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**A M V E T S**

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**STATEMENT OF**

**JAMES B. KING**  
**AMVETS NATIONAL EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

**BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**ON**

**THE AMVETS LEGISLATIVE AGENDA FOR 2006**

**WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2006**  
**334 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING**  
**10:30AM**

**Chairman Buyer, Ranking Member Evans and members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am James B. King, national executive director of AMVETS, and it is my pleasure to appear before this committee to present our legislative agenda for 2006. On behalf of AMVETS, the AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary, Sons of AMVETS and our other related organizations, I thank you for giving us this opportunity.**

**I come before you today to speak on behalf of my fellow AMVETS and veterans who have joined me here in our nation's capital. For more than 60 years, AMVETS has taken to heart the doctrine of service set forth by our organization's founders. In so doing, we endeavor to provide our fellow veterans with the type of support they truly deserve. This outreach effort takes many forms, from the professional advice our service officers offer about earned veterans benefits, to our legislative efforts on Capitol Hill, to the work done by our hospital volunteers. Other AMVETS members involve themselves in a range of initiatives aimed at contributing to the quality of life in their local communities.**

**These two areas—veterans service and community service—drive our commitment to make a difference in the lives of others. For example, since its inception in the 1950's, the AMVETS National Scholarship Program has awarded more than two million dollars in scholarships to graduating high school students. For the past 17 years, AMVETS has sponsored a youth leadership program in cooperation with Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge that has served over 700 youth to date. At VA, AMVETS is proud to serve on the National Advisory Committee of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service Program. Last year, more than 3,000 AMVETS, Ladies Auxiliary and Sons volunteers tallied over 200,000 hours of voluntary service at 146 VA Medical Centers. In addition, more than 10,000 AMVETS from all across the country invested over 700,000 hours working to help veterans and providing an array of community services that enhance the quality of life for our nation's citizens. The Independent Sector annually calculates the value of America's voluntary hours based on the Bureau of Labor statistics. I am pleased to report that based on these statistics, AMVETS provided in excess of \$23 million in voluntary service to the community.**

**As a national veterans service organization, AMVETS is dedicated to the service and best interest of the community, state and nation. We have a long and proud history. Today, AMVETS membership is open to all men and women who have served honorably in the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard on or after September 15, 1940 and to those who are currently serving our country. We welcome all new members with open arms.**

**Mr. Chairman, America is a blessed nation. We have more money, comforts and luxuries than at any previous time in our history. America is a giant, containing tremendous resources, and presenting a commanding presence around the globe. Our military might is absolutely remarkable and we have a president that is marching our Armed Forces towards victory.**

**A new generation of brave American's are once again deployed around the world, answering the nation's call to arms. Our soldiers are doing everything right, everything that we ask of them and much more. Just as in previous wars this century, our country fights not for land or fortune, but for freedom. In past conflicts, America has fought to secure liberty, abolish slavery and crush communism. Our cause today is equally just. We fight to conquer the evil forces who would rule by fear and are helping spread freedom and democracy around the world.**

**But we are facing a situation where returning soldiers feel abandoned. Wounded warriors recovering at Walter Reed and elsewhere are in a vulnerable place and feel that no one is taking care of them. In many cases, they are right. About 103,000 of the 400,000 military servicemen and women returning from operations overseas need health care services for the physical and psychological traumas of war that may never heal. Seventeen percent of them, in fact, have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Before you think about undermining VA health care, go and visit these injured soldiers. Talk with them and listen to what they have to say. I assure you, you will not leave with a dry eye.**

**We are spending close to \$2 billion a week for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, yet trying to nickel and dime veterans' healthcare here at home. Nobody is saying we are spending too much for our national defense. Nobody is asking us to reduce the defense or VA budget. I believe there is enough money in both budgets to properly equip the military and take care of those who served.**

**AMVETS is very concerned about a Department of Defense (DoD) proposal to double or triple TRICARE fees paid by retired uniformed services beneficiaries. DoD believes the fee increases will save money by shifting 14 percent of users away from retail outlets and cause 600,000 current enrollees to exit TRICARE by 2011. These brave soldiers put their lives on the line for our national defense, we should not kick them out of a system that was created as a recruitment tool in appreciation of their service.**

