

Senate Veterans Affairs Speech

Madame Chair and Members. My name is Dr. Kristy Janigo, and I served in the North Dakota Army National Guard from 2000-2006. I was a sergeant and a squad leader with the one HUNDRED thirty second Quartermaster Company. I am the American Legion Department of Minnesota Legislative Chair.

I ask you today to look at veterans differently. As you consider bills this session, to LOOK at funding veterans issues an investment in disparity reduction. Nationally, the U.S. military is 45% people of color making it one of the most diverse organizations in existence. And that happened organically. People of various backgrounds want to serve. Did you know that of Minnesota's 303,000 veterans, eight percent of us are female? That's 24,240 of my sisters, and one of them is The American Legion's Statewide Commander Jennifer Havlick.

By now, I hope you have all seen this. It's the Commanders Task Force booklet, a carefully constructed platform of the issues that are most pressing to the veterans and the military community, endorsed by the commanders of the top veteran service organizations in this state including the Legion.

The suicide rate among veterans is significantly higher than the rest of the population, including for female veterans. The Legion stresses buddy checks nationally because we've found peer support to be an important tactic in suicide prevention. But we need your help with this. We ask you to support state

funding to the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs for suicide prevention.

Eight percent of Minnesota Veterans are African American, Hispanic, Asian, Indigenous or a race other than White. Yet, a hugely disproportionate percentage of veterans experiencing homelessness in this state, about 30%, are Black. And there are female veterans with children experiencing homelessness as well. We need your help to end veteran homelessness in Minnesota through funding for our nonprofit partners doing the work.

We are asking that the monthly allowance given to sheltered homeless veterans be increased. Despite a large budget surplus, Minnesota encourages homelessness by taking federal benefits income from veterans and others to pay for their shelter. Presently, veterans can enter a shelter and be left with just \$111 a month, OR choose to remain homeless to keep their money to pay bills. Fixing this issue would reduce the number of homeless veterans. Last year, this bill was HF3568/SF3417, led by Catholic Charities. It has bipartisan support and should pass this year in the human services bill.

We need a bonding bill to support the replacement of six buildings at the Hastings Veterans Home, which has become terribly outdated since it began as a mental health hospital in the very early 1900's.

We're asking to amend the Post-9/11 service bonus to ensure all veterans who served are properly recognized. This change should also include the change that we recognize all current Minnesota resident veterans of that time, keeping it in line with all other state Veterans benefits. It is also time to increase the amount of the Disabled Veterans Property Tax Value Exclusion. This is especially necessary with recent skyrocketing of home values. And change the language so surviving spouses can apply within two years of the award of benefits.

There's even more we can do for military families. We're asking for the elimination of vehicle registration fees for Gold Star spouses and children, as well as for 100 percent disabled veterans. These people already have made deep sacrifices on behalf of our federal and state governments.

Veterans do take care of their own. In service organizations like the American Legion, we step in to meet immediate needs and fill gaps left by the government. We use charitable gambling proceeds to IMMEDIATELY address housing and food insecurity, and a number of other needs for veterans who show up at one of our post homes. We also use these funds to support local sports and youth programs. But charitable gambling is taxed heavily, so that is LESS money we can use to serve veterans we know, locally, and our youth. We've been asking for years for a reduction in our charitable gambling taxes so that we can better support our communities.

I invite you to spend time with us March 30 for Veterans Day on the Hill.

Please deliver for us this year. We're asking for a clean, separate Veterans Omnibus Bill this session. Demanding it. Because our issues should not be subject to partisan trading or fights. Thank you for your time.

Kristy Janigo
American Legion Department of Minnesota Legislative Chair