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Testimony

of

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before the

Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
Subcommittee on Benefits
U.S. House of Representatives

on

**Legislative Bills to Update, Improve and Enhance Earned
Veterans Benefits and Related Matters**

Thursday, April 29, 2004
10:30 AM, Room 334
Cannon House Office Building



A M V E T S

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Chairman Brown, Ranking Member Michaud, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of AMVETS National Commander S. John Sisler and the nationwide membership of AMVETS, I am pleased to offer our views to the Subcommittee on Benefits regarding the legislative matters at hand. For the record, AMVETS has not received any federal grants or contracts during the current fiscal year or during the previous two years in relation to any of the subjects discussed today.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS is a staunch advocate of providing veterans with appropriate benefits and services *earned* through honorable military service. As a leader since 1944 in helping to preserve the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces, our organization continues its proud tradition providing not only support for veterans and the active military in procuring their earned entitlements but also an array of community services that enhance the quality of life for this nation's citizens.

AMVETS applauds this Subcommittee and its effort to identify, examine and pursue legislative initiatives to implement solutions necessary for veterans to obtain the services and benefits they richly deserve.

H.R.348, the Prisoner of War Benefits Act of 2003

Vice Chairman Bilirakis introduced H.R.348 to improve benefits for former prisoners of war (POWs). The bill would strike current law provisions that require a servicemembers capture to extend 30 days or more for entitlement to presumption of service connection for certain diseases and 60 days or more for presumption of service connection for dental care. In essence, the bill enhances the opportunity for former prisoners of war to avail themselves of health care services for specific diseases noted in the legislation and other illnesses that the Secretary may determine require regulations. AMVETS agrees that our prisoners of war deserve our gratitude and respect. Too often, they return carrying the extra burden of physical and emotional scars and for their sake and the sake of everyone who wears the military uniform we need to do right for America's sons and daughters held as POWs. AMVETS supports the bill.

H.R. 843, the Injured Veterans Benefits Eligibility Act of 2003

H.R. 843, introduced by Rep. Silvestre Reyes, seeks to expand full service-connected disability benefits for individuals disabled by treatment or vocational rehabilitation provided by VA. Current law does not provide disability compensation to service members whose condition may be aggravated or initiated because of medical treatment or rehabilitation. While the benefit contract is generally related to a servicemembers past military experience, AMVETS does not oppose “service connected” coverage for individuals who are disabled as a result of their exposure to VA care.

H.R. 1735, a bill to increase the maximum amount of home loan guarantee for veterans

H.R. 1735, introduced by Rep. Susan Davis, would increase the maximum loan guarantee to \$81,000 from \$60,000. This change in guarantee will increase no-downpayment VA guaranteed home loan limits from \$240,000 to \$324,000. Under the current formula, VA guarantees 25 percent of the available loan up to the guarantee limit.

Housing prices in certain parts of the country prevent many veterans from buying a home without a downpayment. The proposed increase in the guarantee would enable many veterans to purchase a home of their choice without a downpayment, which would otherwise be unavailable to them. It is our understanding that related federal mortgage associations, including Fannie Mae, have established similar increases in their guarantee and that this legislation provides parity with the conventional loan market. AMVETS fully supports H.R.1735.

H.R. 2612, the Veterans Adapted Housing Expansion Act of 2003

H.R. 2612, introduced by Ranking Member Michael Michaud, would expand VA Secretary authority to provide specially adapted housing assistance to veterans with permanent and total service-connected disabilities. AMVETS supports the goal of this legislation.

H.R. 2206, the Prisoner of War/Missing in Action National Memorial Act

H.R. 2206, introduced by Rep. Ken Calvert, seeks to designate the memorial under construction at Riverside National Cemetery, Riverside, California, as the Prisoner of War/Missing in Action National Memorial. AMVETS supports this legislation as a fitting tribute and honor to America's former prisoners of war. It is our hope that such a designation would continue the work to ensure that future generations understand the courage of these men and women who sacrificed so much of their freedom in defense of the liberties we hold dear. AMVETS supports the bill.

H.R. 4065, the Veterans Housing Affordability Act of 2004

H.R. 4065, introduced by Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite, seeks to adjust annually the amount of maximum home loan guarantee available to eligible veterans by indexing the increase of the VA guarantee to the Freddie Mac conforming loan limit. Housing prices in certain parts of the country prevent many veterans using a VA home loan guarantee from buying a home without a downpayment. The proposed increase in the guarantee would enable many veterans to purchase a home of their choice without a downpayment, which would otherwise be unavailable to them. Because the bill takes into account fluctuations in the housing market and would more readily adjust the housing benefit to the yearly real estate market, AMVETS supports this legislation.

H.R. _____, a draft bill, to codify a presumption of service connection for certain diseases when occurring in veterans exposed to ionizing radiation during military service

The draft bill introduced by Ranking Member Lane Evans would amend title 38 to presume additional diseases occurring in veterans exposed to ionizing radiation during service. This bill would allow presumption of service connection to eligible veterans with these conditions, including cancer of the bone, brain, colon, lung and/or ovary. AMVETS fully supports this section of the draft bill as it recognizes the serious adverse health consequences of these exposures during military service.

H.R. 3936, a bill to authorize the location of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to be at any location in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

H.R. 3936 would allow the federal government to site the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims within the D.C. metropolitan area instead of solely in the District of Columbia. AMVETS has no objection to passage of this legislation.

In closing Mr. Chairman, AMVETS looks forward to working with you and others in Congress to ensure the earned benefits of all of America's veterans are strengthened and improved. As we find ourselves in times that threaten our very freedom, our nation must never forget those who ensure our freedom endures. AMVETS thanks the panel for the opportunity to address these issues.