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**STATEMENT OF
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DAV (DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS)
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
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Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran and members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to testify at this legislative hearing of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. As you know, DAV is a non-profit veterans service organization (VSO) comprised of more than one million wartime service-disabled veterans that is dedicated to a single purpose: empowering veterans to lead high-quality lives with respect and dignity.

We are pleased to offer our views on the bills impacting service-disabled veterans and their families and the programs administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that are under consideration by the Committee.

**S. 1243, Improving VA Accountability to Prevent Sexual Harassment and
Discrimination Act of 2021**

S. 1243 includes provisions to create a more effective and responsive process for employees in VA to report sexual harassment and employment discrimination. The bill would require the VA to realign the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) director under the Deputy Secretary, and ensure the director would not be responsible for oversight of personnel functions that may create a conflict of interest when handling complaints.

The bill would further ensure that EEO program managers at the facility level have a direct report to the Office of Resolution Management, would direct VA to create an employment discrimination complaint resolution process and require all VA managers to report any employment discrimination complaints to the Office of Resolution Management within two days of receiving the complaint. The bill would also require the VA to develop training on the complaint resolution process, review and update internal policies to incorporate any changes made to the sexual harassment or employment discrimination policies in response to this Act and issue a final directive and a handbook for the Harassment Prevention Program of the Department. VA would then be required to report to Congress semi-annually on its progress in implementing the policy.

A Merit Systems Protection Board survey in 2016 found an estimated 22% of VA employees experienced some form of sexual harassment in the workplace from mid-2014 through mid-2016. This prompted a GAO (Government Accounting Office) report released in 2020—*Sexual Harassment: Inconsistent and Incomplete Policies and Information Hinder VA’s Efforts to Protect Employees* (GAO Report 20-387)—which included a number of recommendations DAV supports to address identified deficiencies. These recommendations served as the foundation for many of this bill’s initiatives.

Specifically, the report identified a number of deficiencies in VA’s sexual harassment policies and made recommendations to improve data collection, reporting procedures, employee training and harassment prevention efforts within the Department. GAO found that while VA has policies in place to report and address sexual harassment in the workplace, information collected or provided was incomplete, outdated or not always consistent with the Department’s overarching policy. For example, while VA compiles information on sexual harassment allegations, it does not require managers who receive complaints to report them to VA’s central office, resulting in an incomplete picture of harassment across the Department. The report indicated that VA has misaligned responsibilities and incomplete implementation of its policies on sexual harassment that impair its ability to properly identify problems and confirm that corrective actions were taken. GAO further noted that VA does provide educational materials and training to its employees; however, the required training does not include in-depth information or current examples on identifying and addressing sexual harassment. Finally, GAO reported a four-year delay in VA finalizing and approving directives and implementing guidance for its Harassment Prevention Program. We concur with GAO’s recommendations to address these deficiencies.

As VA works to improve the overall culture within its department and facilities to ensure all veterans feel safe and welcome accessing their care, it must also address issues of harassment within its own workforce so it can effectively recruit and retain employees to support its mission. DAV Resolution No. 015 supports improvements in programming for women veterans—addressing sexual harassment and employment discrimination among VA employees is likely to create a safer, more inclusive and welcoming environment for patients as well. DAV Resolution No. 113 also calls for policies that are favorable to the effective recruitment and retention of valued employees. DAV supports S. 1243 in accordance with these resolutions.

S. 1296, Daniel J. Harvey Jr. and Adam Lambert Improving Servicemember Transition to Reduce Veteran Suicide Act

This bill would require the Department of Defense (DOD) and the VA to jointly implement a five-year pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of providing specified counseling and services as part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for service members as a means of reducing the incidence of suicide among veterans.

The pilot program would involve a three-hour counseling module and the provision of contact information for a counseling or similar facility in the locality where the veteran intends to reside. Additionally, participating veterans must submit medical records in connection with their service in the military, regardless of whether they intend to file a claim for VA benefits.

Under the program, a social worker or behavioral health coordinator from the VA must contact the veteran within 90 days after the veteran has been discharged or released from service to schedule a follow-up appointment. There must be a minimum of 10 DOD Transition Assistance Centers and they must serve at least 300 military members in order to be selected to carry out the pilot program.

