

1 JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
2 THE AMERICAN LEGION

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4 WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2018

5 United States Senate,
6 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
7 House of Representatives,
8 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
9 Washington, D.C.

10 The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m.,
11 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny
12 Isakson and Hon. David P. Roe, Chairmen of the Committees,
13 presiding.

14 Senators Present: Senators Isakson, Heller, Sullivan,
15 Sanders, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, and Manchin.

16 Members Present: Representatives Roe, Coffman,
17 Gonzalez-Colon, Takano, Kuster, Esty, and Peters.

18 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ROE

19 Chairman Roe. Good morning, everyone. Good morning,
20 Commander, and welcome to the House and Senate joint hearing
21 to receive the legislative presentation of The American
22 Legion.

23 It is both an honor and a privilege for me to be here
24 with Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Walz--and Takano is
25 here in his place--Senator Tester, as well as the rest of

1 the members of both Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

2 I want to welcome and thank all American Legion members
3 present today for your brave and honorable service to our
4 nation, service that continues through your work with The
5 American Legion and your attendance here in Washington this
6 morning.

7 To the American Legion Auxiliary and the Sons of the
8 American Legion present today, I would also like to thank
9 you all for your selfless commitment to those serving, those
10 who have served.

11 I would be remiss if I did not recognize my fellow
12 Tennessee Legionnaires in the crowd, including my good
13 friend representing Post 61 out of Mountain City, Tennessee,
14 Bob Hensley.

15 Bob, if you and the Tennesseans, I would appreciate it.
16 You are here. Yeah, there is Bob. Thank you all.

17 [Applause.]

18 Chairman Roe. And I did have to point out yesterday
19 that for you Texans out there, there would not be a Texas
20 without Tennessee, so anyway--

21 [Laughter.]

22 Chairman Roe. Madam Commander, thank you today for
23 your help and support of the Legionnaires across the
24 country. 2017 was a tremendous and monumental legislative
25 year for American veterans, both present and future. From

1 appeals modernization to the Harry W. Colmery Forever GI
2 Bill, The American Legion has been at the front of our fight
3 for our veterans and their dependents and caregivers.

4 However, success does not beget complacency. These
5 Committees and our American Legion partners still have much
6 work to do to improve the benefits and services provided by
7 VA. Your professional and responsive D.C. staff does a
8 great job of sharing The American Legion's message and
9 priorities with Members of the Congress and especially these
10 House and Senate Committee members. They are a crucial
11 element to let us know what really is happening on the front
12 lines at VA facilities across the country. Without that
13 input, we would not be able to do our jobs effectively or
14 continue our efforts to help Secretary Shulkin transform VA
15 into the Department that all of us need and deserve.

16 With your help, Commander, we will continue to advocate
17 for improvements within the VA and to praise the Department
18 when recognition is due, but we will also continue to meet
19 our constitutional responsibilities to provide rigorous
20 oversight and challenge the Secretary when the Department
21 falls short of what our veterans deserve.

22 As Chairman, I will continue to foster an agenda
23 focused on problem-solving and results, bringing together
24 stakeholders like yourselves and policymakers to build a
25 better future for our veterans.

1 We all share a common mission to improve services and
2 benefits for veterans, and everyone in this room has
3 prevailing priorities we believe will help us get there.

4 First among the Committees' current priorities is
5 consolidating and strengthening VA care in the community.
6 As we continue to explore options for improving the
7 community care program, our focus will be to preserve VA's
8 role as a coordinator of care for enrolled veterans, while
9 increasing their options for care and simultaneously
10 investing in a stronger VA.

11 We will also continue our work on improving both the
12 quality and equity of VA caregiver program. I am working on
13 legislation which will be the focus of next week's
14 roundtable discussion with representatives from your
15 organization and other stakeholders as well as members of
16 the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

17 Another means of investment in VA is our effort to
18 establish an Asset and Infrastructure Review process to help
19 the Department modernize and realign its medical facility
20 footprint across the nation in order to meet the needs of
21 veterans where they live.

22 The average Veterans Health Administration building is
23 nearly my age, and let me tell you, like I told the group
24 yesterday, that is pretty old. When you get your next dog
25 and realize he may live longer than you do, that is how old

1 I am.

2 [Laughter.]

3 Chairman Roe. And it was designed to meet an obsolete
4 model of delivering health care.

5 So aligning VA's physical infrastructure to better
6 serve veterans where they live is crucial in ensuring the
7 future success of the VA health care system.

8 In November of 2017, VA submitted its comprehensive
9 plan outlining its progress and its timeline for
10 implementing the Veterans Appeals Improvement and
11 Modernization Act of 2017, a new law which passed with
12 overwhelming support and guidance from The American Legion.

13 We need to ensure that VA stays focused and on track to
14 implement the law so that veterans can have their claims
15 adjudicated in a timely manner instead of waiting around for
16 years on end.

17 Last but certainly not least is the implementation of a
18 modern commercial electronic health record. I appreciate
19 the Secretary's decision to review the new EHR
20 interoperability capabilities, and we are confident that he
21 will make a decision soon on awarding a much anticipated
22 contract. Once that occurs, our oversight efforts will only
23 get more intense to ensure this enormous IT modernization
24 effort succeeds, unlike virtually all that have come before
25 it.

1 We look forward to moving through these processes with
2 your help and, more importantly, continuing our partnership
3 with the American Legion and all stakeholders to ensure the
4 best possible service is provided for every veteran.

5 As you can see, there is a lot of work ahead of us, and
6 we are eager to receive your testimony today from the
7 American Legion regarding its legislative priorities.

8 And with that, I yield to Chairman Isakson for his
9 opening remarks.

10 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

11 Chairman Isakson. Thank you very much, Chairman Roe,
12 and welcome to the Legion. And, Denise, welcome to you.
13 Beauty and brains are a tremendous package, and the Legion
14 has it both with you. We are glad that you are here today
15 and your entire leadership team. We welcome you all to
16 Washington, D.C.

17 These are important days for two Committees of the
18 House and Senate. We have had a remarkable year--or 2
19 years, thanks in large measure to the leadership that I will
20 introduce in just a second, Speaker Ryan, who have helped us
21 pass unprecedented legislation on accountability, on
22 appeals, speeding up the appeals process, having
23 accountability in the Veterans Administration, making the GI
24 Bill work for the future, not just the past, and all the
25 many changes you have helped us make, and we are on the cups

1 of finishing that with Veterans Choice and the Veterans care
2 bill, which we will be passing, in my hopes, in the next few
3 weeks ahead.

4 I am not going to take any longer of my time because a
5 more important member is here, and that is the Speaker of
6 the House, Paul Ryan.

