

THE AMERICAN LEGION DEPARTMENT OF NEVADA

Views and Estimates

**FOR THE
Legislative Commission's Subcommittee to
Study Issues Relating to Senior Citizens & Veterans**

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Department Commander**

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Statement of
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Legislative Commission's Subcommittee

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INTRODUCTION

As The American Legion Department of Nevada Commander, I thank you for this opportunity to present the views of its 10,250 members on issues under your jurisdiction. Each generation of America's veterans has earned the right to quality health care, disability compensation, rehabilitation, and transitional programs. With young Nevada servicemembers continuing to answer the nation's call to arms in every corner of the globe, we must now, more than ever, work together to honor their service and sacrifice.

ACCESS TO CARE FOR RURAL VETERANS

As you all know, Nevada has a large rural population and The American Legion proudly represents them and honors their membership. Nationwide research indicates that veterans residing in rural areas are in poorer health than their urban counterparts. It is further reported that statewide, one in five veterans enrolled to receive health care lives in rural areas. Providing quality health care in a rural setting has proven to be very challenging, given factors such as limited availability of skilled care providers and inadequate access to care. Even more challenging will be the ability to provide treatment and rehabilitation to rural veterans who suffer from the signature ailments of the on-going Global War on Terror (Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) / Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF))-traumatic blast injuries and combat-related mental health conditions. Our efforts need to be especially focused on these issues.

There is great difficulty serving veterans in rural areas. Veterans in Nevada face extremely long drives, a shortage of health care providers and bad weather. The Veterans Integrated Services Network (VISN) rely heavily upon federally funded Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) and outstanding outreach efforts by the Nevada Office of Veterans Services to close the gap.

One concern of The American Legion is that many of the CBOCs are at or near capacity and many still do not provide adequate mental health services to veterans in need. The provision of mental health services in CBOCs is even more critical today with the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has been estimated that nearly 30 percent of the veterans who are returning from combat suffer from some type of mental stress. Further, statistics show that mental health is one of the top three reasons a returning veteran seeks health care.

The American Legion believes that where there is very limited access to health care it is in the best interest of veterans residing in highly rural areas that local care be made available to them. Some of these veterans have physical limitations or suffer from conditions that make extensive travel dangerous. Many veterans have expressed concerns to our organization about their limited financial resources prohibiting travel, citing the rising cost of gas, the limitations of the mileage reimbursement rates, and the need to pay for overnight accommodations as obstacles. Fortunately, some non-profit organizations, such as The Veterans Guest House in Reno, provide caring support to out-

of-town military service veterans and their families. Providing contracted care in highly rural communities would alleviate the unwarranted hardships that these veterans encounter when seeking access to health care.

SEAMLESS TRANSITION

The American Legion is concerned that many servicemembers returning home from OEF/OIF duty are not always advised of the benefits and services available to them from Federal and State agencies. This is especially true of Reserve and Nevada National Guard units that are demobilized at hometown Reserve Centers and National Guard armories, rather than at active duty demobilization centers. Nationwide, the Department of Defense (DoD) estimates that 68 percent of separating servicemembers attend the full Transition Assistance Program (TAP) seminars and only 35 percent of the Reserve components attend. The American Legion believes this low attendance number is a disservice to all transitioning servicemembers, especially the Reserve Component. Participating with the Nevada National Guard's TAP coordinator, Nevada Legionnaires have helped brief Guard and Reserve units on VA's benefits and services.

STATE EXTENDED CARE FACILITY

The Nevada Office of Veterans Services does an outstanding job with the Boulder City State Veterans Home (SVH); the excellent staff at the 80 bed facility provides nursing home, hospital, and domiciliary care for southern Nevada. However, the need for a SVH in northern Nevada should be addressed as soon as possible. Under the provisions of title 38, United States Code, the Veterans Administration is authorized to make payments to states to assist in the construction and maintenance of SVHs. Grants for Construction of State Extended Care Facilities provide funding for 65 percent of the total cost of building new veterans' homes. Recognizing the growing Long-Term Care needs of older veterans in northern Nevada, it is essential that plans for an SVH in Reno be maintained as an important alternative health care provider. The American Legion opposes attempts to place moratoria on new SVH construction. State authorizing legislation has been enacted and state funds have been committed. Delaying this project will result in cost overruns from increasing building materials costs and may result in Nevada deciding to cancel this much needed facility.

EDUCATION BENEFITS

Nevada is a nation-wide leader in State education benefits for our National Guard members. The American Legion has a proud history of developing the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Public Law 78-346), also known as the GI Bill of Rights, assisting 16 million veterans of WWII to make the American Dream come true and reshaping the United States. Continuing this tradition, The American Legion supports

Nevada's current tuition waiver program and salutes your support of the Nevada National Guard.

The American Legion supports the inclusion of National Guardsmen's immediate family members in the State tuition waiver program.

HOMELESS VETERANS

This is a true national tragedy that has not bypassed Nevada. The American Legion supports the efforts of public and private sector agencies and organizations with the resources necessary to aid homeless veterans and their families. The American Legion supports State proposals that will provide medical, rehabilitative and employment assistance to homeless veterans and their families.

Homeless veteran programs should be granted full appropriations to provide supportive services such as, but not limited to; outreach, health care, rehabilitation, case management, daily living, personal financial planning, transportation, vocational counseling, employment and training, and education.

STATE CEMETERIES

Another Nevada success story, the State Cemeteries in Boulder City and Fernley complement the national cemetery system. To date, the State Cemeteries have provided more than 2,000 burials. With the continued increase in Nevada's veteran population, The American Legion believes Nevada will increasingly use the State Cemeteries to fill the needs of veterans. Expansions and improvements of the existing cemeteries are therefore likely to increase. With increasing costs, especially the high costs of land in urban areas and water, and increased demand, The American Legion suggests that the amount of money for the State Cemeteries be substantially increased.

SUMMARY

The American Legion appreciates the strong relationship we have developed with both houses of the State Legislature. With increasing military commitments worldwide, it is important that we work together to ensure that the services and programs offered to Nevada's veterans are available to the new generation of servicemembers who are returning home.

The American Legion is fully committed to working with you to ensure that Nevada's veterans receive the entitlements they have earned. Whether it is improved accessibility to health care, timely adjudication of disability claims, improved educational benefits or employment services, each and every aspect of these programs touches veterans from every generation. Together we can ensure that these programs remain productive, viable options for the men and women who have chosen to answer the nation's call to arms.