**Unfortunately, new veterans returning home will soon discover that their battle is not over. Many will have life-altering injuries and will turn to VA for their health care needs. That is why it is so critically important that VA be funded at levels that will ensure all eligible veterans have access to and receive quality health care in a timely manner. I come before you to ask that you provide the resources necessary to provide quality care for these new veterans and their families. I ask you to take a look at what the real needs are. I ask you to stop the foolish business of politics.**

**AMVETS holds that the purpose of the VA medical system is literally what is stated in its mission, "To care for him who hath borne the battle, his widow and his orphan." But veterans continue to suffer as a result of a system that has been routinely under funded and is now ill equipped to handle the large influx of veterans waiting and wanting to use VA services.**

**As Members of the United States Congress, you are provided with certain benefits that you earned as a representative of the people, paid for at taxpayer expense. I would imagine that you would never vote for any proposal or initiative that would under fund or undermine the integrity of that special delivery system. We ask that you do the same for veterans.**

The administration's fiscal year 2007 budget requests a total of \$80.6 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, \$8.8 billion more than last year, a 12% increase. Included in the spending plan is nearly \$34.3 billion for veterans health care, with collections. However, an estimated \$795 million would come directly out of veterans' pockets, not the federal treasury. Veterans should not be asked to fit the bill in order to pay for billions in VA shortfalls. Without collections, the VA healthcare would be funded at \$31.5 billion, \$2.7 billion more than last year.

AMVETS recommends Congress provide \$32.4 billion for veterans health care, an increase of \$3.7 billion over the fiscal year 2006 appropriation, and approximately \$1 billion over the administration's fiscal year 2007 budget request, without collections.

AMVETS is annoyed that the administration is again proposing to increase prescription co-pays from \$8 to \$15 and create an annual enrollment fee of \$250 for almost 2 million veterans. These new fees will have a dramatic impact on veterans. According to estimates, they will force over one million veterans, half of the Priority 7 and Priority 8 veterans, to drop out of the VA health care system. The premiums have already been paid by service to this country. AMVETS disagrees with this policy and we ask Congress to reject it.

Faced with growing federal budget deficits, it is apparent that the reason for these policies is to generate revenue, save money, and reduce discretionary spending. Year after year, we are told that the budget recommended by the administration and the majorities in the House and Senate are adequate. We know this is not true.

Early on in the budget process last year we recognized that VA grossly underestimated the number of services it would need to provide care for returning soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan. VA assumed a growth rate of 2.3 percent when actually the growth rate was closer to 5.2 percent. In fact, *The Independent Budget* for fiscal year 2006 projected a growth rate of approximately 5 percent, right on target. But despite our recommendation, Congress relied on statements from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which said that their own

**recommendation was enough. In reality, they were well over a billion short. I ask that you listen and pay attention to our recommendations and follow them this fiscal year. We were right then, and we are right now.**

**Frankly, the current system of funding veterans' health care is broken. It doesn't work. AMVETS will continue to pursue legislation with eight VSO partners to assure dependable and stable funding of the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system. Specifically, what we seek is assured, or mandatory, funding.**

**Under the current process, VA health care competes with other non-veterans priorities for adequate appropriations. Over the years, this process has proven its weakness in providing for the needs of enrolled veterans. VA struggles each budget cycle to find the funds needed to care for the men and women who served in America's Armed Forces. Shifting to a mandatory funding system will provide a stable and timely system of funding for VA. We ask that you seriously take a look at this idea. It may hard for Congress to swallow, but once health care funding matches the actual cost of care, VA can truly fulfill its mission.**

**We understand that in a time of war resources are scare. But let's make certain that we select our most important programs over less important ones. According to the non-partisan Congressional Research Service, the number of congressional earmarks has grown from 4,155 valued at \$29 billion in 1994 to 14,211 worth \$53 billion a decade later.**

**Literally thousands of lesser priority, pet projects take away from funding the core benefits and assistance built into the VA system, and affect many other federal programs as well. We know the money VA needs is there. It's always been there. It's just a question of priorities. It is clear to members of AMVETS that if congressional leadership cannot put veterans at the top of the list of priorities within a \$2.77 trillion budget, something is definitely wrong with the priorities of our national leaders.**

