



***The American Legion
Department of California
Scott F. McKee
Department Service Officer's Testimony
Before the
State of California
Little Hoover Commission
April 23, 2013***

The American Legion was formed in 1919 right after WW I. As stated in the preamble to the Constitution of the American Legion, "For God and Country we associate ourselves together for the following purposes: To uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America; to maintain law and order; to foster and perpetuate a one-hundred percent Americanism; to preserve the memories and incidents of our association in the Great Wars; to inculcate a sense of individual obligation to the community, state and nation; to combat the autocracy of both the classes and the masses; to make right the master of might; to promote peace and good will on earth; to safeguard and transmit to posterity the principles of justice, freedom and democracy; to consecrate and sanctify our comradeship by our devotion to mutual helpfulness."

Out of this formation the American Legion stands on four pillars: Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, National Security, Americanism, and Children & Youth. Each of these pillars encompasses a variety of programs that benefit our nation's veterans, its service members, their families, the youth of America and ordinary citizens. These programs make a difference in hundreds of thousands of lives each year.

The First and most important of the four pillars of the American Legion is Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, which is dedicated to the timely and compassionate delivery of benefits – including health-care services – earned by U.S. military veterans. One of the division's marquee programs is the Department Service Officer School, which provides accredited training for Legion service officers throughout the nation. The curriculum for these schools includes education on veteran's law, as well as changes in the veterans-benefits claims and appeals process. The Legion provides staff representation at the Board of Veterans Appeals in Washington D.C. to help veterans appealing a decision to navigate through the maze of regulations and paperwork relevant to their cases. The VA&R field-service staff conducts regular site visits to VA medical facilities, and produces the "System Worth Saving" report for Congress and others. The division is the Legion's eyes and ears in Washington D.C. about all issues related to VA, particularly benefits and health care. The division also offers representation to veterans dealing with discharge disputes and correction of military records; and administers the Legion's involvement with VA Volunteer Services, which provides countless hours of cost-free staffing at VA facilities nationwide.

Based upon Veterans Administration Statistics as of September 2012 California leads the Nation with 1.865 million veterans with 1.389 million of these being wartime veterans, followed

by Texas with 1.675 million veterans, and Florida with 1.543 million veterans. This large amount of veterans are seeking their just earned benefits for defending this Nation in both war and peace, which starts with WW II, Korea, Vietnam, Grenada/ Nicaragua, Persian Gulf, to Iraq/Afghanistan. Included in this demand are their dependent, which even go back to the Civil War. The American Legion being the largest wartime Veterans Organization in the world stands at the forefront trying to meet the needs of our veterans throughout the United States, the World, and specially the State of California, with the largest population of veterans and dependents. We outreach to this populace whether they are a member or not. Our services are free (at no cost) to all veterans "*Honorably Discharged*" or granted a "*General Discharge under Honorable Conditions*." In order to make this happen we garner the funding through our membership and fundraising. Not one dime of taxpayer money comes to the American Legion to take care of this most vital need of our Veterans and their dependents.

In the State of California, as the Department Service Officer I oversee three VA Regional Offices co-located in Oakland, Los Angeles, and San Diego, along with fourteen VA Medical Centers and Clinics throughout the State. We employ 10 VA Inspector General Accredited Service Officers, four Administration Support Staff (also are VA IG Accredited), nine Hospital Representatives (also are VA IG Accredited), and twenty-eight, non-paid VA Voluntary Staff co-located in the various VA Medical Centers and Clinics. These dedicated Legionnaires devote most if not all of their time to assisting veterans and dependents in the true call of President Abraham Lincoln in "*caring for him who hath borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan*." Many of our local post in the communities appoint a Legionnaire on both the Legion side and the various Auxiliaries of the American Legion volunteer Post Service officer, who also aides our veterans locally in dealing with the VA. These are appointed positions and are not accredited with the VA IG. They do hold an important position tin the community as steering the veteran and/or the dependent in the right direction when seeking veteran's benefits.

