

## **\*\*OPENING STATEMENT\*\***

- Secretary Wilkie, thank you for participating in this budget hearing.
- Today, we could go over the details of the President's budget request. But in the last four months, the world has changed. And VA has changed.
- More than 106,000 Americans have died - many of them veterans who returned from wars abroad to die fighting a very different type of battle here at home.
- As the largest integrated health care system in the nation, I know VA has been focused on saving as many veterans' lives as possible. More than 12,000 veterans have been diagnosed by VA with COVID-19.
- And while many are recovered or convalescing, more than 1,270 have died.
- As part of its 4th Mission, VA has also taken care of non-veterans and has deployed staff and supplies to non-VA facilities such as state veteran nursing homes.
- VA's front line workforce deserves a thank you and far more for what they've done.
- We must ensure that VA has everything it needs to keep employees safe and take care of veterans.
- Today's hearing is an opportunity for us to take stock of where we are and where we need to be.

- Mr. Secretary, at the outset of the nation's response to COVID-19, Congress fulfilled VA's request for nearly \$20 billion to support its ability to take care of veterans.
- We need a better understanding of how VA has spent those funds and whether unspent dollars will be available to address veterans' needs – COVID-19 or otherwise – next fiscal year.
- We also need to ensure that the President's budget request for VA's in-house care meets the anticipated health care demand of veterans when looked at through the lens of the coronavirus.
- We also need to know whether private sector providers are prepared to safely administer care to veterans given the virus' unprecedented effect on American health care.
- We must anticipate the economic ripple effects of coronavirus on industries across the board, prepare for potential increases of enrollment and reliance on VA, and evaluate whether the President's budget request meets that demand.
- We've seen the devastating physical effects that coronavirus has had on those who have contracted the disease.
- But I think we'll also see large-scale negative psychological effects from physical distancing and

isolation, seeing loved ones dying, and not having access to traditional in-person mental health resources.

- VA needs to look to new and innovative approaches to providing mental health care to veterans across the country, including but not limited to increased access to telehealth services.
- And as we have seen with this COVID-19 crisis, VA facilities need more space, not less. We need capacity and we won't get there by shortchanging VA's infrastructure.
- With veterans unemployment on the rise, it's also critical that VA communicate what programs need support in order to get veterans educated, trained, back to work, and able to provide for their families.
- One way we help veterans provide for themselves and their families is to ensure their claims are processed timely and accurately.
- I'm truly concerned with the mounting backlog of claims from the COVID-19 pandemic due to the deferred and disrupted in-person examinations for veterans and how these delays will affect them and their families.
- So I look forward to hearing more details about this Budget Request and the Department's response to COVID-19, and I look forward to our conversation.
- Thank you all again for being here.