

## California Veterans Caucus Platform

We believe that war or military force must only be used as a last resort. Our military's focus should be responding to humanitarian crises. The United States' military must adhere to the US Constitution and only deploy to foreign soil with the approval of Congress. We must not go to war through unilateral Executive action. We urge full repeal of Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) of 2001 and 2002. We demand any military action in any foreign power's jurisdiction be preceded by a formal war declaration as required by the United States Constitution (Article I, Section 8) and comply with the War Powers Resolution of 1973 (US Code, Title 50, Chapter 33), such war declaration shall not be vague and would specify the foreign power, the reasons and a definitive period of time the war is declared for. We demand Congress to only declare wars that take into consideration renewed threat assessments to American soil and a cost/benefit analysis of existing long-term geopolitical strategies. These actions are necessary to ensure that the sacrifices our service members make are in line with the will of the American people and their sacrifices are towards well-defined, publicly articulated and achievable goals.

We have the best trained and hardest working men and women serving in the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard. Service members work around the clock and sacrifice immeasurably to keep us safe. We must respect and honor service members, veterans and their families both at war, overseas and back home.

### Honor, Respect, & Dignity

- We feel that all active military members, their families, and veterans should be treated with respect and dignity regardless of Age, Race, Sex, Gender Identity, National Origin, Religion, Disability, Pregnancy, Medical Condition, Political Affiliation, Marital Status, Sexual Orientation, Military Rank, Income Level, and Housing Status.
- **We fully support open Transgender service** in the military. They have been willing to put their life on the line for our nation and our military is stronger with their inclusion.
- **Conscientious objectors and whistleblowers** have played an important part in our country's history. They played critical roles in informing American citizens about the on-the-ground truth during war, as The Pentagon Papers revealed during Vietnam. We support the constitutional right service members to file as conscientious objectors without fear of retaliation. We encourage our Congress to continue to review whistleblower laws and procedures to ensure that there is an effective path to call out government wrongdoing, fraud, and waste. Whistleblowing is an important check and balance in a democracy, particularly for departments within the Executive branch. We must ensure that individuals that summon the extraordinary courage and patriotism it takes to blow the whistle on inappropriate government conduct be protected from

retaliation, malicious prosecution, and their claims are thoroughly and objectively investigated.

- We are committed to addressing the **critical issue of sexual assault** of both women and men in the military. It is an unquestionably dishonorable act. We must increase efforts to prevent sexual assault and rape, and aggressively investigate and prosecute all allegations. We insist that the military remove the entire chain of command from investigating and prosecuting claims of rape and sexual harassment. Furthermore, victims must receive timely, appropriate and comprehensive treatment for physical, emotional, and psychological trauma resulting from sexual assault.
- We believe in the need for sensitivity and respect in dealing with Military Sexual Trauma (MST), Adjustment Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), mental disabilities, and physical disabilities at all levels of the Government. We believe all units should train their personnel to recognize the symptoms and encourage those who need it to seek treatment instead of criticizing a service member over an injury or mental health issue.
- We should discourage the longstanding culture of telling servicemembers to not seek treatment in regards to **mental health issues**. We support training for identifying and increasing awareness on Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) in the private workplace along with those required by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and we support providing training to union representatives and human resources professionals about Uniform Services Employment and Readjustment Rights Act (USERRA).
- We support **sensitivity training for all emergency responders** regarding veterans and mental health issues.
- War contributes to climate change and environmental destruction. We call for a drastic change in policy at the Department of Defense (DoD) and encourage a more **balanced, earth friendly and environmentally sound path of preservation**. Although acknowledging the security risk of climate change the DoD continues to be the biggest consumer of fossil fuels in the State of California and its largest polluter. More needs to be done to ensure that our military footprint doesn't leave behind harmful waste that includes toxic metals, radioactive materials, fuel spills, and other pollutants that damage the lives of our service members and families living on or near bases and devastate the livability of areas where our military has conducted war operations. We need to be proactive in establishing practices and procedures that ensure the military are better stewards of the environment and to prevent the billions of dollars wasted cleaning up military sites in the future.