The State of California has fifty-eight counties covering 163,707 square miles, with the greatest concentration of veterans in Southern California. The VA Regional Offices are given jurisdiction over three different areas of the state based loosely on veteran population. San Diego VARO covers four counties, Los Angeles VARO covers six counties, and Oakland has the greatest amount 43 counties, with the last five counties on the north-eastern side of the state being covered by the VA RO in Reno Nevada. Those living in the cities and the urban areas have greater access to services because of their proximity to the VA Regional Offices, VA Medical or Clinics, as well as the County Veteran Service Offices. The American Legion Department of California has about 120 cross VA IG Accredited Service Officers located in many of the County Veteran Service Offices throughout the State. This partnership is vital not only to show the number of veterans and their dependents seeking assistance but due to the vast distances they are able to meet some of the needs of our veterans seeking these vital benefits. The American Legion like the Federal, State, County, and local governments have limited resources in order to begin to provide these services. With over 1.3 million claims adjudicated and approximately

980,000 claims being filed not one entity in the various Veteran Service Organizations or government can manage this without being partners together.

Here are the numbers July 1, 2012 – March 31, 2013, which bear this out. Remember this is just the American Legion VA & R Division in the State of California, which includes our partnership with the various counties throughout the state.

• Interviews in American Legion Offices, which include Counties -	9555
• VA Ratings Received -	1,322
• VA File Reviews -	9704
• Telephone In – (Phone Calls are No longer short in duration)	19,598
• Telephone Out - (Phone Calls are No longer short in duration)	5,613
• Telephone Total -	25,158
• 1 st Class Mail In -	32,491
• From VA Correspondence (Flimsies) In -	47,380
• 1 st Class Mail Out -	34,829
• VA Correspondence (Flimsies) Out to Counties -	49,116
• Total Correspondence Handled -	163,816
• Claims Filed -	15,714
• BDN Computer Log-In -	33,421
• 646' VBA Claims Written Brief -	229
• VBA Travel Board/Video Hearings with VBA Judges -	79
• New Power of Attorneys-	3,485

Here are the Federal Dollar Amounts returned to the State of California through the VA & R Offices of the American Legion and with the help of the County Veteran Service Offices.

JULY 1, 2011 – June 30, 2012

✓ Oakland	\$253.73 Million
✓ Los Angeles	\$115.88 Million
✓ <u>San Diego</u>	<u>\$202.63 Million</u>
✓ Total	\$572.250 Million
✓ American Legion Forecast or July 2013-June 2014 -	\$858.375 Million

This money in Federal Dollars does not only benefit the State of California but it is vital to assisting our Veterans and their Dependence with a greater quality of life. The aftermath of war continues long after the Soldier, Sailor, Marine, Airman, Coast Guardsmen, and National Guardsmen return home and leave the service. Their dependents also are requiring more just earned benefits as these veterans are usually the bread earners in the family are diminished in maintain the quality of life they had prior to deployment. Not only does the VA at the Federal level need to reach out to the dependents that often are the care givers to these veterans but are

the widows and orphans that we feel have served or are still serving alongside our veterans. Even though our WW II and Korean War Veterans are passing away you can see by the numbers the demand for benefits are rising and not diminishing.

As the Department Service Officer for the American Legion California to meet this challenge we propose and have begun is educating our members, military service members (active, reserve, and their dependents), the veterans and their dependents, and even the general public of the experiences, which lead to requirement for these vital VA benefits, which are available. This awareness to as many as possible will gain a greater understanding of those needs as our veterans re-enter, work, and live in our communities. Oftentimes our returning veterans no matter what war or conflict they come out of are looked at as outcasts as they transition back into civilian life. Some of the public and even the government does not know or what to make of us, the veterans and what we experienced.