The bill requires DOD and VA to submit a joint report on the activities under the pilot program. The report must contain certain information to include gender of the military member; their branch of service; a diagnosis of or symptoms consistent with MST, PTSD, TBI, depression or bipolar disorder in connection with their military service; an assessment of whether the activities under the pilot program helped to reduce the incidence of suicide in the members who participated in the pilot program and recommendations for expansion or extension of the program.

DAV supports S. 1296, based on DAV Resolution No. 118, which calls for improved outreach through general media for stigma reduction and suicide prevention, sufficient staffing to meet demand for mental health services and enhanced resources for VA mental health programs and suicide prevention efforts. DOD and VA share a unique obligation to meet the health care needs, including mental health care and rehabilitation, of veterans who are suffering from readjustment difficulties as a result of wartime service.

S. 1564, Veterans Legal Support Act of 2021

This legislation would authorize the VA to support university law school programs that provide legal assistance to veterans. This support may include, but is not limited to, financial support up to \$2 million per year, derived from the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) General Operating Expense account.

DAV recognizes the benefit of training law students in veterans' law, and for veterans to have access to legal services. DAV's Charitable Service Trust (CST) supports our nation's ill and injured veterans, their families and caregivers through targeted grant support of charitable initiatives. For the last eight years, DAV's CST has provided financial support to Harvard Law School's Veterans Law and Disability Benefits Clinic.

DAV supports S. 1564, the Veterans Legal Support Act of 2021, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 119, which calls for supportive services, including legal aid services, for veterans experiencing homelessness. However, we consider it critical and recommend that additional funding be appropriated for this purpose and that support for

law schools' veteran legal clinics does not take any funding from existing VBA programs for claims processing and appeals.

S. 1607, Student Veterans Transparency and Protection Act of 2021

This legislation would improve the GI Bill Comparison Tool and ensure veterans, service members, and their families are better informed about their educational benefits. In addition, it would ensure all VA educational, vocational, and transition assistance counselors are knowledgeable about the GI Bill Comparison Tool and would authorize VA to restore educational benefits to beneficiaries who utilized their entitlement at an educational institution that is subject to a civil enforcement action.

Ensuring that veterans and their survivors educational benefits are protected is extremely important to our members. The Student Veterans Transparency and Protection Act of 2021, would restore educational benefits, including Dependents Educational Assistance, to beneficiaries who utilize their entitlement at an educational institution that is subject to civil enforcement action. DAV supports S. 1607, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 272, which calls for the adoption of programs and legislation to identify, reduce and remove barriers to a service-disabled veteran's employment, continued education and full access and use of other benefits.

S. 1664, Department of Veterans Affairs Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Processing Claims Improvement Act of 2021

The VA Office of the Inspector General (OIG) report of December 2020, focused on non-military sexual trauma (MST) post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related claims, estimated that VA claims processors did not follow VA regulations and procedures when processing 16% of these PTSD claims. The majority of errors were due to improper or inadequate stressor verification. The review team determined that claims processors do not fully understand the various types of in-service stressors nor the stressor verification procedures when required, which contributed to inconsistencies and errors in the process. This was the result of a lack of training on non-MST PTSD claims after the first year, coupled with the lack of clear and concise guidance.

S. 1664 would require the VBA to establish an ongoing national training program for claims processors who review compensation claims for service-connected PTSD. Claims processors would be required to participate in the training at least once a year starting in their second year of being a VA claims processor. Additionally, the bill would require standardization of training at all VA regional offices (VARO) and establish a formal process for conduct of annual studies.

We are greatly concerned by the VA OIG report findings and the negative impact that a lack of proper training by VBA claims processors has on veterans' ability to obtain the benefits they have earned. VA must prioritize ongoing instruction and quality control of training and manuals. Veterans struggling with PTSD face many challenges; however, VA training and correct rating decisions should not be one of them.

DAV strongly supports S. 1664, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 036, which calls for legislation that will strengthen training, testing, quality control, as well as accountability measures to ensure that VBA develops a culture focused on getting each claim decided right the first time.

S. 1838, Building Credit Access for Veterans Act of 2021

This legislation mandates the VA to carry out a pilot program to expand access to homeownership for veterans by developing alternative methods of credit scoring methodologies for veterans with insufficient credit history for a lender to determine his/her credit worthiness. For example, alternative credit scoring information may include proof of a veteran's rent, utilities and insurance payment histories. The expectation is that this will expand veterans' financial options and access to credit.

DAV does not have a resolution on this specific issue and takes no position on this legislation.

