

TESTIMONY

of

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before the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

on

H.R. 4015, the Jobs for Veterans Act

Thursday, April 18, 2002,

9:00 a.m., Room 334

Cannon House Office Building

MR. CHAIRMAN, RANKING MEMBER REYES, AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE:

On behalf of National Commander Joseph W. Lipowski, I am pleased to present the viewpoint of AMVETS on H.R. 4051, a bill to amend Title 38, United States Code, to revise and improve employment, training, and placement services furnished to veterans, and for other purposes. Neither AMVETS nor I have been the recipient of any federal grants or contracts during the current fiscal year or the previous two years.

Mr. Chairman, AMVETS has been a leader since 1944 in helping to preserve the freedoms secured by America's Armed Forces. Today, 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.

We believe that America's commitment to its veterans, codified, and consistently reaffirmed by federal statutes throughout our history, is not being satisfied to the degree Congress intended.

We are concerned that the programs managed by the Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS) remain, unfortunately, underfunded, neglected, and not fully staffed.

We commend the subcommittee for looking to update and enhance these programs. Clearly, your efforts are critical, if we are to meet the employment and training needs of veterans.

However, it is also critical that we ensure adequate funding is provided, and we ask for your assistance in getting the word to your colleagues on the Appropriations Committee about the resources needed to keep VETS programs on track—helping veterans effectively transition from military service to the civilian workforce.

Mr. Chairman, you and your subcommittee, together with the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, have aggressively fought to support veterans programs. Indeed, many of the initiatives you have fought for are currently in place.

We agree with many of the provisions of H.R. 4015. In too many instances the program is, unfortunately, not working as effectively as you intended. And, in the process, veterans are being left behind.

We must not lose sight, however, of the fact that veterans continue to need the special job training services that the Veterans Employment and Training Service and its state-based Disabled Veterans Outreach Program Specialist (DVOP) and Local Veterans Employment Representative (LVER) system provides.

Regarding DVOPs and LVERs, AMVETS believes it is important that states continue to be required to hire veterans for these positions, as provided under current law. For decades, LVERs and DVOPs have been the cornerstone of employment services for veterans throughout the United States employment service system. Part of the reason is that these individuals are veterans advocating for veterans.

We object to the provision in H.R. 4015 that would change this principle and allow States to hire veterans for these positions only “to the extent practicable.” I’ve often heard it said that the heart and soul of VETS are the dedicated DVOPs and LVERs tasked with facing the employment challenges of hard-to-place veterans. These are the individuals who help form the bridge and effect a smooth transition of military servicemembers to the civilian workforce. In our view, these people should be veterans.

Another concern we have with the legislation is criteria that would qualify an individual to serve as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor for veterans employment. H.R. 4015 would only allow an individual to serve as Deputy Assistant Secretary who had previously served five consecutive years of service in the federal executive branch immediately preceding appointment.

Now if the effort is to establish someone as Deputy Assistant Secretary with institutional process knowledge, such limitations might be appropriate. If what we're looking for, however, is a more responsive organization, the need may be, at some future time, for someone with expertise outside of government, perhaps in marketing or organizational management or information technology or in serving veterans. Flexibility should reside with the administration to choose, as is the current option, an individual from a broader community of skills than might be found in the 5-year class of the federal bureaucracy. We do not intend our criticism to be pejorative toward dedicated federal employees, nor, however, do we wish to limit an administration's choice for this important position.

AMVETS strongly supports the incentive programs outlined in H.R. 4015. Starting an incentive initiative for state employment services is a good idea and would do much to enhance the current system. There is currently no system in place through which comparisons can be drawn between state programs so that successful ones can be rewarded. DOLVETS must develop meaningful performance standards in order to promote successful outcomes and enliven its activity.

AMVETS also supports the provisions in H.R. 4015 that strive to make the employment services delivery system more flexible. Clearly, we need to ensure that all veterans receive priority of service and that the programs designed to assist them work as intended by Congress. This effort requires federal monitoring and accountability, which can only be done if the program is administered under iterative review.

While implementation of performance standards and measurements will definitely help, there is no need to have a one-size-fits-all approach for activities in each of the 50 states. Clear standards that measure the program's implementation in terms of outcome instead of process can allow for flexibility. And flexibility is important because states are different and may have different approaches to satisfying the needs of local employers as well as different types of veterans who may need employment help.

AMVETS supports provisions in H.R. 4015 to raise employer awareness of the benefits found in hiring veterans. The men and women who have served in the military have a great number

of skills to offer the private sector. It is important to note, however, that past surveys have indicated that nearly one of every five employers never considered recruiting veterans. In addition, past surveys reveal that more than 50 percent of surveyed employers indicated that even if they wanted to hire a veteran, they did not know whom to contact. An effective marketing program can dramatically lift the opportunities available to veterans on separation.

AMVETS also strongly supports provisions in H.R. 4015 that would carry the priority of service for veterans to all job and job training programs of the Department of Labor. It is important to recognize that Congress has determined that our nation has a responsibility to meet the employment and training needs of veterans assuring that veterans receive priority of service. This directive represents one good way to help accomplish the goal.

On one related point, AMVETS is extremely disappointed with the proposal in the president's budget to transfer Veterans Employment and Training Service programs from DOL to VA. We believe this transfer is ill advised. DOL knows the labor market. That's its business, and it knows better than anyone where the jobs are. VA does not have the capability or the assets to support employment programs. Moreover, the department already faces serious challenges in providing timely health care and reducing a backlog of nearly 600,000 claims. Moving VETS programs to VA may change some "titles," but it does nothing to better serve veterans.

Another disappointment is the administration's failure to request funding for the National Veterans' Training Institute. This Training Institute (NVTI) administers training programs unavailable elsewhere and should be funded at a level adequate to ensure training is continued within a constantly changing veterans environment. Failure to fund this mission sets up a situation where people are led to believe they're going to get some real employment help, but the reality is otherwise. That would be the wrong thing to do.

Finally, as the Subcommittee is looking at these chapters of Title 38, AMVETS encourages you to reestablish an exemption of VA compensation and pension from income eligibility requirements in all federal programs. We note, for example, that certain veterans have been denied access to HUD's low-income senior assisted housing program because their sole income of social security and VA disability compensation was above the program's threshold.

Had HUD not counted VA compensation as income, eligibility would have been granted. It is incomprehensible that a nation's payment of veterans disability compensation would stand as a barrier to improving the quality of life for those injured in military service. America's aging disabled veterans deserve better in this case and others, and we urge Congress to promptly eliminate the inclusion of VA compensation as income determining eligibility for federal programs.

Mr. Chairman, in summary, we believe the issues surrounding veterans' employment and training are clearly solvable. We do not believe Congress and the administration should segregate veterans to a single agency.

The job and job-training programs should continue to be managed and run by the Department of Labor. We have confidence that the current DOLVETS management team is fully competent to implement needed reforms. Indeed, we are encouraged by recent words to AMVETS from the Deputy Secretary of Labor reiterating Labor's commitment to priority services for veterans and confirming Labor's obligation to consider veterans a primary constituency of the Department.

It is evident that all parties agree there is a need to renew outreach efforts to potential employers. It is also agreed that veterans continue to be a national treasure. And it is agreed that we need to do a better job introducing veterans to employers. The bill at hand moves us in the right direction on all these matters, and we trust you will make it the final agreement.

AMVETS looks forward to working with you and others in Congress to ensure we help meet the needs of America's veterans and their families. We have much to do, but we are encouraged in knowing our work will help determine the future of our nation and the world around us. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to present our comments on this important legislation.