

H.R. 4312, H.R. 6409, and H.R. 6420

Sep 05, 2018

Statement of

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Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Before the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

With Respect To

H.R. 4312, H.R. 6409, and H.R. 6420

WASHINGTON, DC

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Esty, and members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and its Auxiliary, thank you for the opportunity to provide our remarks on legislation pending before the subcommittee.

H.R. 4312, Fallen Warrior Battlefield Cross Memorial Act

The VFW supports this bill, which would prevent the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) from prohibiting the display of a battlefield cross in a VA national cemetery.

This past year, VFW members from VFW Post 3345 in Strongsville, Ohio, erected a battlefield cross by the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery's chapel as a sign of respect for their fallen comrades buried at the cemetery. They were in dismay when the then director wrongly removed the memorial because it depicted violence. To VFW members, all of whom have deployed into harm's way in a foreign land, the battlefield cross has a special significance. It is used to honor and remember our brothers and sisters who have made the

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ultimate sacrifice.

The VFW is glad VA reversed the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery director's decision and issued a notice to all national cemetery directors entitled "Acceptance of Donations Featuring the Fallen Soldier Display," which makes clear VA's policy to allow the display of the battlefield cross at any VA national cemetery. VFW Post 3345 members report that the Ohio Western Reserve National Cemetery instance was resolved within three days and has not reoccurred. For that reason, the VFW does not believe this legislation is needed, but agrees with the intent of ensuring veterans can continue to honor their loved ones.

H.R. 6409, Honoring Veterans' Families Act

The VFW supports this legislation, which would authorize VA to properly recognize the surviving spouse and dependents of our nation's veterans, and has two recommendations to improve it.

Current law does not permit VA to replace a veteran's government-furnished headstone to inscribe the deceased veteran's surviving spouse or dependent who is interred with the veteran. This bill would authorize VA to replace a veteran's headstone to ensure it rightfully honors the spouse or dependent that is laid to rest with the veteran.

It would also authorize VA to replace a headstone that has been used to mark the grave of a spouse or dependent that precedes the veteran. However, the bill does not specifically authorize VA to replace a private marker for the spouse or dependent, or provide a government-furnished headstone to a spouse or dependent who precedes the veteran. To prevent veterans from bearing the cost of a private headstone to honor the veteran's spouse or dependent, whom the veteran plans to join in interment, the VFW urges the subcommittee to authorize VA to provide government-furnished headstones to such individuals. Currently, VA lacks the authority to furnish a headstone for an eligible spouse or dependent who precedes an eligible veteran in death and is interred in a private or tribal cemetery.

Regardless, this bill must be amended to specifically authorize VA to replace a spouse's or dependent's private headstone with a government-furnished headstone. Without such authority, veterans who wish to be interred with their loved ones who preceded them may be afforded the opportunity to obtain government-furnished headstones, which have become identifying symbols to mark the final resting places of our nation's heroes.

The VFW is also glad this bill would establish a retroactive effective date to authorize VA to properly recognize a spouse or dependent who is already interred with an eligible veteran, but lacks the proper recognition on the veteran's headstone. The VFW would, however, recommend that the subcommittee amend this bill to align the effective date with Public Law 115-136, which corrected the disparity of eligibility for headstones between spouses and

dependents. It authorized VA to provide headstones for certain spouses and dependents who die on or after November 11, 1998. The VFW urges the subcommittee to establish the same effective date for this authority.

H.R. 6420, to establish a grant program to conduct cemetery research and produce educational materials for the Veterans Legacy Program

The VFW supports this bill, which would support and enhance the VA Veterans Legacy Program.

Perpetuating the memory and history of our dead is one of the VFW's founding principles. That is why the VFW has collaborated with Ace Hardware to honor veterans by giving out 1 million American-made flags nationwide. This past Memorial Day, 2,300 VFW posts throughout the country used the donated flags to mark and honor veteran's graves.

The Veterans Legacy Program ensures the memories and stories of the brave men and women who have worn our nation's uniform are preserved in perpetuity. While it is still being fully developed, the program provides an avenue for students, descendants, friends, and fellow veterans to learn about the contributions veterans who are interred at VA national cemeteries made to their communities and the country. The VFW is a strong supporter of this program and has worked with the National Cemetery Administration to improve and expand it.

This bill would establish a grant to help VA conduct research and produce educational materials for the program, which are the most labor-intensive and often difficult parts of the program. The VFW believes that such a grant would expedite the research process and ensure this important program is expanded to all VA national cemeteries as soon as possible.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am prepared to take any questions you or the subcommittee members may have.