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Office of the White House Press Secretary

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THE WHITE HOUSE

TEXT OF REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT  
 TO BE DELIVERED AT THE DEDICATION  
 CEREMONIES OF THE DISABLED AMERICAN  
 VETERANS BUILDING

I am very proud to be here with you today, taking part in the dedication of the Disabled American Veterans National Service Headquarters.

In August of 1974, I had the privilege as Vice President of addressing your fifty-third annual convention in New Orleans. At that time your National Commander graciously offered me an invitation. He said I would be welcome at any gathering of the Disabled American Veterans, at any place. I can think of no time or place or occasion more appropriate for me to accept that invitation than today.

The completion of this impressive new National Service Headquarters is the proud climax to your fine history of accomplishments -- a history that stretches back for fifty-six years.

As a veteran of World War II, I have long admired and respected the outstanding role the DAV has played in our national life. The DAV, with over half a million dedicated members, has compiled an enviable record of conscientious and compassionate response to the special needs of disabled veterans and their families.

Your efforts have greatly increased the educational, medical and employment opportunities available to disabled veterans. You have personally assisted hundreds of thousands of individual veterans and their families in receiving the benefits which they have earned.

Working with the Veterans Administration, you and the members of your auxiliary have promoted the rehabilitation and welfare of hospitalized veterans. And your unique partnership with the Boy Scouts of America makes it possible for thousands of handicapped boys to enjoy the benefits of scouting.

Throughout all these programs, you display a strong, healthy and vibrant patriotism. You are rightfully proud, as I am, of the great country we were called upon to defend -- and did. Yours was the ultimate involvement. You gave your muscle, your blood, your courage and your years. It is a priceless gift America must never forget. As President, as Commander-in-Chief, and as citizen -- I salute you for it.

One of your notable accomplishments has been to serve, and to involve in your work, disabled veterans of the Vietnam conflict. I understand more than 80 percent of your 280 National Service Officers stationed throughout the country today are Vietnam veterans.

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That clearly shows your success in meeting the new challenges confronting our veterans. We have the same obligation to the servicemen of that long and divisive conflict as to any others. They served their country well in war, and it is only right that we serve them well in peace.

By maintaining and improving our Veterans Administration, we can ensure that veterans will get the help they deserve.

That is why, even within the tight constraints of my Federal budget for Fiscal Year 1977, I have proposed a record amount of over 4 billion dollars for VA medical care.

I have requested funds for more than 9,000 new VA medical personnel in my budgets for Fiscal Years 1976 and 1977, to implement the recommendations of the quality of care survey. And those budgets provide some 600 million dollars for VA medical construction projects.

We are providing more funding, more people and better facilities to give eligible veterans the highest-quality, fastest service possible. In addition, my new VA budget will provide 8 billion dollars in compensation and pension benefits to almost 5 million veteran families in Fiscal Year 1977. You deserve nothing less. I will do all that I can to make certain that you receive nothing less.

I believe the Veterans Administration has done a fine job overall under very difficult circumstances. With the leadership of my good friend Dick Roudebush, the VA has made tremendous strides in serving veterans.

We are going to make sure this progress continues, with the help of organizations like yours. From your new headquarters you will be in a very good position to continue serving the legitimate interests of disabled veterans.

This new building is a monument to the sacrifices made by those veterans, and to the services you have rendered them. But it is more than that. It is a living, vital, dynamic headquarters where you will continue those services.

Here is a building that has been designed with sensitivity to the needs of disabled veterans. Like your organization, it is one hundred percent accessible to them, whatever their infirmity.

We must continue to eliminate the cruel barriers that prevent disabled veterans -- and too many other disabled Americans -- from leading the rich life they have every right to enjoy in our great country.

Many of these barriers are physical. Your efforts and the government's efforts to train and rehabilitate the disabled are tragically undermined if the disabled individual cannot enter and use public buildings or places of business.

I am well aware of the sad fact that many things the rest of us take for granted --- like a narrow doorway or a flight of steps --- can be like signs saying "Disabled --- Keep Out." We must work to remove these signs --- and we are.

We are moving steadily toward making Federally owned and leased buildings physically accessible to every American.

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A recent meeting at the White House on the subject of architectural barriers, explored this problem with architects, builders and contractors. By removing physical barriers, we can also help remove the social barriers which all too frequently confront the disabled.

As we dedicate this building, let us dedicate ourselves to protecting the freedom for which veterans gave an important part of their lives. Let us also dedicate ourselves to understanding and responding to the special needs of disabled veterans. A free society owes an enduring debt to those who fought to keep it free. Let us match that sacrifice with our determination that all veterans shall indeed, live a life that is secure, satisfying and truly independent.

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