits and the unemployment rate soared to 11.7 percent. In addition, small businesses were being impacted by the economic shutdowns and by September, over 160,000 businesses had been shuttered with the estimate being that over half will likely never reopen.

Since the start of the pandemic, as the nation began to cope with this surreal environment, slow improvements had been made to the veteran unemployment rate. Between May and June the unemployment rate decreased from 13.3 percent to 11.1 percent and overall continued to steadily decrease. According to the Department of Labor (DOL), Iraq and Afghanistan era veterans held a steady unemployment rate of 10.3 percent however, younger veterans (ages 18-34) did not see the same positive trend as older veterans (ages 34 and older). This difference may have resulted from older veterans having more established resumes and work experience or the types of employment that younger veterans were seeking. With many of the traditional entry level jobs being deemed “non-essential,” veterans who were working as bartenders, waiters, retail, etc., saw their places of employment have to close or lay off employees due to significant losses in revenue. In addition, many younger veterans may not have had the experience of looking for work or an entry-level career position in an already competitive environment while many older veterans had experienced this before during an era of widespread unemployment that occurred during the Great Recession.

In addition, many veterans who are out of work and looking to find a means of supporting themselves and their families fall into a group that has either lost or used their eligibility for educational and employment programs through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). A significant number of veterans have either let their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits expire or have already used it, or in the case of service disabled veterans who are eligible for the Veteran Readiness and Employment—or VR&E program, have either used their benefit or have let the 12-year time period for applying elapse. For these veterans, there are very few other options available.

The plight for recently unemployed disabled veterans is further compounded by the fact that many of them have lost a “sheltered” work environment. That is to say, their places of employment had made reasonable accommodations for their disability and having lost that protection are now faced with the significant obstacle of finding employment during a global pandemic that can also accommodate that veteran’s disability.

Congressional Actions: What Can Be Done?

DAV is pleased with many of the actions Congress has taken since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to help veterans who are in economic opportunity programs

and those who are no longer eligible for these programs. The House and Senate in some cases worked extremely quickly and in a bipartisan fashion to ensure that veterans are protected from incurring any undue financial hardship due to the restrictions of in-person learning and have introduced legislation to create programs to get veterans back to work.

The Student Veteran Coronavirus Response Act of 2020, extends or restores student veteran's educational benefits to those who are now forced to attend school virtually. This bill was signed into law in April, a month after the start of the crisis. Significantly, this law also extended the delimiting date for veterans who would meet the end of their entitlement for VR&E during the crisis. This law also continues to pay veterans enrolled in work-study programs who lost their positions on campus due to the ongoing shutdowns. While DAV supports this legislation, it was originally designed to end in December. We ask Congress to quickly pass legislation, like H.R. 8483, the Pandemic Assistance for Student Veterans Act of 2020, that would modify and extend the protections given to student veterans as this pandemic continues into 2021.

In addition, DAV supports section 201 in H.R. 7105, the Deliver Act that proposes a rapid retraining program for veterans who lost their jobs due to the coronavirus pandemic and are not eligible for any other VA education/employment programs. This program would provide 12 months of courses in a "high demand" career field for out-of-work veterans. While we are hopeful that this program is passed into law quickly, DAV notes that it would be for a limited period of 18 months and would only serve about 35,000 veterans. We believe that a more permanent assistance program is needed as the outlook for economically impacted veterans grows more dire.

DAV Recommendations

DAV recommends Congress consider two changes to the eligibility requirements of the current VR&E program. We believe that this program has a proven record of getting service disabled veterans employed in the most trying of circumstances and while other programs would need to be "stood up" before they could truly benefit veterans, the VR&E program is already fully functional and could start helping veterans right away.

The VR&E program, also known as the Chapter 31 program, assists veterans and service members with service-connected disabilities that provide an employment barrier to prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment. Veterans with at least a 20 percent disability evaluation or a 10 percent evaluation with a serious employment handicap meet the eligibility criteria. VR&E provides comprehensive services to include vocational assessment, rehabilitation planning, and employment services. For veterans with service-connected disabilities so severe that they cannot immediately consider work, the VR&E program offers services to improve their ability to live as independently as possible within their families and communities.

Currently a veteran is ineligible if they apply for VR&E 12 years after receiving service connection for their *first* compensable condition. However, this does not take into consideration if the veteran's condition has progressively increased in severity to the point of being unemployable, nor does it take into consideration whether the veteran incurred a more severe condition since their first disability claim, perhaps due to underlying conditions brought about by exposure to burn pits.

Additionally, a veteran who has already utilized VR&E cannot enroll in the program a second time. This is particularly concerning during times of national economic distress where a significant number of previously employed service disabled veterans now find themselves without work. Additionally, even prior to the pandemic, the percentage of seriously disabled veterans who found themselves out of work was not insignificant. As was mentioned earlier, the Post-9/11 generation is not seeing the same rebound in unemployment numbers as their older veteran counterparts. This is worrisome because this is the same generation that, due to continuous wars and multiple deployments, have shown considerable rates of service-related disabilities that could hamper their ability to find gainful employment. According to the March 2020 report released by the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, amongst Gulf War II era veterans, 41 percent (1.8 million) reported a service-connected condition and of those, 55 percent (990,000) reported having a disability rating of over 60 percent, which is considered seriously disabled.

DAV recommends Congress pass legislation that would:

1. Permanently eliminate the 12-year delimiting date to apply for VA VR&E, leaving a veteran's date of entitlement open ended.
2. Allow a veteran who has previously utilized VR&E services and lost their job due to the pandemic to enroll for a second time.

We believe that these two recommendations would be responsible and effective ways of helping service-disabled veterans get re-incorporated back into the workforce, and help them find meaningful employment with suitable accommodations for their service-related disabilities.

It should also be noted that while we would seek the re-admittance of those who had previously utilized VR&E and lost their employment *only during the pandemic*, we seek the permanent elimination of the 12-year delimiting date. We make this recommendation because we believe that the effects of this economic downturn will be felt far longer than we can foresee and this program should not turn away any veteran who is need of help finding employment due to their service connected disabilities, no matter the time frame.

We thank Congresswoman Brownley for introducing H.R. 444, the Reduce Unemployment for Veterans of All Ages Act, which would accomplish this by eliminating the eligibility periods for VR&E. We urge Congress to pass this legislation so the VA can

immediately start the process of getting these disabled veterans back into the workforce.

Mr. Chairman, this nation has a long road ahead of it before we will likely begin to pull out of this economic crisis and it stands to reason that our nation's service disabled veterans will be significantly affected for a considerable amount of time. It is imperative that we get assistance to as many of them as quickly as we can and what better way than to open up a program that is ready to enroll veterans today. By utilizing the VR&E program, we can accomplish the goal of getting these men and women back to work now.

This concludes my testimony on behalf of DAV. I appreciate the opportunity to share our recommendations and look forward to working with this Subcommittee on ways to get America's disabled veterans back to work.