## Military Families

We honor the **sacrifice of military families** who serve alongside our service members. We recognize the unique concerns and challenges they face, especially after many years of continuous deployments. We promote family-friendly policies and champion efforts to care for our military family members, especially for the spouses and children who have to rebuild their lives after the loss, life-altering injury, or disability of a loved one.

- We demand military families having jobs, education, childcare, and healthcare with reliable case management to assist with families needs. This includes rights to professional licensure reciprocity for those military spouses to ease the burden of being assigned to new duty stations. We support expanding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mental health services to veterans' families, including children, parents, siblings and significant others.
- We demand improved access to affordable and high-quality child care services, especially for military families and National Guard members who live off base and have fewer available options. We also support extending the hours of DoD active duty child care facilities to include weekends and after business hours.

## Service Members

- We demand **bank holidays for Service Members** who have to work on a federal holiday after the first-year in-service. This would mean that the Service Member would gain a day off for working on the holiday. If the Service Member is on leave, the federal holiday will not be docked from paid leave.
- We demand allowing **leave time to be accumulated** with a max of 75 days off to be carried over to the next fiscal year without command approval. Troops serving in hostile fire or imminent danger pay areas would be allowed accumulate up to 150 days of leave.
- We are in **strong opposition to any Basic Allowance for Housing cuts**. The full cost of out-of-pocket expense needs to be covered. We believe whenever someone is entitled to Basic Allowance for Housing they should receive 100%.
- **Foreign civilian contractors** who have risked everything to work with the American military should not be forgotten. Their contributions and sacrifices merit recognition, and the number of Special Immigration Visas (SIV) issued should be sufficient to ensure that any person employed by the US government can escape retaliation from enemy forces by immigrating to the United States.

- We should also ensure that caseworkers are assigned to **re-train our SIVs for employment in American jobs** and receive a living stipend, integration training, and services while they make the transition to American citizens.
- We support the **fair treatment of reservists and Guard members** when it comes to employment, health, education benefits, deployment, and reintegration. We support creating standard civil and criminal penalties for employers who have been found to knowingly violate USERRA job protections and we hold federal, state, and local governments to the same standards of compliance as private sector employers.
- We support making it **illegal to fire an employee** while a USERRA is being processed.
- We must provide better services and support to veterans **making the transition from active duty to appropriate and rewarding post-service civilian employment**. The Military Transition Assistance Program (TAP) should be expanded and cover a wider range of topics including but not limited to: Budget and finance, resume writing, school enrollment, job placement, healthcare enrollment, applying for VA benefits, and other life skills. A peer-to-peer case management system is necessary to better assist our transitioning service members and can be accomplished at minimal expense to the military or to taxpayers. TAP courses should be no less than one week in length. All service members who are not citizens at time of the TAP course training, the TAP program should assist with application for US citizenship and provide case management until completion of naturalization ceremony.

## **Veterans**

Our country has a sacred, moral and **ethical responsibility to keep faith with all our veterans and wounded warriors**. We must take care of those who have put their lives on the line to defend us.

A "Veteran" is someone who at one point signed a blank check to the Federal government in the amount of up to and including their life. Every veteran past, present and future should be guaranteed full citizenship without discrimination or debate. **US Military Service unequivocally equals citizenship**. We will fight to restore the injustice that we have deported thousands of those who have honorably served our nation's military forces, as they were willing to put down their lives for this nation, this nation owes them the same courtesy. This includes all who begin their service as documented or undocumented non-residents, green card holders and legal residents to have an immediate pathway to citizenship complimentary of their service to the U.S.

- We will push for more uniformity at the national level in awarding credit for military experience and transferability to accredited universities. Congressional guidance is necessary to get higher education on the same page and to undo the tangled web that

exists in navigating which universities accept different types of military experience as college credit.

