

**STATEMENT OF
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OF THE
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
APRIL 27, 2006**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 1.3 million members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), I appreciate the opportunity to present our views on the legislative measures being considered today.

H.R. 4791, the Disabled Veterans Adaptive Housing Improvement Act, would increase the amount of assistance available to disabled veterans for specially adapted housing and would provide for annual increases in the amount based on the cost of living. Section 2101(a) of title 38, United States Code, authorizes the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide assistance in the form of a specially adapted housing grant to veterans who have incurred service-connected disabilities consisting of loss or loss of use of both lower extremities, total blindness together with loss or loss of use of one lower extremity, or loss or loss of use of one lower extremity together with either the loss or loss of use of an upper extremity or other organic disease that requires use of a wheelchair or the use of braces, crutches, or canes. The purpose of this grant is to enable severely disabled veterans to construct, purchase, or remodel homes with structural features to accommodate special needs. Section 2102 of title 38, United States Code, limits the amounts VA may provide to such veterans. Currently, VA may approve a grant of not more than 50 percent of the cost of building, buying or remodeling adapting homes or paying indebtedness on those homes already acquired, up to a maximum of \$50,000. VA may approve a grant for the actual cost, up to a maximum of \$10,000, for adaptations to a veteran's residence that are determined by VA to be reasonably necessary. The grant also may be used to help veterans acquire a residence that already has adaptations for the veteran's disability.

H.R. 4791 would amend section 2102 of title 38, United States Code to increase the \$50,000 grant to \$60,000, and increase the \$10,000 grant to \$12,000. Additionally, the bill would provide for automatic annual adjustments based on the national average increase in the cost of residential home construction. In accordance with resolutions adopted by the delegates to the DAV National Convention, the DAV supports legislation to increase the amount of assistance available to disabled veterans for specially adapted housing and to provide for annual increases in such amount. Additionally, H.R. 4791 is reflective of the recommendations of *The Independent Budget (IB)*, which is a budget and policy document that sets forth the collective views of the DAV, AMVETS, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. As the Subcommittee is aware, increases in housing and home adaptation grants have been infrequent, although real estate and construction costs rise continually. Unless the amounts of the grants are periodically adjusted, inflation erodes the value and effectiveness of these benefits that are payable to some of the most severely service-connected disabled veterans. We urge that the proposals contained in the Disabled Veterans Adaptive Housing Improvement Act be favorably acted upon by the Subcommittee.

A draft bill, the Veterans Employment State Grant Improvement Act of 2006, would enact a number of measures intended to improve employment services for veterans provided under the Veterans' Employment and Training program. Section 2 would establish professional qualifications and standards for Disabled Veteran Outreach Program (DVOP) specialists, and Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVERs) that are consistent with the duties and functions of their positions. DVOP/LVER personnel help disabled veterans make the difficult and uncertain transition from military to civilian life. They help provide jobs and job training opportunities for disabled and other veterans by serving as intermediaries between employers and veterans. They maintain contacts with employers and provide outreach to veterans. They also develop linkages with other agencies to promote maximum employment opportunities for veterans. Though the DAV has no resolutions specific to professional qualifications for DVOP/LVER employees, we acknowledge the importance of filling such positions with capable, qualified individuals. Disabled veterans deserve to have employment representatives who are trained specifically to meet their unique requirements. Section 3 establishes rules for part-time employment for DVOP/LVER employees. Specifically, it would provide that DVOP/LVER employees shall perform the functions of their jobs on not less than a half-time basis. Section 4 would establish local performance information systems to measure the performance of DVOP/LVER employees. Section 5 would require the State to provide a licensing and certification program under which a veteran may receive credit toward a license or certification based on training or experience the veteran acquired while serving in the Armed Forces. The DAV has no resolutions specific to sections 3, 4, or 5.

