

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
- We have a fairly heavy load for this hearing, and I greatly appreciate that you have included so many bills on today's agenda.
- I just want to briefly touch on a few bills that I have worked on that we'll get views on today.
- One of my main focuses this Congress is on mental health and suicide prevention.
- I want to thank all of my colleagues on this committee for being such good partners in these efforts.
- In particular, I have worked closely with Sen. Moran on expanding access to mental health care for our veterans and increasing oversight over VA's mental health programs.
- S. 785 – the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act – does just that.
- It also eases transition for recently separated veterans, improves and expands VA's mental health infrastructure and increases community engagement through grants.
- I want to also thank Sens. Sullivan, Murray, Sanders Blumenthal, Hirono, Manchin, and Sinema for their support of this important bill.

- S. 711 – CARE for Reservists – allows members of the National Guard and Reserve to receive care at Vet Centers, and includes them in VA’s suicide prevention planning.
- I worked with Sens. Moran, Sullivan, Cassidy, Tillis, Sanders, and Manchin to improve and expand care for our Guardsmen and Reservists.
- Today’s agenda also includes S. 514 – the Deborah Sampson Act – which would eliminate barriers to care and services that many women veterans face, and would expand services for women veterans most in need, such as those experiencing homelessness.
- Thank you Sen. Boozman, for reintroducing this critical bill with me, as well as 32 other cosponsors, 7 of whom sit on this committee.
- Another bill I worked on, S. 805 – the Veterans Debt Fairness Act – helps veterans by reducing VA’s ability to recover overpayments that are caused by VA errors.
- I want to thank Sens. Boozman, Brown and Blumenthal for being great partners on this legislation, and ensuring that the VA – not our veterans – is held accountable when mistakes are made.
- Finally, I have a couple of bills that increase oversight and accountability at VA.

- First, S. 1154 – the Department of Veterans Affairs Electronic Health Record Advisory Committee Act – would create a panel of experts to oversee and give guidance to VA as they embark on the \$16 billion, 10 year Cerner electronic health record project.
- Thank you Sen. Blackburn for working together with me to ensure that this massive project gets rolled out correctly.
- And last but not least, S. 524 – the Department of Veterans Affairs Tribal Advisory Committee Act – which would create an advisory committee made up of tribal members from across the nation to advise the Secretary on issues specific to Indian Country.
- I want to thank Sens. Sullivan, Cramer and Sinema in pushing for greater representation of Indian Country in VA policy at the highest level.
- I look forward to hearing our witnesses' views on the bills on today's agenda and look forward to a productive hearing.