- We support job training, increase of the number of veterans' courts, ending chronic displacement and combat suicide, as well as protect and preserve the post-9/11 GI Bill for future generations. We support that all veterans have **equal access to new and/or expanded benefits** and not just future generations. We strongly urge the establishment and funding of Veterans' Courts accessible to all counties and encourage the establishment of Veterans' justice programs.
- We demand a **government initiated public housing program for servicemen/women** who have served the country armed forces increasing public welfare. We support establishing and funding a partnership between the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Department of Labor (DOL) and community-based nonprofits, like Community Solutions, that will explore expanding the definition of displaced veterans to include marginally sheltered or "couch surfing" veterans. We also support providing assistance to and identifying service members at risk for homelessness. We support the elimination of homelessness among veterans by increasing funding levels for permanent affordable housing, therapeutic facilities, and utilization of California's State Armories year-round.
- We will fight for every veteran to have **timely access to high-quality healthcare and timely processing of claims and appeals**, as well as work to resolve the systemic problems throughout the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). All claims should be handled with sincerity, and with the best interest of the veteran in mind and automatic denials of claims is unacceptable. Healthcare is a human right. All Veterans and their dependents should be given care at the VA. The VA system needs to be fully funded, with staff that is well paid, and expanded to rural areas that do not have VA hospitals. VA funding should not be redirected nor reduced. We insist that the VA fulfill its obligation to veterans by reducing the backlog of claims through both accelerated claims processing, and employing veterans to perform claims processing.
- We **reject attempts to profit off our veterans by privatizing the VA**. We believe that the VA must be fully resourced so that every veteran gets the care that they have earned and deserves, including those suffering from sexual assault, mental illness and other injuries or ailments. We do support creating a system like the VA Dental Insurance Program for urgent care centers across the country. Full healthcare, and dental should be given to all veterans.
- We must also look for more ways to make certain the VA provides **veteran-centered care** with full and equal treatment for all veterans. We support programs at the VA that reach out to groups such as the LGBT community with employees trained to meet such communities needs. We must ensure that all VA medical centers have appropriate

facilities and are fully staffed to support the needs unique to women veterans, including women's clinics and reproductive services. We strongly support that veterans who were involuntarily discharged due solely to their sexual orientation receive an automatic upgrade from the less-than-honorable discharges to honorable discharges, without the requirement that service members request it.

- Twenty veterans a day lose their life to suicides and more needs to be done in the treatment of MST, TBI, and PTSD. We support **expanding mental health programs** by advocating for; successful community models of peer support programs that promote community involvement, risk identification and response among veterans, partnering with organizations to expand peer support programs, identifying ways to treat invisible, latent, and toxic wounds of war; and the full treatment of MST, TBI, and PTSD.
- We demand **pensions to be fully restored**, with no cuts, and kept up with the cost of living. While the nation faces fiscal challenges, we cannot balance the budget on the backs of the military men and women who have served us. Combat related special compensation rates need to favor the Veterans with the full amount. We strongly urge the reinstatement of the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance (FSSA) program that was designed to help military families on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), FSSA was discontinued in 2016.
- **Training provided for all veterans is a must.** We support programs such as Troops to Teachers and Helmets to Hardhats that have low dropout rates. The Veteran Retraining Assistance Program was a successful program. The program allowed for qualifying Veterans who did not have a GI Bill to receive up to 12 months of education assistance in areas the Department of Labor found to be in high demand. We believe that all veterans and spouses if unemployed or making under the poverty line should be entitled to such a program if they do not have a GI Bill.

This Veterans Platform is respectfully presented by Robert Leahy

Special Thanks to:

Major Contributors:

Christopher Kowrdovich, Young Democrats of America Veterans Caucus Chair

Robert Leahy, California Veterans Caucus 2nd Vice-Chair

Derek Matthews, California Veterans Caucus Legislative Committee Chair

Don Gomez, California Veterans Caucus Deported Veterans ad hoc Committee Vice-Chair

Editors:

Susana Williams, California Veterans Caucus Communications Committee Chair

Cullen Tiernan, California Veterans Caucus Chair

Jody Feldman, California Veterans Caucus 1st Vice-Chair

Gilbert Feliciano, California Veterans Caucus Member