7 And on a personal note, when I came to the House in
8 1999, Paul was here, and the first thing I did was had him
9 wait on me at Tortilla Coast, bringing me some good queso
10 and some good chips. And we got to be good friends, and we
11 have been good friends ever since.

12 And I have watched him ascend to the highest points of
13 leadership in the House of Representatives in our country.
14 He is one of the outstanding reasons that I stay in
15 Washington because he is one of those people you put your
16 trust in, your hope in, and your future in, and it is an
17 honor for me to introduce to all of you the man that needs
18 no introduction whatsoever, Paul Ryan.

19 [Applause.]

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1 STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE PAUL RYAN, A MEMBER IN
2 CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF WISCONSIN

3 Mr. Ryan. This is totally--thank you, Elizabeth. That
4 was absolutely uncalled for.

5 [Laughter.]

6 Mr. Ryan. Johnny, thank you very much--excuse me---Mr.
7 Chairman. We are pretty casual around here. We are all
8 friends, and look, I am excited to be over here. First of
9 all, I have not been over in the Senate in like 2 years, so
10 thanks for letting me come over.

11 [Laughter.]

12 Mr. Ryan. They usually do not let us House guys come
13 over here too often, so, Mr. Chairman, appreciate your
14 indulgence. Chairman Roe, it is fantastic to see you and
15 exciting to see you at the helm.

16 I want to start by thanking the members of our
17 Veterans' Affairs Committee. I want to thank you in turn.
18 Over the last year, in large part because of your bipartisan
19 efforts, we have made some really, really important strides
20 for our veterans, increasing accountability at the VA,
21 expanding the GI Bill. These are impressive
22 accomplishments, and I just want to thank those of you on
23 the Veterans' Affairs Committee for shepherding these
24 accomplishments through.

25 And then I want to talk about our friends here in the

1 VA community, in the VSO community.

2 Of course, this progress would not have been made if it
3 were not for our veterans services organizations, and that
4 is who we have here today, but particularly the American
5 Legion.

6 People know the Legion as a fixture in their
7 communities. It is truly a national force for good, and the
8 GI Bill is a perfect example. What became one of the most
9 consequential laws of the 20th century started with a Legion
10 commander putting some of his ideas down on a notepad.

11 Fittingly, when it came time to pass the Forever GI Bill
12 last year, the Legion was indispensable in getting this
13 done, along with the other veterans service organizations.

14 So the reason I am here today is it is my absolute
15 privilege to introduce Commander Denise Rohan of Verona,
16 Wisconsin.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Ryan. I have got to say we in Southern Wisconsin
19 are just so proud to have one of our own as the first woman
20 in history to lead the Legion.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Ryan. Commander Rohan represents the best of what
23 we had to offer in Wisconsin. She is selfless. She is
24 inclusive. She is beyond tireless, and she is a rapid Green
25 Bay Packer fan, as every Wisconsinite is.

1 [Laughter.]

2 Mr. Ryan. You may be an owner for all I know. Most of
3 us are.

4 This month alone, she traveled from everywhere, from
5 Minnesota to Missouri to Mississippi to talk at Legion
6 posts. She made "Family First" her motto, expanding the
7 Legion's focus on helping military families, and she is
8 encouraging more young people to get involved in the
9 organization, which is absolutely critical.

10 Just last week, she said, "When I look at everything we
11 do, it is all about taking care of one another." That just
12 speaks to who she is. It really speaks to the kind of
13 leader that Commander Rohan is going to be, the kind that
14 she has been. She is inspiring Americans to remember our
15 solemn obligation to take care of our nation's veterans.

16 So Commander Rohan is making the most of her time in
17 this post, and I know that you will all greatly benefit from
18 her presentation today.

19 So let me just say to all the Legionnaires here, thank
20 you so much for what you all do for our nation's heroes, and
21 thank you very much, Chairman, for having me today. And I
22 am excited to introduce Commander Denise Rohan.

23 [Applause.]

24 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

25 Chairman Isakson. Mr. Speaker, thank you, and I want

1 to apologize. I think I jumped ahead of the Chairman of the
2 House by introducing the Speaker of the House, Mr. Ryan.

3 Chairman Roe. That is all right. We have been trumped
4 by the Senate before. That is okay.

5 Chairman Isakson. No, no, no.

6 [Laughter.]

7 Chairman Roe. Senate is always causing problems for
8 us.

9 Chairman Isakson. I apologize for that very much, but
10 he is a great Speaker and a great leader, and you have got a
11 great Chairman that I enjoy working with very, very much.

12 If you see me leave, it is because I have got to go to
13 the floor of the Senate as part of service this morning, but
14 I will be back. Thank you for being here, and I apologize,
15 Chairman Roe.

16 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Chairman.

17 At this time, I would like to ask Mr. Takano if he has
18 any remarks he would like to make.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. TAKANO

20 Mr. Takano. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning
21 to everybody.

22 I represent Riverside, California. I am a proud
23 Californian, but I have a scheduler, Desiree Wroten, who is
24 a rabid Packers fan and travels to Green Bay any chance she
25 gets to watch the Packers.

1 Commander Rohan, thank you for being here, and thank
2 you for your continued service to our nation's heroes. The
3 American Legion has been and will continue to be a part of
4 the foundation we need to ensure that our veterans receive
5 the benefits and care they have earned.

6 I also want to note that women across the military and
7 in the veterans community are emerging as strong and
8 effective leaders.

9 As the first female commander of the American Legion,
10 you are continuing this long, overdue rise of women in
11 leadership roles, and I am grateful for your service to our
12 nation.

13 In an era defined by partisanship and gridlock, our
14 work in the Veterans Committee has been a rare and welcome
15 exception. Accomplishments like appeals and modernization
16 and the Forever GI Bill will forever improve the lives of
17 veterans for generations to come.

18 I am proud of the progress we have made in a climate
19 that incentivizes political victories over political
20 involvement and political improvement. However, that spirit
21 of bipartisanship will continue to be tested as we determine
22 the future of the Veterans Health Administration.

23 I strongly believe that a robust and sustainable VA
24 health system is critical to providing veterans the care
25 they deserve, but community providers will continue to be an

1 important resource to support VA facilities.

2 Finding that right balance between strengthening the
3 VA's health system and ensuring appropriate access to care
4 in the community is a difficult challenge, and it is true in
5 the best of circumstances when all stakeholders are
6 negotiating and debating in good faith.

7 When political opportunism and ideological agendas are
8 injected into the debate, the chances of finding an
9 effective solution suffer dramatically.

