



January 21, 2025

Ashleigh Barry Testimony Supporting MD House Bill 267 with Proposed Amendments

Thank you, Chair and members of the committee. My name is Ashleigh Barry, Senior Vice President of Communications for the National Association for Veteran Rights (NAVR), a national trade association dedicated to promoting ethical and transparent business practices among companies serving the service-disabled Veteran community, including organizations such as Veterans Guardian. At NAVR, we establish certification standards to ensure companies provide excellent services at reasonable fees—fees that Veterans are willing to pay.

House Bill 267, with the proposed amendments, is crucial for protecting Veterans from unethical practices in the claims assistance industry while preserving their freedom to navigate the complex disability claims process as they see fit. The bill, as amended, aligns with NAVR's mission to uphold ethical standards and advocate for Veteran choice and Veteran-owned businesses. We commend its focus on prohibiting predatory practices such as excessive fees, misleading guarantees, and improper access to Veterans' sensitive information. The inclusion of clear disclosures and written agreements ensures Veterans are informed of their rights and aware of free service options.

I bring to this testimony a deep personal commitment. As a former senior executive overseeing communications at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and an investigative journalist for two decades, I witnessed firsthand the systemic challenges faced by our nation's heroes. While reporting for CBS News, I was instrumental in exposing the Phoenix VA wait-time scandal, stories that revealed the systemic neglect and delays faced by Veterans and sparked years of national scrutiny. What I uncovered then continues to fuel my fight today through my work at NAVR and my time at the VA's national office.

The reality of wait times remains dire. In Maryland, there are over 63,000 Veterans and only 70 VSO representatives—leaving more than 900 Veterans for every VSO representative. Nearly 40% of claims in this state are pending for more than four months. These delays are not just bureaucratic inconveniences; they can have devastating consequences, including the tragic loss of life. I've reported on suicides by Veterans whose claims were left on hold, forgotten, or denied.

This legislation strikes an important balance—encouraging Veterans to seek expert support while holding service providers to the highest ethical standards. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Ashleigh Barry