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**WHITE PAPER FOR A COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL VETERANS
AND MILITARY FAMILIES POLICY FOR THE USA
PROPOSED BY: VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES FOR
PROGRESS**

PURPOSE: To address the needs of Veterans, Active Duty Military (including Guard and Reserve), and their families regarding Coming Home Issues for the 21st Century.

Recent conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere require a new approach by Congress, the Executive Branch including Federal Agencies (DOD and VA specifically) as well as state and local governments, to address the needs of those serving, veterans, and their families. In order to effectively resolve these needs, a comprehensive policy is required to prioritize and implement legislative, administrative, and funding initiatives.

VMFP proposes a new proactive approach to address the areas of outreach and advocacy, physical healthcare, mental healthcare, educational benefits, job opportunities, housing assistance, and the eradication of homelessness among Veterans and their families. VMFP also recommends the establishment of strong partnerships and coalitions with traditional Congressionally chartered Veteran Service Organizations (VSO's) and other veteran and military family advocacy groups to educate and involve the media and general citizenry to focus and help implement the National Policy for our veterans and their families.

Issue 1 Veteran and Military Family Outreach and Advocacy

Recommendation: The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs should work together from recruitment through discharge to educate and advise the active duty, guard, and reserve personnel of their benefits and of the benefits to which their family members are entitled. The VA's vet centers and advocates, VSO's, and state, county, and city certified veteran assistance staff should be empowered to represent the veterans in all consultations with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Assigned advocates, principal family members, and caregivers who wish to represent military personnel and veterans should be entitled to do so and treated with dignity and respect by DOD and VA medical boards and staff.

Issue 2 Physical Healthcare

Recommendation: The DOD and the VA should work together closely to reduce the backlog of disability claims processing, benefit approvals, and funds disbursement to the veterans. Every effort should be made to understand the physical and psychological impact of injuries such as loss of limb, burns and traumatic brain injury (TBI). These

traumas require comprehensive screening and diagnosis, immediate treatment, and proper follow-up care. Legislative remedies should include partnering with regional, state, county, and municipal medical facilities to assist the VA with professional staff and expertise. If treatment for burn injuries and traumatic brain injury (TBI) require medical specialty treatment that the VA cannot provide, the veteran should be allowed to seek care outside the VA system and be fully covered.

Personnel should not be re-deployed to combat zones unless they clear several physical exams by medical examining boards representing all branches of the Military Service, and are shown to be physically fit for service.

Issue 3 Mental Healthcare

Recommendation: Every effort should be made by the DOD and the VA to recognize, understand, prioritize, and treat traumatic brain injury (TBI), post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), personality disorders, depression, or other mental health diagnoses brought about by physical and/or psychological trauma experienced while in the service. Legislation should be passed to direct the VA to partner with local community mental health centers to provide mental health outreach, counseling and care. Research and development legislation should be passed to implement and fund such technologies as telemedicine and telepsychology that will allow the VA and the DOD to expand this capability and the delivery of service into rural areas.

The Congress should pass legislation to prevent the VA from disqualifying a soldier for benefits based on a finding of pre-existing mental health reasons until several medical exams are administered by the VA and a medical panel outside the VA. Personnel should not be re-deployed to combat zones unless they clear several psychological and mental exams by medical examining boards representing all branches of the Military Service, and are shown to be mentally fit for service.

Issue 4 Educational Benefits

Recommendation: Congress and the Administration must implement the 21st Century GI Bill of Rights, including Veterans educational benefits, which provide full compensation for tuition, room, board and a monthly living stipend at a public institution of higher education. The benefit covers a two-year degree program, a four-year degree program, vocational education and training programs for apprentice and journeyman positions in labor unions.

Persons who have attained a degree from a higher educational institution prior to or during active duty will be provided full tuition, books, and fees towards a higher degree in their chosen field at the same level provided above.

In the case of a veteran who is partially or fully disabled as a result of a physical or mental condition and who chooses not to use the educational benefit, VMFP recommends the benefit will be transferable to a family member (spouse, son or daughter) to improve the financial stability of the entire family.

National Guard and Reserve personnel will also be eligible for full benefits if they are activated and deployed for at least 15 months, or for any period in support of a war effort.

Issue 5 Job Opportunities

Recommendation: Private and public sector employers should make every effort to hire qualified veterans and military family members and give them preference over applicants who have not served in the armed forces. Human resources departments should be directed to hire qualified veterans and military family members. Employers should be encouraged to offer training for those applicants who meet minimum qualifications including their military specialty or rating but need additional coursework for advancements. State employment agencies shall offer proactive assistance, counseling, recruitment, and other employment services to veterans.

Congress should enact new legislation providing tax incentives and wage assistance to companies and small businesses that hire and train veterans, members of the Guard and Reserves, and military spouses, and should ensure existing legislation covers these individuals as a targeted group. Diverse labor unions and regional labor councils should expand job opportunities in their apprentice and journeymen programs specifically for veterans, members of the Guard and Reserves, and their families.

Issue 6 Housing Assistance

Recommendation: US Department of Veterans Affairs should make every effort to inform veterans and their family members of the eligibility requirements for federal and state VA home loan programs. Veterans Affairs should also inform them of the requirements of other mortgage lending institution programs and the risks of these programs regarding foreclosures. The VA should develop a rental assistance program for veterans and families who cannot afford to purchase a home and need assistance to meet monthly rent payments. Where rent control laws currently exist, VA should encourage state and local governments to give preference to veterans and military families.

In the event of any base closing, the DOD should make a portion of any vacated housing available, at a rate that is affordable, to veterans and military families. This covenant should be made part and parcel to the conveyance of the property, whether to a local public development agency, a private developer, or the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Issue 7 Eradication of Homelessness among Veterans and Military Families

Recommendation: The Congress of the United States, the Executive Branch and state and local governments should make a concentrated effort to eradicate the causes of, and to initiate, fund, and implement solutions for, homelessness among veterans and military families.

Issue 8 Military Families

Recommendation: The Congress of the United States, The Executive Branch and state and local governments should recognize and implement policies and legislation that address the needs of military families.

VMFP supports the following initiatives of the Obama/Biden administration as they relate to providing compensation to family members/caregivers of veterans rated totally disabled from service-connected disabilities. These initiatives include but are not limited to the following:

1. Expand the Family Medical Leave Act
2. Encourage states to adopt paid leave
3. Mandate a reasonable amount of paid sick leave
4. Protect against caregiver discrimination

Additionally, VMFP endorses:

1. Education, training, and support for caregivers of returning veterans suffering from PTSD, TBI, substance abuse, or other health issues
2. Treatment and counseling for family members/caregivers suffering from PTSD
3. Wounded warrior respite care
4. Relocation assistance for caregivers of wounded warriors
5. Legal aid, marriage and family counseling for veterans and families transitioning to civilian life
6. Childcare assistance
7. Mentoring and tutoring for children of deployed service members
8. Retrofitting properties to accommodate disabled wounded warriors

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