10 In recent weeks, the American Legion and many other
11 veterans service organizations have been forced to take an
12 uncomfortable position to defend the VA from those who would
13 rather see it collapse than succeed. Your willingness to
14 speak up has not gone unnoticed.

15 And I want to thank you for standing up for the best
16 interest of veterans, and I want you to know that Members of
17 Congress on both sides of the aisle stand with you.

18 Thank you, Commander Rohan, for your testimony today.
19 Thank you to each of the--each member of the American Legion
20 for the sacrifices you have made for this country and the
21 services you continue to provide to the veterans community.

22 Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time.

23 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

24 Senator Tester, you are recognized.

25 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

1 Senator Tester. Yeah. Thank you, Chairman Roe, and,
2 Commander, it is an honor to have you and your team here
3 today. You are very well served by your staff here in
4 Washington, D.C. I do not want going to your head, Matthew.

5 [Laughter.]

6 Senator Tester. But my staff and I rely heavily on
7 their advice and their perspective on issues important to
8 veterans and their families, so thank you for sending a
9 quality crew up here.

10 I appreciated the opportunity yesterday to address your
11 convention. Just so you know and the folks in the audience
12 know, I also appreciated the bacon. It was good.

13 [Laughter.]

14 Senator Tester. And I want to congratulate my fellow
15 Montanan, Diane Carlson Evans, for receiving the Legion's
16 Patriot Award for her efforts on building the Vietnam
17 Women's Memorial. She is a great lady and somebody--

18 [Applause.]

19 Senator Tester. Yeah. It is good.

20 And we have got a few Montanans out in the crowd. I do
21 not exactly know where they are sitting, but Merv Gunderson;
22 Roger Hagan, a Big Sandy boy. And I do not know if Kelly
23 Ackerman is here, but I know Bill White is here. And
24 everybody else that might be here from Montana, welcome.
25 Thank you for the work that you do for Montana's veterans

1 and for veterans across the country.

2 Look, we are here because Congress should be taking
3 their cues from you. Legionnaires utilize the VA health
4 care and the beneficiaries of its programs every single day
5 in your system, where saving initiative is a critical
6 resource for those of us trying to reform and improve the VA
7 health care system.

8 We hold these hearings because only VSOs can help
9 Congress focus on what veterans need and how to make sure
10 the VA is equipped to deliver on those needs. That means
11 taking our cues from you on how to reform community care in
12 a way that makes the most sense for veterans, community
13 providers, and the taxpayer. It means providing women
14 veterans with the care and services that they need, and it
15 means improving mental health care for our veterans across
16 the board.

17 On the second point, I share your belief that the VA
18 must do a better job of gathering data about women veterans
19 using the VA health care system. The Deborah Sampson Act
20 that we introduced last year will do exactly on that.

21 On the first point, Chairman Isakson and I are working
22 hard to bring legislation to the floor that would
23 consolidate VA's community care programs into one. It
24 passed our committee by a vote of 14 to 1, and it has strong
25 support of all the VSOs, including the American Legion.

1 But as we have seen play out in the media, there are
2 outside forces, and there are political agendas that are
3 working against us. I am frustrated that the dysfunction in
4 the administration is now bleeding over to the VA. Veterans
5 deserve much better than that.

6 You deserve a Congress and a VA that works for you and
7 listens to you about what you need, what is working, and
8 more importantly what is not working for our veterans. We
9 have accomplished a great deal in this Congress because we
10 have been able to work together productively, to not worry
11 about who gets the credit or who scores political points,
12 but to focus on results for our veterans.

13 The American Legion plays and has always played a
14 critical role in that process, and we will continue to rely
15 heavily on your ideas, your energy, and your feedback as we
16 move forward.

17 Commander, again, welcome. Thank you for all that you
18 do and all that your organization does on behalf of veterans
19 around this country.

20 Thank you.

21 [Applause.]

22 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator Tester.

23 I would like to take a--before we start with opening
24 remarks, I would like to take a point of personal privilege
25 and ask everyone--we are going to miss a ceremony because of

1 this hearing with Billy Graham, him being interned at the
2 Capitol. Only four people--he is going to lie in honor
3 there, not in state, but in honor, and only four Americans
4 have ever done that. The last was Rosa Parks.

5 I would like to ask all of you to stand for a moment of
6 silence, remove your cover, and remember the Graham family
7 today in your prayers.

8 [Moment of silence.]

9 Chairman Roe. You may be seated.

10 Commander, you are recognized for as much time as you
11 may consume.

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1 STATEMENT OF DENISE H. ROHAN, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
2 AMERICAN LEGION; ACCOMPANIED BY PAUL DILLARD,
3 CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION; RALPH
4 BOZELLA, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND
5 REHABILITATION COMMISSION; MATTHEW SHUMAN,
6 DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIVISION; LOUIS
7 CELLI JR., DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND
8 REHABILITATION DIVISION; RANDALL FISHER, CHAIRMAN,
9 VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION COMMISSION; AND
10 JOSEPH SHARPE, DIRECTOR, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND
11 EDUCATION DIVISION

12 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

13 I would like to take a moment just to thank the Speaker
14 for his lovely introduction and for taking the time away
15 from his busy schedule to be with us this morning. The
16 American Legion knows that we have a true ally for veterans,
17 and luckily, he is the Speaker of the House. Again, thank
18 you to Speaker Ryan.

19 And good morning, and thank you, Mr. Chairman.

20 May I begin by introducing a few of our distinguished
21 guests. I ask the following people to please stand or wave
22 to be recognized.

23 American Legion national officers who are serving with
24 me this year.

25 [Applause.]

1 Ms. Rohan. Our dedicated past National Commanders of
2 The American Legion.

3 [Applause.]

4 Ms. Rohan. Diane Duscheck, president of the nation's
5 largest patriotic women's organization, the American Legion
6 Auxiliary.

7 [Applause.]

8 Ms. Rohan. And all of our former national presidents.
9 Former national presidents.

10 [Applause.]

11 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Danny Smith, the National Commander of
12 the Sons of the American Legion; and all former National
13 Commanders of the SAL.

14 [Applause.]

15 Ms. Rohan. And at the table with me this morning, we
16 have Mr. Paul Dillard, Chairman of the Legislative
17 Commission.

18 [Applause.]

19 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Ralph Bozella, Chairman of our Veterans
20 Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission.

21 [Applause.]

22 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Matthew Shuman, our National
23 Legislative Director.

24 [Applause.]

25 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Lou Celli, the Director of the Veterans

1 Affairs and Rehabilitation Division.

2 [Applause.]