S. 1850, Chaplains Memorial Preservation Act

The purpose of this legislation is to ensure military chaplains who died while serving their nation are memorialized at Arlington National Cemetery. The bill would allow the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces to update the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish chaplains' memorials at Arlington National Cemetery with the names of all military chaplains who died on active duty.

DAV does not have a resolution on this specific issue and takes no position on this legislation.

S. 1881, Veteran Education Empowerment Act

This legislation would reauthorize and improve a grant program, through the Department of Education, that would assist colleges and universities establish and maintain Student Veteran Centers. Student Veteran Centers act as the hub for veterans' support and success on college campuses all across the United States and provide counseling and tutoring services to veterans to help achieve a successful outcome.

Many student veterans have been away from school for long periods, are older than their peers, or struggle with service-connected disabilities. Student Veteran Centers provide a space for veterans to feel welcome among other student veterans, receive tutoring, peer mentorship and other career support services.

DAV supports the Veteran Education Empowerment Act in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 272, which supports the adoption of programs that help to reduce the barriers to service-disabled veterans continued education.

S. 1936, GI Bill National Emergency Extended Deadline Act of 2021

This bill would codify protections allowing veterans extensions to use their educational benefits when the institution has been impacted by an emergency, such as a pandemic. This would make permanent the emergency measures that were enacted during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that student veterans whose education is impacted by natural disasters do not lose their earned benefits due to forces out of their control.

Beneficiaries of programs such as Veteran Readiness and Education (VR&E) and Chapter 35 Dependents Educational Assistance (DEA) are already under stringent delimiting dates, which can potentially disrupt the ability for disabled veterans and the surviving family members of veterans to complete their courses.

DAV supports this legislation in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 175, which would extend the delimiting dates for VA educational benefits during school closures caused by disasters and pandemics. Additionally, we support the permanent removal of the delimiting dates for those receiving DEA benefits but would recommend it be removed for all those currently eligible in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 124.

S. 2089, Burial Equity for Guards and Reserves Act of 2021

The Burial Equity for Guards and Reserves Act of 2021, would amend Public Law 116-315 to allow state cemeteries to decide whether to inter an honorably discharged Guard member, Reservist, or their spouse or children, without jeopardizing federal grant money.

In order to be buried in a cemetery under the control of the VA National Cemetery Administration, a veteran must meet certain requirements. Under current law, in order to receive federal grant money from the VA for improvements, state veteran cemeteries are barred from interring many National Guard members and Reservists due to rules requiring active service.

DAV does not have a resolution specific to this issue and takes no position on the bill.

S. 2329, BEST for Vets Act of 2021

Starting in 1996, as part of a pilot program, the VA was authorized to complete disability exams from non-VA medical sources to increase its capacity and improve timeliness, but stipulated no more than 10 VA regional offices (VAROs) could participate. These contract exams, originally managed by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), were expanded from 10 to 15 VAROs between 2014 and 2016.

In 2016, VHA officially transferred the national compensation and pension disability exam contract and program management to the VBA. VA established VBA's

Medical Disability Examination (MDE) program to manage and oversee contractors, monitor their performance, and ensure that they meet contract requirements, while enhancing the prompt delivery of disability benefits claims and improve the disability exam experience for veterans. The disability contract exam program was also expanded to allow all VAROs access to use the mandatory contract exam program starting in fiscal year 2017.

The contracts for the vendor-provided VA examinations require a specialized focus on three areas: quality, timeliness and customer satisfaction. The examiners for the vendors are required to complete the same training as provided to VHA examiners. In reference to the timeliness, the contract exams are required to be completed within 20 days generally, or within 30 days for specialized exam requests outside of the vendor's network.

S. 2329 would ensure that only licensed health care professionals furnish disability examinations under the VA contract examiner program, which allows for contract physicians to conduct VA disability examinations and provide medical opinions. It would amend section 504(a) of the Veterans' Benefits Improvements Act of 1996, Public Law 104-275 and Section 5101 note of Title 38, United States Code.

The bill provides that no examination as part of this program will be conducted by any health care profession other than a physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner, audiologist, or psychologist that has a current unrestricted license to practice that health care profession. This is consistent with VA's current policy for VA provided examinations, per its adjudication manual, M21-1, section IVi3A1d.

Additionally, the bill requires VA to provide an annual report to the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. The report must include the conduct of the program and any actions taken by the Secretary.