**It's frustrating that Congress manages to find money when it needs it. Looking at last year's appropriations, Congress found money for the Country Music Hall of Fame, the World Cup, the GRAMMY Foundation, and most disturbing, a five-year, billion dollar program to provide *illegal* aliens with health care. But somehow, when it comes time to fund VA, the bank is broke. AMVETS asks that you first take a look at where the funds are most needed before thinking of your own political gains.**

**No veteran leaving military service should fall through the bureaucratic cracks. AMVETS believes there is no greater responsibility of DoD and VA than to properly take care of returning soldiers and provide as many tools as possible to assist them in settling back into civilian life. For some war wounded and their families, the seams between systems is frustrating. When a service member separates from military service, the process for determining his or her eligibility for veterans' benefits should be, and needs to be, seamless, timely and accurate. In order to provide a true seamless transition, AMVETS recommends that veterans' basic service information contained in the DD-214 be made available electronically. We ask that you explore ways to make this possible.**

**I do not think we realize how fortunate we are as a nation to have a highly skilled veteran population able to lend their talents to the workforce. Veterans have the skills that make them assets in a variety of occupations. Leadership, integrity, and teamwork—all of which the military teaches—are universal qualities for every industry.**

**While Congress has done a good job in reauthorizing training, education and job programs, I encourage you to take a look at the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) and other related programs to ensure all our returning troops get the assistance they need. DoD discharges approximately 25,000 service members annually. Recently separate service personnel are likely to seek immediate employment or continue their formal vocational education. But they need to know all that's available to them.**

**The Department of Defense estimates that 68 percent of separating service members attend the full TAP seminars, but only 35 percent of the reserve components attend. Countless numbers of National Guard and Reserve troops return from the war only to encounter difficulties with their federal and civilian employers at home. AMVETS encourages Congress to explore ways to make TAP participation mandatory for active duty and the Guard and Reserves.**

**While speaking about returning troops, we ask that you continue to adequately fund the Department of Labor's Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) and the Local Veterans' Employment Representatives (LVER) program. Through the implementation of these programs, DOL-VETS assists not only veterans, but also helps Reservists and Guard members in securing employment and protecting their re-employment rights and benefits.**

**AMVETS asks you to keep a close eye on legislative attempts to consolidate and block grant the DVOP and LVER programs. We remain firmly committed to the belief that this type of veteran-oriented program should remain separate and distinct to ensure that these brave men and women are given the assistance their country owes them for their military service. It would be a grave error to downgrade employment services that specifically help troops returning to the country they fought to defend.**

**For decades, DVOPs and LVERs have been the cornerstone of employment services for veterans. We believe that it is important for States to continue to be required to hire veterans for these positions. Part of this reason is that these individuals are veterans advocating for veterans. After all, DVOP and LVER staff are the front-line providers for services to veterans. They are the individuals who provide a smooth transition of service members from the military to the civilian workforce. In our view, these people should be veterans.**

**A practical example of just how important it is for veterans to advocate for veterans can be found within our own organization. The AMVETS Department of Ohio developed and fully operate a 501(c)(3) career center designed to assist veterans in their career needs. The AMVETS Career Center provides a range of services to help veterans find employment in a**



**substantial career, or assists them in refreshing and/or upgrading their skills. For example, the Center can help a veteran learn more about computers, business math, business grammar, business management, word processing, database management and so on.**

**The AMVETS Career Center provides these services to veterans who are homeless, unemployed or underemployed, those who want to prepare for a new career or better job, and to recently separated veterans who are making the transition to the civilian workforce. The Center also provides services to non-veterans from the community for a small fee of \$50.00. There is no cost to the veteran.**

**Mr. Chairman, this is just one example of the fine work veterans do for their fellow veteran. They have a natural attachment to the veteran and play a pivotal role in making sure veterans who come back to their hometown have every advantage to excel and be a part of the local workforce.**