3 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Randall Fisher, the Chairman of the
4 Veterans Employment and Education Commission.

5 [Applause.]

6 Ms. Rohan. And finally, Mr. Joe Sharpe, the Director
7 of the Veterans Employment and Education Division.

8 [Applause.]

9 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Chairman, I thank you for allowing me
10 to make those important introductions.

11 Chairman Roe, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester,
12 and members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans'
13 Affairs and others among us, I am thankful for this
14 opportunity to share with you The American Legion's
15 legislative priorities.

16 The American Legion begins its centennial commemoration
17 this year, so naturally, the 2 million more time veterans of
18 our organization are reflecting on the journey that we have
19 taken over the last century. In doing so, we are
20 rediscovering not only who we are and what we do every day
21 through 13,000 local posts in communities worldwide, but why
22 we do it.

23 When you explore the original purpose of The American
24 Legion--support for veterans, defense, youth, and patriotic
25 values--a common denominator emerges. The American Legion

1 was built to strengthen America. That is the why of The
2 American Legion. I believe that is also the why of Congress
3 and that common denominator that we both share.

4 The American Legion and Congress have been through a
5 lot together over the last century to strengthen our
6 country, and despite some political turbulence at times, we
7 have found a way to do just that.

8 And let us remember that when The American Legion was
9 founded, there was no House or Senate Veterans' Affairs
10 Committee. There was no VA. There was no veterans'
11 preference hiring act. There was no GI Bill nor any problem
12 to help disabled veterans restate their lives.

13 If you made it back from World War I, you got \$60, a
14 train ticket, and permission to wear your uniform home. One
15 American Legion National Commander famously said, "Convicts
16 released from prison receive better support than that."

17 The American Legion and Congresses of the last century
18 thought that that is a pretty risky way to treat the men and
19 women who sacrificed some or all fighting under our flag.

20 Moreover, The American Legion founders believed that a
21 nation which does not take care of its veterans will have a
22 difficult time raising a motivated fighting force should the
23 call to arms come again, and that call always does come
24 again. Fair and reasonable treatment of veterans was then
25 and it still is a matter of national security.

1 Today, we are more than 16 years into a war that has
2 produced more than 3 million post-9/11 veterans. Nearly a
3 third have suffered some kind of physical or psychological
4 disability. All put their lives and careers on hold to
5 serve our nation during a time of war.

6 Their demographics have changed much faster than their
7 system of support. For example, the growing percentage of
8 women veterans who service health care and dignity are only
9 now and slowly achieving measurable attention.

10 I submit to you that The American Legion's legislative
11 agenda addresses the challenges today of our veterans, male
12 and female, head on. Most emphatically, we address today's
13 challenges by holding ourselves and government accountable
14 to care for those who have come home ill, injured, and
15 suffering the invisible wounds of war and understandably
16 expecting to see a VA doctor within 30 days of making their
17 appointments.

18 Now, knowing that my time before you is short, I will
19 highlight just three of The American Legion's key
20 legislative interest, and of course, the first is choice.
21 Everyone here understands The American Legion opposes the
22 slippery slope of privatization. To be clear, our first
23 priority is to get veterans the care they need, where they
24 need it, and when they need it, and that is simply not
25 happening on a consistent basis today under the current

1 Choice Act. We understand.

2 [Applause.]

3 Ms. Rohan. We understand that community care providers
4 can and do fill gaps when VA facilities are overcrowded or
5 they are distant. We also know that not all community care
6 providers want VA patients nor are they keen in the
7 reimbursement process. The time it takes for payment and in
8 many markets the price VA is willing to pay for care, that
9 leaves us concerned that VA patients may find themselves
10 left to the care of whichever provider is willing instead of
11 the provider of highest quality.

12 If the solution is to use community care providers,
13 conditions and relationships must be established to ensure
14 that veterans are not simply sent to the provider of least
15 resistance. It is of paramount importance that approved
16 community providers have 21st century digital access to VA
17 medical records.

18 Today, as VA operates with tens of thousands of
19 unfilled health care positions, The American Legion feels it
20 is imperative the competitive recruitment and retention of
21 VA professionals rises on the priority list. If the supply
22 of VA's health care professionals meets the patients
23 demands, the need to use community care services would be
24 relieved.

25 When choice is the best way to provide timely health

1 care for our nation's veterans, we must ensure that veterans
2 never pay for the health care to treat their service-
3 connected injuries.

4 [Applause.]

5 Ms. Rohan. VA's high-quality standards must be met;
6 medical record sharing is modern, convenient, and expedient.
7 The VA reimbursement process must be fair and timely for
8 non-VA providers, and finally, Mr. Chairman, a strong
9 community care relation must be driven by one simple
10 mission, to provide the best care possible for our veterans
11 in a timely manner.

12 Second, The American Legion has been waiting while the
13 Federal Government has spent billions to stand up an
14 integrated lifetime electronic medical record system that
15 finally connects the Department of Defense and the VA.

16 The American Legion calls on Congress to ensure that
17 progress over the last year to integrate these systems does
18 not get bogged down in bureaucratic mire or dropped from
19 budget priority list.

20 Third, The American Legion continues to fight for
21 better transferability of military training and experience
22 into credits that can be used for certifications and
23 licenses in specialized civilian career fields and to give
24 military personnel and our veterans collect credits based on
25 their training. Underused apprenticeship and on-the-job

1 training opportunities for veterans using the post-9/11 GI
2 Bill can be stimulated through incentives, promotions, and
3 red tape reductions for employers and program participants.
4 For many of the career paths, our veterans do not need to
5 start with chapter one because they already finished the
6 textbook, and sometimes they did that while they were on the
7 battlefield.

8 Benefits and opportunities we as a nation provide to
9 those who have served in uniform are not acts of charity.
10 They are matters of national security of making America
11 strong. If we are unable to provide promised VA care and
12 benefits to veterans who need it, we send a clear message to
13 future men and women about what awaits them should they
14 choose military service.

15 The recently released movie "12 Strong" about the
16 Special Forces soldiers who fought the Taliban in the early
17 stages of today's war, a line attributed to Colonel
18 Mulholland reminds us that the most important thing we can
19 take into battle is a reason why. Strengthening our nation
20 is The American Legion's reason why.

21 We gratefully look back at recent accomplishments such
22 as the VA Appeals Modernization Act, VA accountability, and
23 Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Act of 2017. They
24 demonstrate that Congress shares our belief that if you give
25 veterans a chance, they will exceed all expectations, and in

1 doing so, strengthen America.