The VA Compensation and Pension examination process is a vital part of the claims process as it can be determinative of the existence of a current condition, or if the veteran's illness or injury is related to their active military service or specifically, the severity of that condition. In many cases, the VA exam is the linchpin to establish or deny a claimed benefit.

DAV supports S. 2329 in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 036, which calls for legislation that provides significant and meaningful claims processing reform.

S. 2405, Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act

This bill would authorize the VA to provide grants to assist states in carrying out programs to improve outreach and assistance to veterans and their families to ensure that they are aware of veterans' benefits and programs and assist them in applying for them.

A state applying for this grant must submit a plan that outlines the details for the use for the grant. The state must also identify how the grant funds will be distributed among its counties and meet the unique needs of American Indian or Alaska Native veterans, elderly veterans, women veterans, and veterans from other underserved communities. VA must prioritize the awarding of grants in areas with a critical shortage of county or tribal service officers and areas with high rates of veteran suicide and referrals to the Veterans Crisis Line.

Finally, S. 2405 would authorize appropriations of \$50 million for each fiscal year 2022 through 2026 for this new grant program.

This bill would provide outreach and services that help the needs of all service-disabled veterans, to include American Indian and Alaska Native veterans, elderly veterans, women veterans, and veterans from other underserved communities. DAV supports S. 2405, in accordance with our Statement of Policy which calls for enhanced outreach to ensure that all disabled veterans receive all the benefits they have earned and are eligible for.

S. 2431, Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General Training Act of 2021

S. 2431 would require all VA employees to receive training on reporting wrongdoing, responding to inquiries, and cooperating with the Office of Inspector General (OIG) within a year of enactment or within a year of onboarding with the Department. The OIG would develop this training to ensure employees are familiar with the roles and responsibilities of the Office; the circumstances and mechanisms for reporting wrongdoing; raise awareness of whistleblower protections; and, to identify opportunities for using OIG to overall improve VA's programs, operations and services.

Mr. Chairman, DAV appreciates the role of VA's OIG in ensuring that waste, fraud, abuse and other wrongdoing are addressed within the Department. The VA OIG has saved taxpayers millions of dollars and helped to improve the performance of VA's programs, services and benefits.

We are pleased to support S. 2431, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 508, which urges VA management to instill practices of transparency and accountability in improving responsiveness to veterans and strengthening VA.

S. 2513, Brian Neuman Department of Veterans Affairs Clothing Allowance Improvement Act of 2021

This bill would make automatic recurring annual clothing allowance payments to veterans unless the veteran elects to no longer receive those payments or it is determined by the VA that the veteran is no longer eligible to receive those payments.

Five years after veterans become eligible to receive clothing allowance benefits, VA would be required to review their eligibility to determine if they continue to be eligible to receive payments. S. 2513, would also require VA to establish a regulatory standard to determine if the service-connected disability of the veteran making the claim for clothing allowance is subject to change. If it is determined the veteran has a service-connected disability that is not subject to change, the eligibility review will no longer be necessary.

If the VA receives a claim for annual clothing allowance and it is determined that the veteran no longer meets the eligibility requirements for this benefit, VA will notify the veteran the benefit will be discontinued.

Veterans should not be burdened with unnecessary steps to access benefits they are entitled to. We support S. 2513—which seeks to streamline and improve the processes and overall delivery of clothing allowance benefits and services for our nation’s ill and injured veterans. This bill is in line with DAV Resolution No. 007, which calls for the VA to adopt policies and other practices that accelerate the timely delivery of benefits and services and takes into account the unique needs of injured and wounded veterans.

S. 2644, GRAD VA Educational Assistance Parity Act of 2021

The GRAD VA Educational Assistance Parity Act of 2021, would provide GI Bill benefits parity between members of the National Guard and Reserves and active-duty service members. Specifically, this bill would expand entitlement for the Post-9/11 GI Bill by counting every day that a service member is paid and in uniform toward benefit eligibility.

We appreciate the intent of S. 2644; however, as DAV does not have a resolution on this specific issue, we take no position on the bill.

S. 2687, Strengthening Oversight for Veterans Act of 2021

S. 2687 would provide the Inspector General (IG) of the VA testimonial subpoena authority. Additionally, the bill would require the VA IG to notify the Attorney General (AG) of the United States if he/she intends to issue a subpoena, allowing the AG the opportunity to object to the issuance of the subpoena if it would interfere with an ongoing investigation.