Section 6 would require all new DVOP/LVER employees to attend training at the National Veterans' Training Institute (NVTI). NVTI was established to develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States. NVTI provides consistency of training to ensure veterans receive a uniform, high quality level of service throughout the country. The DAV believes making NVTI training mandatory for new DVOP/LVER employees is a worthy goal; however, the 2006 IB expressed concern that several years of level funding along with reduced appropriations for FY 2005 compromises the vitality of NVTI and its ability to provide quality training. The IB recommended an adequate level of funding for NVTI to ensure quality training for veterans' employment specialists. We hope this recommendation will be considered along with the Subcommittee's consideration of establishing professional qualifications for DVOP/LVERs. Section 7 would establish a demonstration project for placement of veterans in high-unemployment areas, and section 8 would establish performance incentive awards for employment service officers. The DAV has no resolutions with regard to these provisions. Section 9 would direct the Secretary of Labor to prescribe regulations to implement section 4215 of title 38 United States Code, which ensures priority of service for veterans at employment offices. The DAV supports this measure.

A draft bill, the G.I. Bill Flexibility Act of 2006, would provide flexibility in the programs of education for which accelerated payments of educational assistance under the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) may be used. Specifically, it would allow MGIB payments to be used for tuition for education programs that lead to certification or licensure in an occupation, or leads to occupation in an industry that has a critical shortage of employees or is an industry that is experiencing a high growth rate. The limitation on maximum accelerated payments would be \$10,000, except for veterans with service-connected disabilities. The Act would provide special rules to authorize the amount of the accelerated payment for service-connected disabled veterans to equal 75 percent of the established charges. The DAV was founded on the principle that our nation's first duty to veterans is the rehabilitation and welfare of its wartime disabled. Generally, we will not take action on legislation

designed to provide benefits that are based upon other than wartime service-connected disability. While we acknowledge and recognize the important and praiseworthy purpose of the MGIB, our mission does not encompass issues pertaining to the program because it is not specific to service-connected disabled veterans. However, because this draft bill contains a provision with the specific purpose of assisting disabled veterans, it is aligned with our mission and the DAV encourages the Subcommittee to favorably consider this draft bill.

A draft bill, the Veterans' Certification and Licensure Act of 2006, would establish an advisory committee to improve certification and licensing procedures for veterans. The overall purpose would be to assist veterans seeking to utilize their military training and experience to obtain employment in the civilian job market. Such improvement would facilitate the seamless transition of members of the Armed Forces and generally enhance veterans' employment opportunities. Though the DAV has no resolutions specific to this legislation, its purpose is meritorious and we have no objection to the favorable consideration of this draft bill.

An amendment to H.R. 3082 would endeavor to increase VA contracting opportunities for small businesses owned and controlled by service-connected disabled veterans. The amendment would require VA to establish a percentage goal for each fiscal year for such contracts. The established goal could not be less than the 3 percent procurement goal established by Public Law 106-50, the Veterans Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development Act Of 1999. The annual performance review of the senior procurement official of each Administration of the VA would include an assessment of whether or not the goal had been met. In accordance with resolutions adopted by the delegates to the DAV National Convention, the DAV supports this legislative measure to assist disabled veteran owned businesses. While we appreciate and strongly support the intent of this amendment, we are somewhat disappointed it does not require VA to ensure that a set percentage of procurement contracts are awarded to disabled veteran owned businesses. An estimated 300,000 service-disabled veterans are small business owners. No other category of business owner has contributed more to our nation, or is more deserving of special consideration for Federal contract procurement opportunities, than service-connected disabled veterans. The federal government's dismal failure to meet the procurement goal established by Public Law 106-50 clearly illustrates that goals are meaningless without mandates. The only marked difference between this amendment and earlier efforts to increase contracting opportunities for disabled veteran owned businesses is the provision to include an assessment of whether or not the goal had been met in the annual performance review of the senior procurement officials. The DAV hopes this additional measure to encourage adherence will prove successful.

We appreciate the Committee's interest in these issues, and we appreciate the opportunity to present the DAV's views, which we hope will be helpful.