**AMVETS is very concerned about the growing backlog of claims that leaves many veterans without due compensation. As of November 2005, the Veteran Benefits Administration reports that 117,766 claims for benefits have been pending for more than 180 days. That's 19,581 more claims pending than at this time last year. There are, of course, reasons for that. Budgets that can't stretch to cover the needs of the VBA; experienced employees retiring and being replaced by novices requiring years of training; and the Global War on Terrorism.**

**The challenge is simple. How can VA adequately process disability claims with the funds and staffing levels they've been given? The answer is they can't. If you cannot get them the funding they need to fully staff all VBA Benefits Offices and Regional Offices, then VA will never be able to do its job to the best of its ability. If VBA is going to reduce the claims backlog to zero; if VBA is going to have to process over three-quarters of a million claims per year; if VBA is going to deal with veterans and their problems, than you need to do your part. You need to get the funds they need to hire additional full time employees, not cut 149.**

**AMVETS supports legislation that would award a military service medal to members of the Armed Forces who served honorably during the Cold War Era. We are disappointed that the Cold War Service Medal did not survive the House-Senate conference on the fiscal year 2006 National Defense Authorization Act. Presidents going back to Truman have recognized the significance of the Cold War. This nation would certainly demonstrate its great respect for the men and women who carried the burden of this policy by creating the Cold War Victory Medal. Members of AMVETS believe the issuance of a victory medal would be a fitting and proper act of appreciation to the veterans who served during this time period.**

**There is one issue that, for veterans, transcends all others. It concerns the desecration of the United States flag. AMVETS will not waiver in its efforts to protect the flag from being dishonored. As a member of the Citizens Flag Alliance, we continue to strongly support a constitutional amendment to protect our most sacred symbol. The flag stand for all that is good about our country. The flag is placed over the coffins of those who died so others might live, it covers the bodies of first-responders who gave their lives in the line of duty, and it flies at half mast in recognition of honorable Americans. It is much more than a piece of cloth. It stands for independence, union, and the values on which it was established. We believe our children should be raised as patriots full of respect for the flag and constitutional values it represents.**

**All fifty State legislatures have passed resolutions asking Congress to submit the flag amendment for ratification. A flag protection amendment is supported by over 80 percent of the American people. If someone desecrated the Halls of Congress, the Lincoln Memorial, or any other of our national monuments, lawful action would be taken against the offenders. We ask nothing more for our flag.**

**On this issue, we recognize and greatly appreciate the members of the House who helped assure overwhelming passage of the flag protection amendment every year. We now ask our Senators to stand up and be counted and bring the flag protection bill to the Senate floor as soon as possible.**

**Additionally, as the committee is aware, there is a growing need for long-term care in VA. Veterans 85 years and older, who are in most need of these services, is expected to reach 1.3 million over the next decade. With the sharp increase in the projected number of elderly veterans, AMVETS believes that VA's extended care services are indispensable to its overall mission in providing veterans health care.**

**We urge you to explore the challenge ahead for providing long-term assistance to veterans. And we seek action that will provide enrolled veterans with affordable access to a continuum of extended care services that include nursing home care, domiciliary care, as well as home and community-based extended care services. In this way, we can assure improved healthcare delivery and enhance the measure of care for elderly veteran patients.**

**I would be remiss if I did not mention and acknowledge the fine work VA nurses provide to wounded veterans. VA nurses care for over five million American veterans nationwide. The VHA has the largest nursing workforce in the country with nearly 59,000 registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and other nursing personnel. But VA staffing levels are so precious that even the loss of one nurse can result in a critical staffing shortage. Veterans are much more comfortable receiving treatment from nurses who understand their service, who speak the same language, and know what they went through. AMVETS encourages this committee and VA to actively address the factors known to affect retention and retention of VA nurses.**

**We also want the fullest possible accounting of our missing servicemen and ask for your support in the effort to find and identify their remains. This is important. It is a duty we owe the families of those still missing and unaccounted for as well as to those who served or are currently serving. No amount of effort or commitment can compensate for the loss of our service personnel, but the endeavor honors the value of an American's service to the nation.**

**We must certainly remember the widows and survivors of service members who died on active duty or from a service-related disability. AMVETS would like to see Congress review how the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits are calculated, which is currently set**

at a flat rate of \$1,033. As you know, the DoD Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) benefits are calculated at 55 percent of retired pay. AMVETS recommends that the DIC be calculated in a similar manner at 55% of the disabled veterans 100% disability compensation amount. We believe this would help alleviate growing financial difficulties of widows from wars prior to the current conflict who are receiving only DIC.