The bill would also ensure the VA IG makes clear that a witness can voluntarily cooperate with the Inspector General rather than be subpoenaed and to the greatest extent practicable, have the IG travel to the location of a participating witness. In addition, the bill would require the VA OIG to report to Congress regularly on the number of times they have used this new authority.

DAV does not have a resolution specific to S. 2687, and takes no position on the legislation.

S. 2761, Every Veteran Counts Act of 2021

This bill would require VA to conduct and publish a survey of veterans every 10 years that contains information about veterans' demographic characteristics, including gender identity and sexual orientation, employment, housing and access to broadband. It would look at indicators of utilization of VA services such as enrollment in the VA health care system and service-connected disability rating. The legislation would also require VA to survey veterans about various exposures during service including exposure to environmental hazards, and military sexual trauma. The survey is to include veterans from all service eras and would require VA to consult with Congress, VSOs, its advisory committees and others to review the survey to ensure that it is well designed, the methodology for administering the survey is sound and that it will collect relevant information for its purposes. VA would conduct the first survey one year after enactment of the bill and at least every 10 years thereafter.

DAV appreciates the need for this information in developing sound policy and understanding key gaps in access to VA benefits for certain populations. We suggest VA also collect information on veterans' awareness of benefits, programs and services as this may be a key obstacle in veterans' utilization of VA programs—especially in earlier service eras. We'd also recommend VA collect information about household composition—particularly veterans' responsibilities for dependent children and parents in addition to their access to transportation and child and elder care, if needed. Veterans often cite lack of child care and transportation as barriers to use of VA services.

In past years, the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans has expressed concerns that the Secretary does not adequately respond to its recommendations, particularly a long-standing recommendation to collect and publish data on veterans in racial and ethnic minorities and their applications and awards for and utilization of VA benefits and services. VA has just begun to collect data on transgender veterans but has no systematic means of collecting data on sexual orientation. The discussion draft would address some of these information gaps.

We believe the benefit of understanding the diverse number of veterans it serves is critical to VA for the purposes of appropriate planning of health care services, specialized programs and resources. DAV Resolution No. 023 urges VA to continue identifying and addressing social and behavioral determinants that may affect health outcomes in addition to barriers to health care for all service-connected veterans by minority and ethnic groups. For these reasons, we are pleased to support this bill.

S. 2794, Supporting Families of the Fallen Act

This bill would increase the benefit amount paid through the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) and Veterans' Group Life Insurance (VGLI) from \$400,000 to \$500,000. This would be the first increase in the benefit amount since 2005.

DAV does not have a resolution that pertains to SGLI or VGLI coverage amounts and takes no position on this legislation.

S. 3047, Veterans Pro Bono Corps Act of 2021

S. 3047 would establish a pilot program authorizing VA to award grants to medical residency and fellowship programs to provide pro bono, independent medical examinations and medical opinions to help low-income veterans substantiate VA disability benefits claims. Additionally, the bill would require VA to establish a competitive process to select grantees and permits VA to give preference to grantees in rural or underserved areas.

The bill would also require participants to undergo training that is substantially the same as or equivalent to training required for VA and VA-contracted examiners as well as requiring VA to provide the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees with annual reports with data needed to evaluate program efficacy.

We do have a concern with utilizing this pilot program for medical opinions. A medical nexus or opinion is required for establishing direct service connection in many instances. In general, if this medical opinion is not based on a review of the veteran's claim folder or service medical records, VA will assign less weight to these opinions. We have the following questions that are not addressed by the bill and ask the Committee to consider:

- How will the pro bono examiners have access to review a veteran's records?
- Will the veteran be required to provide these records to the pro bono examiners?
- Without the medical records to review, will the medical opinions carry appropriate weight with VA to lead to grants of benefits sought?

DAV fully appreciates the goal and intent of the Veterans Pro Bono Corps Act; however, we currently do not have a resolution specific to this bill and take no position on the legislation.

S. 3094, Reaching Every Homeless Veteran Act of 2021

The Department of Labor (DOL) Veterans' Employment and Training Service (DOL-VETS) Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP) is a competitive grant program focused exclusively on competitive employment for homeless veterans. All

HVRPs offer job counseling, resume preparation, job placement, and follow-up at 30-, 90- and 180-day intervals. Program staff also ensure that participants receive essential supportive services such as clothing, shelter, referral for medical services or substance use disorder treatment, and transportation assistance.