2 And while we are reflecting on current legislative
3 accomplishments, I want to extend a heartfelt thank-you from
4 the entire American Legion for your support of a bill to
5 mint a U.S. coin honoring our organization's centennial.
6 You can rest assured that any benefit from an American
7 Legion U.S. mint coin will be applied directly to help
8 veterans succeed, surpass expectations, and strengthen our
9 nation.

10 I saw firsthand what that looks like last month when I
11 toured Puerto Rico and the hurricane-torn island of the
12 Caribbean, where U.S. veterans and American Legion members
13 were standing strong with amazing resolve, putting the needs
14 of others before their own, as their VA facilities and their
15 communities remained far from restored.

16 Those veterans asked me to send a message to you and to
17 my American Legion family members. They say thank you for
18 all of the assistance so far, but the rebuilding process is
19 far from over. So please do not forget them. The road to
20 recovery can be a long and difficult one, and in most cases,
21 all they need is a fighting chance to succeed. I think
22 there is a lesson in that.

23 Now, as you know, my theme this year as National
24 Commander is "Family First," and this includes military
25 spouses, the children, and this includes military spouses,

1 the children, Blue Star parents, veterans' families, and of
2 course, our American Legion family. We are, indeed, all
3 strengthening America together. That is the "why" of
4 everything we do.

5 Chairman Roe, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester,
6 and members of these critical committees, thank you for
7 holding this hearing. Thank you for all you do for our
8 nation's veterans and their families. Thanks to your
9 talented staff, but most importantly, thank you.

10 I would be happy to answer any questions that you may
11 have.

12 [The prepared statement of Ms. Rohan follows:]

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1 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Commander.

2 [Applause.]

3 Chairman Roe. I am going to wait until the end to ask
4 my questions.

5 I will now yield to Senator Tester.

6 Senator Tester. Thank you, Chairman Roe. You are very
7 kind.

8 Thank you for your comments, Commander. I very much
9 appreciate it.

10 Just on the transfer of skills from the military, I am
11 very interested, as you and the American Legion are on that,
12 and would love to be able to work with you to figure out
13 what mechanism is the best way to make sure that these
14 folks, as they leave the military, have certifications that
15 work in the private sector because I think it is a huge
16 deal. They have absolutely got a skill set that can be
17 utilized. We just need to make sure the employers know
18 that, and so if there are things we can work with you on, I
19 would love to.

20 I appreciate your remarks, and the reason I appreciate
21 your remarks is because you said what I was thinking, which
22 is helpful, and that is that we need to build capacity in
23 the VA. And we need to make sure the VA is all it can be,
24 especially in the medial arena, and then we need to make
25 sure that if they are sent out in the private sector to fill

1 in those gaps, that we are not just pushing them off to any
2 old provider that is out there. That there are quality
3 people, and I cannot thank you enough for those comments.

4 I want to talk about electronic medical records for a
5 second because you brought that up too. We are about to
6 have the largest change-over--at least I believe this is the
7 case--in health care history of electronic medical record
8 system to Cerner Millennium EHR. It is going to cost north
9 of \$15 billion when all things are said and done. I think
10 it is critical. It is something we have been talking about
11 around here for a long, long time, and I appreciate the
12 Secretary moving forward on it.

13 Your testimony highlighted the need for rigorous
14 oversight, and I agree with you. And I think Senator
15 Blumenthal, who I am sure will be coming shortly--and I have
16 a bill, along with Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz has
17 a House companion to this.

18 My question to you, Commander, has this VA been keeping
19 you updated about the purchase? Have they kept you in the
20 loop so that you can communicate to minimize any potential
21 negative impacts that may be coming down the pike?

22 Ms. Rohan. Senator Tester, I appreciate that comment,
23 those questions.

24 I want to add also, you from Montana, me from
25 Wisconsin, I understand that choice needed in some of our

1 areas because we veteran have a distance that we need to
2 travel, so I appreciate that.

3 Senator Tester. You bet.

4 Ms. Rohan. I also appreciate the fact that it only
5 makes comment sense that those two systems are connected
6 somehow--

7 Senator Tester. That is correct.

8 Ms. Rohan. --so that a veteran can go right from the
9 Department of Defense into the VA.

10 To give you a more complete answer about the
11 connections we have, I am going to let you talk to one of
12 our staff members, Lou Celli, who is our VA&R guy.

13 Senator Tester. You bet.

14 Mr. Celli. Yeah. Thank you, Senator.

15 And the VA has been keeping us up to date. We have
16 been working intimately with the VA. As a matter of fact,
17 we went down and visited Cerner headquarters, and the
18 Secretary had some concerns, as you well know. Those
19 concerns were not only could the medical records communicate
20 effectively between DoD and VA, but more importantly, could
21 it communicate effectively with the civilian community and
22 the civilian health care providers?

23 And they found that the software itself, of course, can
24 do the job. What they are trying to figure out now is how
25 to get the civilian community to cooperate and participate

1 in that program.

2 We have not yet seen the report that the Secretary had
3 requested, and we are waiting to see that report now. You
4 may have had the privilege of reviewing that. We are
5 waiting to review it now, but they have been keeping us up
6 to date as they move along. And we, like you, are expecting
7 that they are going to be issuing that contract very
8 shortly.

9 Senator Tester. Thank you.

10 You talked about women's health care, Commander. This
11 is the fastest-growing population, women's veterans. From
12 your perspective, from your seat, do you think the VA is
13 appropriately committed to addressing issues specific to
14 women veterans, and do you think it is being done
15 systematically? In other words, does it vary from office to
16 office, from facility to facility, or are we doing a good
17 job--is the VA doing a good job making sure that women
18 veterans are met across the board in every State?

19 Ms. Rohan. I appreciate you being concerned about
20 women veterans also.

21 As I have traveled, I have had the opportunity to visit
22 21 different States so far. I have not been in VA hospitals
23 in all of those States, but I am very impressed with some of
24 the VA facilities, the changes they have made, the
25 improvements to the women's clinics. A lot of the women's

1 clinics have private entrances, so that female veterans do
2 not necessarily need to go through the main doors if they
3 are not comfortable doing so.

4 I can also tell you, though, that I have been in a few
5 VA facilities that I have not quite achieved what we are
6 hoping for as far as women's health care. I was in one
7 clinic that you needed to go through a mental health ward to
8 get into the women's clinic. I did express my concern with
9 that to the director, and they are in the process of trying
10 to make some changes there.

11 There are so many women health issues, some that we
12 know about, and there are so many that we do not even know
13 about yet. As women are going into more and more of our
14 combat roles, we do not know what they are going to be
15 coming home with. So the awareness of that is so important.