AMVETS understands many Gulf War and younger veterans are reporting illnesses stemming from weapons containing depleted uranium. This material can remain in the human body for decades, if not life, causing cancers and other unknown illnesses. AMVETS encourages Congress to pass H.R. 4183 and H.R. 4184, which would require the Department of Justice Civil Division to locate and advise these veterans, widows and orphans of the compensation that is due to them.

Lastly, just as we care for veterans who are alive, we must not forget them when they pass. With the aging veterans population continuing to climb, nearly 676,000 veteran deaths are estimated in 2008, increasing annually and peaking at 690,000 by 2009. It is expected that one in every six of these veterans will request burial in a national veterans cemetery.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS recognizes and appreciates your support and avocation for the National Shrine Commitment. We need to ensure national cemeteries remain dignified and respectful settings that honor deceased veterans and give evidence of the nation's gratitude for their military service. There must be a comprehensive effort to greatly improve the condition, function, and appearance of the national cemeteries. We recommend Congress provide \$50 million in fiscal year 2007 to begin a five-year, \$250 million program to restore and improve the condition and character of NCA cemeteries. Again, we thank you for your leadership in this area, and we look forward in working with you on this initiative.

AMVETS also feels that Congress should review a series of burial benefits that seriously eroded in value over time. With a few modest adjustments, these benefits will make a more meaningful contribution to the burial costs for our veterans.

**Each Memorial Day and Veterans Day we honor the last full measure of devotion veterans gave for this country. Our national cemeteries are more than the final resting place of honor for our veterans, they are hallowed ground to those who died in our defense, and a memorial to those who survived.**

**Mr. Chairman, veterans are no ordinary Americans. They went above and beyond what was ever expected of them. They were part of the Greatest Generation, they fought against communism and tyranny in Korea and Vietnam, and now they fight in the Global War on Terrorism. They fought, bled, and died protecting what they called home.**

**We know you want to provide a better life for our veterans. They dedicated their lives protecting us all and they deserve our gratitude and thanks. Make the hard decisions, stand up for what is right. This is an honorable endeavor, and one that will win you dear friends for life.**

**Great decisions and challenges await us in the months ahead. The membership of AMVETS looks forward to working with you to establish a clear policy of national recognition for those who serve. We have much to do, but we are encouraged in knowing that our work will help the heroes who have borne the battle and lived to tell about it.**

**This concludes my testimony. Again, thank you for extending me the opportunity to appear before you today, and thank you for your support of veterans.**

James B. King  
AMVETS National Executive Director

James B. King was appointed national executive director of the nation's fourth largest veterans service organization on May 21, 2002. In this capacity, he administers the policies of the AMVETS, supervises its national headquarters operations and provides direction, as needed, to state and local components.

The U.S. Marine Corps veteran of 10 years joined AMVETS in 1969 after serving two combat tours in Vietnam with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division. A life member of AMVETS Post 4 in his hometown of Mount Vernon, Ill, Jim has served in leadership capacities on all levels of the organization.

He was elected AMVETS national commander for 1987-88, after serving consecutive one-year terms as national vice commander for membership and programs respectively. Prior to that time, Jim had served, most notably, as Department of Illinois commander and president of the state service foundation.

Long active in veterans' affairs on the state level, Jim also served as president of the Jefferson County, Ill., Veterans Assistance Commission and was appointed as a public member to the Illinois Agent Orange Study Commission. Additionally, he devoted much of his free time to serving as a Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service representative at the VA medical center in Marion, Ill.

Jim and his wife Carol reside in Glen Burnie, Md.

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**SERVING  
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February 15, 2006

The Honorable Steve Buyer, Chairman  
House Veterans' Affairs Committee  
Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Buyer:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program relevant to the February 15, 2006, House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing on the AMVETS legislative agenda for 2006.

Sincerely,

James B. King  
National Executive Director



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