

OPENING STATEMENT

- Good afternoon, and thank you for joining us today.
- Last year, the Veterans Benefits Administration provided compensation to over 5 million disabled veterans and survivors.
- Unfortunately, COVID-19 has hampered VBA, leading to hundreds of thousands of backlogged claims.
- With the funds Congress provided in the *American Rescue Plan*, VA anticipates getting back to pre-COVID numbers by late next year.
- I'm concerned, however, that next year isn't soon enough for disabled veterans weathering the storm in this pandemic.
- I'm also concerned that as VBA concentrates on speed, it risks sacrificing quality.
- Disabled veterans must have confidence their claims will be fairly and accurately decided.
- Last year's removal of the 48-hour review period is an example of when VBA—obsessed with speed—removed a veteran's ability to correct errors before a final decision.
- Look—everyone appreciates quickness, but forcing vets to appeal errors just makes them wait longer.

- So when it comes to renewing VBA's focus on the disabled veteran, we've got work to do.
- GAO, for example, has consistently highlighted gaps in VBA's oversight of contract examiners.
- The quality of an exam can make or break a veteran's claim. If VBA can't guarantee the accuracy of contract examiners, it shouldn't be using them.
- The IG also found significant issues with how VBA processes specialty claims.
- If VBA can't guarantee it fairly accounts for all the complexities of a disabled veteran's claim, it needs to change the process.
- Toxic exposure veterans exhibiting symptoms years after a deployment are second-guessed.
- Veterans bearing invisible wounds from military sexual trauma are held to impossibly high evidence standards.
- VA must take the time to carefully account for all the circumstances surrounding a claim, instead of treating our warriors like widgets.
- In short—VBA must make the process more veteran-focused and less adversarial.

- I look forward to hearing how VBA can improve its practices so that our disabled veterans are better served—long after this pandemic.