16 Senator Tester. That is good.

17 If I might, with you--

18 Ms. Rohan. Yep.

19 Senator Tester. Mr. Chairman, it is just a follow-up
20 question on that.

21 Senator Boozman and I have introduced the Deborah
22 Sampson Act. Last year, we did it, which would require the
23 VA to track metrics so we can see how the VA is doing to
24 fill in any of these gaps that you just talked about.

25 VA has opposed doing this. They think it is

1 unnecessary and think it is too expensive. From your
2 perspective, how important do you think it is to track that
3 data?

4 Ms. Rohan. I believe it is very helpful to track that
5 data. It is really strange. People keep asking me how many
6 women are in The American Legion, and we have always felt a
7 veteran is a veteran, so we had not tracked that information
8 of who, males and females. We never tracked gender. So
9 just in the last 5, 6 years, we started tracking that
10 ourselves. So the data is important.

11 Senator Tester. You bet.

12 Thank you.

13 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

15 Senator Tester. Appreciate the flexibility.

16 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator.

17 I have not actually tracked, Commander, how many
18 American Legion posts I belong to yet, so I understand that
19 a lot.

20 [Laughter.]

21 Ms. Rohan. We do not want to know that.

22 Chairman Roe. Mr. Coffman, you are recognized.

23 Mr. Coffman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

24 For the folks from Colorado, if you could please stand
25 up, so we can recognize you there. All right. Thank you so

1 much.

2 [Applause.]

3 Ms. Rohan. Okay.

4 Mr. Coffman. Tom Bock over there has been involved
5 with The American Legion, I think since the Earth was
6 cooling. A long time.

7 [Laughter.]

8 Mr. Coffman. And Ralph Bozella, I have got to share
9 something with you about Ralph, a little bit embarrassing,
10 but Ralph came to me one day and said, "I have something
11 very personal and very confidential to share with you." And
12 so he did, and it was pretty tough stuff.

13 He bent his head down, and he shuffled his feet,
14 started crying some and said, "My life's ambition was be, to
15 learn the title United States Marine." Well, we know Ralph
16 is an Army veteran from Vietnam, and he said he was
17 rejected. His application was rejected based on three
18 things. His parents knew each other.

19 [Laughter.]

20 Mr. Coffman. He did not have any significant criminal
21 background, and his test scores were too high. So, Ralph, I
22 am sorry about that.

23 But let me talk a little bit about--happy to share
24 that, Ralph.

25 [Laughter.]

1 Mr. Coffman. Let me just talk about mental health,
2 and, Commander Rohan, H.R. 918, the Veterans Urgent Access
3 to Mental Health Act, you all supported that, and I thank
4 you for that. And that authorizes the VA to provide initial
5 mental health assessments and mental health care services to
6 combat veterans and veterans who are victims of sexual
7 assault, even if they have an other than honorable
8 discharge.

9 Right now, I think that the VA is providing some
10 services, but they can turn that off and turn that on. It
11 is at their discretion, and that will continue that way
12 without authorizing, this authorizing language.

13 Unfortunately, many veterans who have deployed to Iraq
14 and Afghanistan have come home not only with clear medical
15 histories of PTSD but also with behavioral health problems
16 directly related to their combat experiences, but the
17 militaries used these other than honorable discharges to rid
18 themselves of servicemembers designated as "discipline
19 problems" rather than providing them with the treatment they
20 need.

21 In fact, GAO found that 62 percent of the 91,764
22 servicemembers separated for misconduct from FY2011 to
23 FY2015 had been diagnosed within 2 years prior to separation
24 with PTSD, TBI, or other conditions that could be associated
25 with misconduct. Of those, 23 percent, 13,292, received an

1 other than honorable characterization of service at a time
2 when 20 veterans a day commit suicide, and VA evidence shows
3 that there are decreased suicide rates among veterans
4 receiving VA health care. I believe it is critical that
5 Senate pass H.R. 918, the companion to our House bill.
6 These veterans must know they are not alone in their time of
7 need.

8 With the support of The American Legion, H.R. 918
9 unanimously passed the House of Representatives last
10 November. Therefore, I would ask you, Commander Rohan and
11 the legislative support team here, while The American Legion
12 supports action on the Senate companion to H.R. 981, which
13 is Senate companion--what is the number for the Senate?
14 Well, if you could--what is the number for the Senate
15 companion?

16 Okay, okay. The Senate action on the House bill that
17 is now before us in the Senate, H.R. 918. If you all could
18 push that in the Senate, as you push that in the House, I
19 would really appreciate that.

20 And just to let you know, for added emphasis, I am a
21 member of your organization and appreciate your leadership
22 here, and my dues are paid up, which I know--

23 [Laughter.]

24 Ms. Rohan. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Coffman, for
25 both paying your dues and for that question.

1 I am going to let one of your constituents, Ralph
2 Bozella, our VA&R chairman, take that for you.

3 Mr. Coffman. And I would like to think of Ralph as an
4 honorary Marine.

5 [Laughter.]

6 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander, and thank you,
7 Congressman Coffman--

8 Mr. Coffman. Thank you.

9 Mr. Bozella. --for raising that issue.

10 And, by the way, those of us that do know you, we know
11 you were in the Army before you were in the Marines.

12 [Laughter.]

13 Mr. Bozella. And the first time you heard that joke
14 was an Army guy telling you about a Marine, and I am glad
15 you remembered it.

16 But the mental health issues within our nation today
17 with veterans, well outlined by you, Mr. Coffman, is a
18 paramount problem within our community. Part of that
19 certainly is those veterans with less than honorable
20 discharges, And we certainly appreciate your bill to raise
21 that issue and do something about that issue because we do
22 not need more veterans with mental health problems going
23 untreated. We have to find a way as a veterans
24 organization, as Congress, as a society to get them the
25 treatment and the help they need.

1 The American Legion has a program where we can help
2 people with less than honorable upgrade their discharge. We
3 do that in-house.

4 How do people know this? Like with anything else, it
5 is an educational process, and to me, the first step in
6 education is raising that awareness.

7 You mentioned the transition program and the 20 suicide
8 deaths a day, and 14 of those are not VA patients. How do
9 we get these veterans to understand that there are programs
10 in the VA that can in fact help you for mental health
11 issues?

12 One of the ways is the Transition Assistance Program.
13 The VSOs have been locked out of that program, and I really
14 believe it is time--The American Legion believes it is time
15 that we invite the VSOs back to the table to help with that
16 because that is what we do best, is raising that awareness
17 in the community, educating our members and even veterans
18 that are not our members about what is available to you. We
19 advocate to that level.

