

VFW National Commander to Congress: 'Congress Must End Sequestration!'

Today's testimony caps the 2015 VFW Legislative Conference

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WASHINGTON – The National Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. John W. Stroud led this morning's testimony before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees with the important topic of sequestration.

“The VFW has continually warned Congress that sequestration will have devastating effects on veterans programs and DOD's readiness and quality-of-life programs,” said Stroud. “There is no guarantee that VA will be exempt moving forward, and if not removed, DOD will be hit especially hard. Commanders will not have the resources necessary to train for and quickly respond to current and emerging threats. Left unchecked, DOD will have to reduce its quality-of-life programs, this is unacceptable! Furthermore, other agencies, like the Department of Labor, will be forced to reduce funding for the programs they provide directly to veterans. Congress must end sequestration!”

Stroud went on to recognize the work of the new 114th Congress, but reminded its members there is still much work to be done, and cooperation and compromise are vital to our nation's ability to successfully care for its veterans.

The Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014 (VACAA), legislation championed in part by the VFW after last year's VA controversy, served to illustrate Stroud's call for continued cooperation between the VA and Congress. The Act provided immediate funding to improve access for veterans who were waiting for medical appointments and improve VA's own internal capacity. However, continued and proper funding must continue. Without it, the lives of countless veterans will be at risk.

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“This Act has afforded VA the ability to make much needed progress in addressing its health care access issues, and the VFW will work tirelessly to ensure VA is a good steward of those resources. However, Congress should not allow itself to believe that this one-time infusion of funding will solve all of VA’s capacity issues,” Stroud explained. “Nor should VA prematurely determine that not all VACCA funds will or can be spent where congressionally mandated.

“It is too early in the implementation of the Choice provision for VA to fully understand the resources it needs. VFW believes, however, that for VA to meet the ever-changing needs of veterans, some flexibility must be provided to allow the transfer of funds from one account to another. There is a compromise to be found where VA can justify and move funds based on facts and trends, and where Congress can fence funding for certain programs to ensure their legislative intent is carried out. The VFW encourages Congress and VA to work together to find a reasonable solution both sides can agree to.”

Stroud went on to note the many challenges the VA system still faces includes the continuously expanding number of enrolled veterans, under-resourcing, systemic malfeasances, and a general culture that is resistant to change. He also called attention to an ongoing survey among VFW members which reports that while VFW members are generally satisfied with VA care, they continue to experience unreasonably long wait times.

The Veterans Choice Program was also a focus of the VFW’s testimony. An internal report based on veterans’ feedback on VA care revealed to the VFW that eligibility requirements established under VACAA for geographic inaccessibility do not align with the realities of traveling to a VA medical facility. To determine geographic eligibility, VACAA requires VA to use the geodesic distance between a veteran’s residence and the nearest VA medical facility.

“Veterans are accustomed to reporting their driving distance when applying for beneficiary travel benefits – one of VA health care’s most popular benefits. Thus, it is illogical to veterans that they can qualify for beneficiary travel of 40 miles, but not qualify for the Veterans Choice Program as a 40-miler. The intent of this provision was to ensure veterans do not travel unreasonably long distances to receive VA health care. However, the geodesic distance a veteran lives from a VA facility does not accurately capture the travel burden that veterans may face,” Stroud explained. “Furthermore, using a metric that veterans feel is misleading only serves to diminish overall patient satisfaction, defeating one of the main goals of the Veterans Choice Program.”

The VFW National Commander went on to note several other concerns with the Veterans Choice Program, female veteran specific health care and the need for continued research on the effects of TBI. He commended Congress on the passage of the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, but urged it to evaluate VA’s process for determining health care eligibility for veterans with less than honorable discharges.

[Read the full testimony here.](#)

Today's testimony caps the 2015 Legislative Conference during which approximately 500 VFW members and leaders convened in our nation's capital to meet with their elected officials to discuss various veterans issues and convey the VFW's expectations.

Other noteworthy events from the conference include:

Senator Bernie Sanders receiving the VFW Congressional Award in recognition of his work in support of and dedication to America's veterans.

Through the newly launched VFW-SVA Legislative Fellowship program, student veteran fellows accompanied VFW leadership to meetings with their respective state's elected officials.

A VFW-hosted dinner at the National Press Club for 60 wounded warriors and caregivers from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, along with their families.

The VFW announced Adam Densmore of Aurora, Colo., as the national Voice of Democracy first-place winner and recipient of the T.C. Selman Memorial Scholarship Award in the amount of \$30,000.

Ethan Schroeder of New Kensington, Pa., was named the first-place winner of the Patriot's Pen contest, earning him a \$5,000 award.

Photo: VFW National Commander John W. Stroud testifies before a joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees.