

APWU CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

**American
Postal
Workers
Union,
AFL-CIO**

WILLIAM BURRUS
PRESIDENT

Before The

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

"Veterans Preference"

**TESTIMONY OF CLIFF GUFFEY
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Madame Chairwoman and members of the Committee. I am Cliff Guffey, Executive Vice President of the American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO – the APWU. On behalf of the APWU, thank you for providing me this opportunity to testify on behalf of our more than 300,000 members. Postal workers and the United States Postal Service have a long and proud tradition of veterans' employment. The APWU and its members strongly support veterans' preference.

I am proud to say that I am a 10 point preference eligible veteran. I served with the Second Battalion of the 3d Marines in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969. APWU President William Burrus and Legislative Director Myke Reid are also preference eligible veterans. Bill served with the 101st Airborne Division, and Myke served with the 502d Air Force Band.

It is no coincidence that the three of us are veterans. More than 187,000 veterans were employed by the Postal Service in fiscal 2005. On behalf of these veterans, and on behalf of all postal workers, I thank the Committee for holding this hearing to address the needs of our returning veterans. We know the Committee will want to consider how best to ensure that postal employment will continue to be accessible to veterans.

Postmaster General Potter recently reported that nearly 25 percent of postal employees are veterans. In the recent past, among postal workers of my generation, the numbers and percentages of veterans in the Postal Service have been even higher.

The fact that large numbers of veterans are employed by the Postal Service tends to obscure the fact that the Postal Service effort on behalf of our veterans is not as strong and beneficial as it could be.

The Postal Service's Annual Reports to Congress from 1999 through 2005 show that the Postal Service has experienced a continuous decline in the number and proportion of its workers who are veterans. In FY 1999, the Service employed 251,788 veterans, accounting for 31.6% of its workforce. In FY 2005, the Service employed only 187,144 veterans, decreasing its veteran populous to 26.6%. Also noteworthy is the fact that the USPS' disabled veteran workforce decreased to only 9 % and veterans with a 30 % or greater disability rating decreased to only 2.4%.

This trend is particularly significant in light of the large numbers of veterans, particularly disabled veterans, who are returning from fighting in the Middle East. The U.S. has nearly 1.4 million active military personnel, 369,000 of whom are deployed outside the United States and its territories. Currently 169,200 U.S. troops are deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, more than a million U.S. Service members have been deployed to the Middle East. According to the Department of Defense's Casualty Report, between March 20, 2003 and August 29, 2007, 4,159 troops – including at least 13 people who were members or closely-related to members of the APWU - have died in the line of duty; 27,782 service men and women have been wounded in action; and 13,353 of the wounded have been classified as not able to return to duty.

The Veteran's Administration has reported that our returning veterans are suffering levels of unemployment and homelessness that I am sure the Committee will agree are not acceptable. According to the Veterans' Administration, the reality is that unemployment usually affects younger, less experienced workers the most, and that includes young veterans who are attempting to enter the civilian work force after their discharge from military service. The VA estimates nearly 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night and nearly 400,000 to one million veterans experience homelessness over the course of a year. Conservatively, one out of every three homeless men who is sleeping in a doorway, alley or box in our cities and rural communities has served in our military service. While great efforts have been made to provide housing, these have not been nearly enough. More importantly, our veterans need good jobs paying a living wage and with adequate fringe benefits. Studies show that gainful employment at a living wage with the opportunity for advancement is the foundation for maintaining economic stability and reducing the risk of homelessness.

There is no doubt that the Veterans' Preference Act has provided important assistance to veterans. The point preferences given to veterans and disabled veterans, and the restrictions that reserve certain jobs for qualified veterans if any have applied for them, are important and effective means of ensuring that veterans are provided employment opportunities in the Federal Government, including the Postal Service. But these opportunities are not as effective as they should be, for several reasons.

Perhaps the largest problem is that veterans are not aware of their veterans' preference rights. It is our understanding, gained from speaking with many discharged troops, that neither the military nor the Veteran's Administration, nor the Postal Service is doing enough to inform veterans of their veterans' preference rights. In our experience, veterans are unaware that 10 point eligible veterans have a right to apply at any time for any position for which a non-temporary appointment has been made from a list of eligibles within the past three years. Veterans also need to be informed that they can file for an open competitive examination after the closing date if they could not file in time because of their military service.

Of course, even knowing their rights under the law will not really assist veterans unless the Postal Service makes an effective effort to inform them of employment opportunities. Veterans who are informed of their rights and also informed of available postal positions are more likely to gain USPS employment because they will have access to the entrance exam upon discharge, rather than waiting for what can be years before the examination is again offered to the public.

Currently the best employment information vets are offered is at sporadic job fairs that do not regularly include a representative from the USPS. We recommend that all federal agencies be given timely notice of these fairs, and that all agencies within the geographical area of the fairs be required to send knowledgeable representatives. Additionally, we urge the Committee to take steps to ensure that the Veterans'

Administration and the military provide exit counseling that includes useful information regarding federal sector employment, recruitment and available positions.

The Committee also needs to be aware of two other significant impediments to veterans' preference in the Postal Service. One is that the Postal Service has systematically eliminated or contracted out the six jobs that, under Section 3310 of Title 5, the Veterans' Preference Act restricts to applying veterans. The APWU has monitored this development as part of our effort to enforce the APWU's collective bargaining agreement with the Postal Service. For years, the Postal Service has sought to contract out more and more of these restricted jobs over the objections of the APWU. We think that this effort by the Postal Service is contrary to the spirit of the Veterans' Preference Act and not in the best interests of the Postal Service. Most often, the savings the Postal Service purports to be seeking through contracting out prove to be illusory. Veterans are losing their postal employment rights because the Postal Service is not preserving these restricted jobs for them in accordance with federal policy. The Postal Service should be required to bargain with the APWU before it can contract out any restricted job, and that if the parties cannot reach agreement on the decision to contract out, the dispute resolution procedures of the Postal Reorganization Act should be applied.

Another problem is that, in a time of continuing automation and stable or declining First Class Mail volume, the Postal Service is not likely to be hiring a large number of new workers. It may be that the most effective way to provide employment

opportunities for veterans would be to identify additional positions that could be restricted for the employment of veterans.

If veterans are to be provided meaningful postal employment opportunities as they have in the past, effective steps need to be taken to inform veterans of their rights. The military should be required to provide effective exit counseling to discharging veterans informing them of their preference rights. The Veterans' Administration needs to provide effective job counseling services that include information about veteran's preference rights and employment opportunities. And the Postal Service must systematically provide information about employment opportunities to the military, to the Veterans' Administration, and to veterans themselves.

In closing, I want to thank the committee for providing the APWU this opportunity to speak out for returning veterans. We hope that our testimony will assist the committee in determining what needs to be done to benefit our newest generation of veterans. APWU and its members look forward to welcoming additional veterans who will be joining our ranks. We will be proud to have them as new union brothers and sisters. We very much appreciate your assistance in achieving this goal.

I will be happy to respond to any questions the Committee may have.