20 And I believe there was an executive order just signed
21 about transition assistance from the White House, so I know
22 it is something that everybody here is interested in and
23 working on. And the best step, I think, was to get the VSOs
24 back involved with that.

25 [Applause.]

1 Chairman Roe. The gentleman's time has expired.

2 Mr. Takano, you are recognized.

3 Mr. Takano. Thank you.

4 Are there any Californians in the house?

5 Ms. Rohan. Of course.

6 Mr. Takano. Wow. Look at that whole row.

7 Well, I want to thank the Californians and the entire
8 American Legion for your Boys State and Girls State, Boys
9 Nation and Girls Nation program. I was a participant in
10 California 40 years ago and was--

11 [Applause.]

12 Mr. Takano. And it is a tremendous civic education,
13 and we need that civic education then. I think--I know the
14 countless hours of volunteer time that your members of the
15 Auxiliary and The American Legion put in.

16 I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you,
17 Commander Rohan, for your testimony and all of the important
18 work that you all do.

19 Now, while the VA is not perfect, I agree that in many
20 cases, it is the best option and the first choice for our
21 nation's veterans.

22 Commander Rohan, in your written testimony, you
23 mentioned the Legion's System Worth Saving program. Can you
24 talk a bit more about what the Legion learned through these
25 site visits and town halls? In particular, I want you to

1 elaborate on what you all believe the core competencies of
2 the VA are that make it the first choice for many veterans.

3 Ms. Rohan. I have had the opportunity to go on some
4 System Worth Saving visits and to attend those town hall
5 meetings, and I want to invite all of you to--if The
6 American Legion is having a town hall meeting, to talk to
7 those folks who are using the system to stop by and sit in
8 on a town hall meeting and listen to our veterans.

9 To further expand on that, I am going to let Ralph
10 Bozella, our chairman of VA&R, give some more information.

11 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander.

12 Mr. Takano, since 2003, we have been conducting these
13 site visits, and since 2012, we have added a component of a
14 veterans town hall meeting prior to the site visit. We
15 learned a lot from the veterans at those town hall meetings.

16 Since 2014, the most pressing issue for veterans has
17 been the difficulty of dealing with the Choice program--
18 records transference, bill payments, and then trying to
19 contact the third-party contractor to get those resolved.

20 In some VA medical facilities--Pittsburgh and Memphis
21 comes to mind--they are using VA resources so the veteran
22 can call back to that VA. So that is the biggest problem
23 that we have seen.

24 And the other part of your question, the core
25 competencies, the best thing about VA, why do veterans

1 prefer VA care? And there are quality measures that show
2 that we do prefer VA care. It is because the VA knows how
3 to treat the entire veteran patient. They know who we are
4 when we come in there. They know that some of us have PTSD
5 and have experienced combat, and there is other parts of our
6 entire makeup, physically and mentally, that have to be
7 treated and addressed when you go in there. I do not think
8 that exists in the private sector.

9 Another really strong piece of that, when we are in a
10 VA facility, we bond with each other. We talk to each
11 other. We talk about our treatment. We talk about our
12 service time, and that creates a camaraderie, which we
13 experienced in the service. And there is certain morale-
14 lifting to that.

15 To me, though, my experience as a patient in VA is VA
16 cares like no one else has ever cared for me as a veteran.
17 Personally, it is the best health care I have ever had.

18 Mr. Takano. Well, thank you so much for that.

19 [Applause.]

20 Mr. Takano. I would be delighted to join any one of
21 your town halls, should it fit my schedule.

22 Ms. Rohan. Sure.

23 Mr. Takano. Every opportunity to listen to veterans
24 about their health care is something I certainly want to
25 spend more time doing.

1 Commander, your testimony also highlighted the
2 challenges that VA faces with recruitment and retention. I
3 have heard about this issue from doctors, constituents, and
4 even the bipartisan co-chairs of the Commission on Care.
5 What suggestions does the Legion have for improving the VA's
6 ability to recruit and retain the best-quality providers and
7 support staff?

8 Ms. Rohan. Thank you for that question, and again, as
9 I have traveled, I have had the opportunity to meet with
10 several of our VA directors. Some of them have been talking
11 about the bad press that the VA gets, and they can find
12 great people that they want to hire. But those folks are
13 not able to proudly say "I work for the VA" because they
14 feel that it does not come off--it seems shameful to tell
15 somebody they work for the VA, when it is such a great
16 system and so many people need it and love it so much, and
17 we can tell how much, how much the employees at the VA care
18 about our veterans and how much they really want to take
19 care of them.

20 So some of the concern and some of the areas I have
21 been to is the bad press that the VA gets, that folks just
22 do not want to go there. So, as employers--or employees, I
23 guess--

24 Mr. Takano. Employees, yes.

25 Ms. Rohan. So and to further in on that, to just hone

1 a little bit farther on that, I would like to have Lou Celli
2 just give some more information.

3 Mr. Celli. Yeah. Thank you, Congressman Takano.

4 In addition to the things that Commander Rohan
5 discussed, there are some legislative actions that Congress
6 can take as well, trying to give VA some expedited hiring
7 authorities for physicians, and it does not always have to
8 be about money. It does not always have to be about more
9 money for student repayment. It can be about incentives
10 that VA can provide within their system now, like the
11 ability to do research in other facilities and transferring,
12 allowing physicians to take a year to transfer to a Class A
13 facility as opposed to a facility that maybe does not have
14 some of the resources in a rural area, and then bring those
15 best practices back.

16 There are lots of ways to attract new talent. The VA
17 is getting more creative with that. We support those
18 efforts, and we would also support any legislation that
19 Congress might want to introduce that would give the
20 Secretary the expediting hiring authority because they get
21 physicians who they can attract, that are in the shoot, and
22 then they end up falling out because they get better offers
23 as they wait too long to get hired.

24 Mr. Takano. That is the big complaint I have heard is
25 the cumbersome hiring process, and even the regulations

1 between VISNs and people unable to transfer easily, but this
2 long cumbersome hiring process for specialists and doctors
3 is unnecessary. And I think we also need a much stronger
4 personnel system as well.

5 Anyway, my time is long over, and, Mr. Chairman, thank
6 you for your indulgence.

7 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

8 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon, you are recognized, and, Commander,
9 I appreciate your comments about Puerto Rico, and I will be
10 there in 2 weeks to visit Puerto Rico.

11 You are recognized.

12 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I
13 want to thank all the members for being here today and you,
14 Commander, for visiting actually the island and the U.S.
15 Virgin Islands during your tour. We really appreciate that,
16 and the people from The American Legion in Puerto Rico
17 really appreciate that.

