

VFW Calls on Congress to 'Meet the Challenge' for Veterans

National Commander presents the challenges facing veterans during a joint hearing on Capitol Hill

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WASHINGTON — With a sea of member caps behind him, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Commander-in-Chief Duane Sarmiento delivered the VFW's legislative priorities during testimony before the 118th Congress during a special joint hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs held today.

Sarmiento began by thanking legislators for all their work in passing the Sgt. 1st Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our PACT Act of 2022, or the PACT Act, the most comprehensive toxic exposure legislation in American history. In a demonstration of impact, Sarmiento started by asking each group of veterans affected by the signing of the PACT Act in 2022 to stand. As VFW members from the Vietnam War, Gulf War and post-911 era stood, they were met with applause from those assembled in the Dirksen Senate Office Building chamber where the hearing took place.

"This is who the VFW is and who your work is helping today," said Sarmiento.

Along with highlighting the much-needed help the PACT Act is providing veterans, Sarmiento shed light on the problem with predatory claims consulting protectives. Unlike VA-accredited VFW Service Officers who provide VA claims assistance free to veterans, service members and serving families, "Claim Sharks" are unaccredited consultants who use contracts that include a commitment by the veteran to pay hefty fees or a significant portion of their increased benefits. Sarmiento stated the VFW strongly supports the GUARD VA Benefits Act, which would reinstate penalties for charging veterans unauthorized fees for submitting VA claims. Sarmiento explained Claim Sharks are spending millions of dollars to lobby against the GUARD Act in D.C., stalling a federal fix.

"It's distasteful that these Claim Sharks take money from veterans. But it's disgusting that they take money from survivors," Sarmiento said.

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To assist veterans before they leave service, the VFW's Benefits Delivery at Discharge, or BDD, program is one of the main efforts in providing free VA claims help to service members in their transition.

Sarmiento explained how every year, VFW accredited representatives assist approximately 20,000 service members with BDD claims before they leave the military, meaning they can receive benefits almost immediately upon separation. However, access to accredited representatives for BDD is inconsistent.

"That's why the VFW highly recommends passage of the TAP Promotion Act, which will ensure all service members have direct access to accredited representatives during TAP classes," said Sarmiento. "The VFW commends VA for starting down this path in January, but this only reinforces the need to make this the law."

Continuing with the topic, Sarmiento bridged to veterans in crisis. He discussed how those transitioning out of the military, particularly junior enlisted service members, are at a higher risk of unemployment, homelessness and suicide. He then urged Congress to pass the Not Just a Number Act, directing VA to report on all its programs and veterans in crisis to identify the root causes that lead to veterans being in dire circumstances.

"After the Navy, I spent 20 years as a police officer. If you've got the gun in your mouth, it's too late," said Sarmiento. "We need to understand what happens before a veteran gets to that point."

Sarmiento addressed a long-standing VFW legislative priority – ending the practice of offsetting DOD retirement and VA disability pay for those forced to medically retire due to combat-related injuries. Introduced in the House of Representatives last year, the Major Richard Star Act, gained overwhelming bipartisan and bicameral support from the 117th Congress, but failed to move forward.

"We must pass the Richard Star Act, so veterans receive the full benefits they have earned through their blood and sweat in their service to our country," said Sarmiento.

The bill is named after U.S. Army Maj. Richard Star who was forced to medically retire after he was diagnosed with cancer in 2018 and died in 2021.

One area close to Sarmiento that he urged Congress to address is reforming the VA's Foreign Medical Program.

"I'm a Filipino Italian American Navy veteran and I still have many friends and family who live overseas," said Sarmiento. "Many are veterans who have earned care and benefits through their service. We know there will never be the same level of care outside the U.S, but what many overseas veterans face is indifference and apathy."

Sarmiento explained how many veterans living overseas see their medical care reduced. Compounded by challenges with direct deposit, postal services and access to military bases, veterans find themselves cut off from the VA care and benefits they earned through their service.

“The current Foreign Medical Program is a riddle wrapped in a puzzle because experiences vary wildly depending on where you are and who you know,” said Sarmiento. “We have to provide consistent access to care and support to veterans overseas.”

Sarmiento’s final segment of his remarks started by reminding congress of its obligations to the fallen and those still in uniform.

“Former President Calvin Coolidge once stated, ‘The nation which forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten,’” quoted Sarmiento.

Sarmiento talked about the need to support U.S. service members still defending American interests abroad. He referenced visits he’s made within the past year, from observing firsthand the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency mission in Southeast Asia, to honoring American cemeteries overseas, to his factfinding mission in Europe learning about the challenges the Department of Defense and its allies and partners face in the Eastern Hemisphere.

“I’ve heard firsthand about the needs of today’s force, which is why those who are fighting terrorism in the Middle East or deterring aggression on the Eastern flank of NATO deserve proper recognition for their service on behalf of a grateful nation,” said Sarmiento.

Sarmiento finished his remarks by thanking both veterans’ affairs committees and says he’s looking forward to the future.

“The VFW thanks you for all of your hard work and the work yet to come. Thank you for the opportunity to share the VFW’s priorities as we enter our next 125 years in service to our veterans,” said Sarmiento.

Video of today’s testimony is available to watch and share [here](#).

Read Commander Sarmiento’s full testimony [here](#).