The goal of the Reaching Every Homeless Veteran Act is to ensure that HVRP grants are awarded in every state and U.S. territory. In instances where a state or territory is without eligible grant applicants, the DOL would be mandated to coordinate an outreach and education program in coordination with the state's Director of Veterans' Employment and Training to increase awareness around HVRP and the benefits of the program.

The legislation would also mandate reporting requirements for DOL on the HVRP application and selection process, thereby providing Congress with the data necessary to discern future statutory or funding changes. We want to ensure HVRP awards as proposed by this bill would continue to be made on a competitive basis and that the same high-quality application standards continue to be maintained.

We are pleased to support S. 3094, in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 119, which calls for support of programs and supportive services to reduce homelessness among veterans including the DOL VETS Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program.

Discussion Draft, RURAL Exams Act of 2021

This discussion draft, the Reform and Update Rural Access to Local (RURAL) Exams Act of 2021, would authorize the VA Secretary to offer incentives specifically for contract examiners to ensure better service to rural and housebound veterans and improve transparency of the medical disability examination program for all veterans.

In addition, the proposed bill would improve data collections on rural exams, allow a study on improvements to rural exams and requires VA to inspect locations to ensure all examinations are safe, accessible and dignified.

VA exams are of a unique importance and missed or cancelled exams can negatively impact a veteran's claim and disability rating. If a negative decision is rendered based on a missed or cancelled exam, the veteran cannot simply request to reschedule the exam. At this point, the veteran is required to submit a supplemental claim requesting a new exam for the claimed conditions, thus requiring additional time, development, and a new scheduled exam for a new VA rating decision. Thus, making VA examinations accessible for all veterans, specifically those in rural areas or that are housebound, become of even greater significance.

DAV would support legislative provisions such as those included in the discussion draft, RURAL Exams Act of 2021, as they are in accord with DAV Resolution No. 036, which calls on legislation that provides significant and meaningful claims processing reform.

Discussion draft, Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2021

The discussion draft, the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2021, has three main sections to include the Board of Veterans' Appeals (Board), VBA disability medical examinations and specific matters for veterans, accredited representatives and other issues.

The proposed bill would create an attorney internship program and an honors program at the Board. It would also establish a pilot program to reimburse claimants for travel to tele-hearings before the Board. Current VA statutes do not allow for reimbursement to claimants for travel to any requested hearings before the Board. This pilot would provide reimbursement only for those traveling from home to the location of the video/virtual hearing is being held, as long as the Secretary determines that travel to such location was reasonably necessary.

Next, the draft addresses VBA medical examinations, which are vital to compensation and pension claims to answer questions regarding service connection and the current level of impairment provided by the veteran's service-related wounds, injuries, illnesses and diseases. It addresses disability benefits questionnaires (DBQs) and fact sheet access to VHA staff by amending Public Law 116-315.

Veterans who travel to a VA facility or a facility of a VA contracted examiner for a VA compensation and pension examination, are eligible for reimbursement. This draft proposal would authorize travel reimbursement for those veterans residing outside of the United States and traveling to these examinations in foreign locations. In addition, the bill would require VA contract examiners to recognize the veterans' accredited representative and include them in communications to the veterans, especially, notice of the examination. Further, it would also include an informative outreach program for veterans on contact information for contract examiners.

The final section of the proposal would create a pilot program to assess the feasibility and advisability of accrediting governmental veterans service officers and providing access to VBA's electronic Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS). The bill would also allow the VA to disclose or re-disclose veteran federal tax return information to contractors and vendors, who are administering or assisting in VA programs that require the information.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and VA vendor failures have caused serious delays in mail, which has negatively impacted VA's mandated requirement of notifying veterans and claimants of VA decisions. This bill would allow veterans to receive all such notifications electronically or to opt out of the electronic notifications and receive all such notices via mail.

In May, DAV testified before the Committee on its hearing on "Supporting Disabled Veterans: The State of Claims Processing During and After COVID-19." We

outlined our concerns involving VA backlogged examinations, pending claims, and the thousands of pending hearings within the Board. This proposed draft would not alleviate all of those concerns, however, it does take steps toward modernization and streamlining processes within VBA and the Board.

DAV would support the legislative efforts such included in the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2021. The draft is aligned with DAV Resolution No. 036, which calls on legislation that provides significant and meaningful claims and appeals processing reform to address VBA's and the Board's overall workloads while providing veteran-centric notifications, examinations, and hearings.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony and I would be pleased to answer any questions you or members of the Committee may have.