Recently I attended a Community College Veterans Student Association meeting and was asked to speak on the VA Benefits available as well as to why a veteran should join our organization. One of the questions I asked; “By a show of hands how many here are veterans?” The response was not one of these young veterans raised their hands. I then asked them; “Who do you think is a veteran is and why don’t you think you’re a veteran?” Their answer to this; “We’re not old enough to be veterans, we’re too young.” I informed them that the day they raised their hands to take that oath to join the Armed Forces of the United States they became a veteran. They laughed and shied away and sad part was their mind set was still they weren’t a veteran and therefore not entitled to VA benefits of to join the various Veteran Service Organizations. Here is where it is vital that as many as possible understand they are veterans and they are entitled to just earned benefits due to their service in the US Armed Forces.

The priorities of our veterans are as follows: The WW II and Korean War Veterans – end of life, burial, memorial, and survivor benefits, as well as sustainable, shelter and geriatric care. The Vietnam Veterans – VA treatment for herbicide exposure, financial support due to disabilities, which prevent employment of reduce the ability to be employed. The Persian Gulf, Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans – 1) shelter 2) sustainable employment 3) Education 4) family care 5) healthcare for themselves and family. What is unique in the interviews with the veteran college students was not so academic advancement for a Bachelor’s Degree or greater, but a steady pay check under the new GI Bill until they can find sustainable employment. Many of our return veterans suffer more unemployment then the greater populace of their age groups. They are more likely to be homeless during their transition from active military to civilian life then the greater populace of their age group. The great question now is how do together meet these need to those who have served this country so unselfishly/? We believe the government can’t do it alone but must partner with the various Veteran Service Organizations. This includes not only state, county, and local governments but must have the Federal Government onboard along with the Department of Defense and the various Branches of the Military Services. It must be an all

hands approach and the Department of Defense must better communicate with all of us when it comes to taking care of our veterans.

At present the American Legion Department of California Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division has implemented a VA Education Training Program for the Posts, Districts, Areas, veterans, dependents, and general public. We have now had two pilot programs in Lakewood and Santa Ana. They were full day VA Seminars, which cover VA Healthcare, VA Benefits (VBA), GI Bill/Education Benefits, and end of life or VA Memorial and Survivor Benefits. The classes usually begin around 9:00 am and end around 3:00 pm. We extensively cover the subject matter and allow as many questions as possible without delving into each personal issue. So far it has had great success with constructive feedback. Our hope as these seminars are presented more often throughout the state, our participants will be empowered through education to file a more complete claim. Due to the size of the state the American Legion has divided the state into six areas in order to make it more manageable to meet with as many Legionnaires as possible. I make the effort to move around to different locations within these areas to get the word to many of our veterans as possible. So far with the limited resources this has shown to be good grass roots effort to educate as much as possible in the hopes the individual Legionnaires will spread the word within their own communities.

At present we need more staffing and better trained staffing as the VA Laws and Regulations are very fluid and change often and sometimes dramatically. In the future we hope that our membership will grow along with the new VA & R Foundation soliciting large amounts of resources in order to meet the needs of as many veterans and their dependents as possible. With increased funding and resources we would like to see a minimum of three accredited Service Officers in each of the three VA RO's, along with full time paid staff in every VA Medical Center and Clinic, a fleet of vehicles, which are equipped as portable service offices and a reserve staff to equip them and travel to the Universities, Colleges, rural areas of the state, attend Veteran Standdown and events. For our elderly veterans and/or shut-ins the ability to make house calls. We would not stop there but add to our program the various fully researched PTSD/ TBI programs out there that are proven to bring our mentally disabled veterans home. More localized Rehab outreach for those who were physically injured or maimed in war.

Realistically The American Legion or the other VSO's and the State of California can't be expected to do this alone but as communicating partners and team members we can begin to make this happen. Yes it's a tall order and resources may have to be redirected as needed but can we do any less for those of us who gave some and the legacy left behind for those who gave all? Remember many of these are our Dads, Moms, Aunts, Uncles, Sons, Daughters, Sisters Brothers, and our neighbors. They will return to our communities, raise families, work and they will continue to serve because of their devotion to this Country. How less can we who have served with them or have been elected to serve our fellow citizens.