18 And I as the only Representative from the people of
19 Puerto Rico, actually those--and I need to thank the
20 Chairman of this Committee for actually--he will be having a
21 hearing in Puerto Rico on March the 12th, and he is going to
22 be visiting the VA hospital. He is going to be having a
23 hearing with the Legion and other veterans service
24 organizations in the Island, and I think this is important
25 not just because of the hurricane aftermath, but all the

1 situations Puerto Rico and the Territories are facing
2 regarding the health care and the situation with veterans in
3 the Territories.

4 And having said that, you saw what is happening in
5 Arecibo with our clinics still actually working in a parking
6 lot with tents and mobile units. VA is still closed. It
7 was a savage hurricane, so we understand that, but we also
8 need to thank my colleagues, Members of Congress, that
9 actually passed during the last supplemental, \$93.5 million
10 to the VA to repair damaged facilities and other costs
11 associated to the hurricane response for Puerto Rico, the
12 U.S. Virgin Islands, Florida, and Texas.

13 They also approved \$75.1 million to repair health care
14 facilities for the veterans units in Puerto Rico, Florida,
15 Texas, and U.S. Virgin Islands; another \$11.1 million to
16 cover the cost of medical services and medical supplies for
17 mobile medical units that were used in the hurricane
18 response during that period of time and another \$4.1 million
19 for the repair of the Puerto Rico national cemetery as well
20 as some units in Texas. So that means that during the last
21 supplemental, this Congress acted approving the funds to
22 help the clinics of the veterans in the U.S. territories,
23 Florida, and Texas.

24 So we are very grateful, Chairman, for having that.
25 Those funds are deeply needed in our areas.

1 I will also need to, first of all, congratulate you to
2 be the first woman leading your organization. I think you
3 make us proud, and there is a lot of women that recognize
4 that more than 500,000 women veterans are now serving our
5 nation, and--

6 [Applause.]

7 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. And that means also that the VA
8 made those estimates about the people that--the women that
9 are going to be attending in terms of treatment, and it is a
10 growing population that needs to be attended, and the
11 outpatient services are now to be comparing the service that
12 male receiving before. Women are in a higher risk of being
13 homeless and suicide relative to none other women veterans,
14 so we need to face those new challenges with new
15 opportunities.

16 So, in that regard, I concur with you with the need of
17 more support to meet those clinics, having more services for
18 women, and one of the questions that I do got for you, it is
19 in terms of how we can improve in terms of the caregiver
20 programs.

21 And I will say about Puerto Rico. One of the main
22 challenges we got in the part of recertification to the
23 process is the visit. The VA must conduct the visit in the
24 rural areas. In Puerto Rico, that is a big challenge. Do
25 you experience or have a similar difficulty for any members

1 of The American Legion in terms of that program and the
2 recertification process?

3 Ms. Rohan. Ma'am, first, after seeing Puerto Rico and
4 the Virgin Islands, I have no words. We actually did a
5 video, which you can see on legion.org, about my visit
6 there.

7 I was able to go to Arecibo and see the tents that are
8 being used as a clinic. The first thing I asked the doctors
9 when I saw those tents was if it was causing issues with our
10 combat veterans having to go into a tent to be treated for
11 everyday needs and I was concerned that that may trigger
12 some post-traumatic stress or it may trigger some concerns
13 for the doctors.

14 And the doctors I talked to that day said that people
15 are resilient, and that our military veterans that are in
16 Puerto Rico and having to be treated in those tents or in
17 the parking lots--until Ponce was brought back up, they were
18 in parking lots being treated in tents also. The doctor
19 told me that he said people are resilient, and they go on in
20 a disaster. They just keep moving and moving and moving,
21 and then someday--they do not know when. It is different
22 for each person. At some time, they are going to sit down
23 and realize that what they are going through is not normal,
24 and when they sit down and realize that what they are going
25 through is not normal, I hope--I hope they have the staff

1 they need to take care of that.

2 When I had the chance to go to the Virgin Islands and
3 visit the clinic in the Virgin Isles, I was told that
4 several of the phlebotomists and some of the nurses that
5 work there in the hospital that they were using left the
6 island. When the hurricane started coming, they left the
7 island, and when they left the island, it left that clinic,
8 the clinic in the Virgin Isles, unable to do blood tests,
9 simple blood tests.

10 The Virgin Isles doctors there at that clinic shared
11 with me the--for a person who lives on the Virgin Isles to
12 have to go into Puerto Rico to go to the hospital in Puerto
13 Rico, the trial of getting there, taking an airplane, if the
14 plane happens to be just a little bit late, they may miss
15 their appointment. And then they get--they are in Puerto
16 Rico with no place to stay because their plan was to go back
17 home that night. So they are there with no place to stay.

18 You know, I do not know what the answer to that all is,
19 but then when you start talking about family members, if
20 somebody from the Virgin Isles is in the hospital in Puerto
21 Rico, the family has to go through all that expense of
22 visiting a family member there.

23 So I also had the opportunity to meet with the Governor
24 of the Virgin Isles, and I am proud to say that one of the
25 things he shared with me is that no country responds better

1 to natural disasters than the United States does. And he
2 was so proud, and he wanted to share that because he has got
3 the British Virgin Isles right there, and he knows how their
4 country responded to those hurricane disasters. And he
5 wanted to say also not just The American Legion members, but
6 he wanted to say to all of you how proud he was of how well
7 America responded.

8 But the other part--and not really about veterans'
9 affairs, but what he was concerned about was the fact that
10 all of the funding goes to put back the infrastructure to
11 the way it was, not to improve it. So each time a hurricane
12 hits, it goes in, and it takes out the infrastructure. And
13 then it just gets repaired back to where it was instead of
14 fixing it the right way.

15 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. I know my time is over, but--

16 Ms. Rohan. I am sorry.

17 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. --let me tell you that we fixed
18 that.

19 Ms. Rohan. Good.

20 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. In that supplemental, we included
21 an amendment--

22 Ms. Rohan. Good.

23 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. --that will promote, that we can--
24 actually, we have done things using new technologies and not
25 doing it as it was before the hurricane.

1 Ms. Rohan. Good. Thank you. I am glad for that.

2 But your question is about families and caregivers, and
3 my them is "Family First." It is really all about taking
4 care of each other and making sure that the families have
5 the resources because I do not want to say it is a burden on
6 families because it is their loved ones they are taking care
7 of, but it is a stressor. And we need to make sure that the
8 whole family, the whole unit is taken care of.

9 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. Thank you, and thank you, Mr.
10 Chairman.

11 Chairman Roe. I think most of you on the House Side--
12 the Senate side does not know this, but usually, I have to
13 gavel everybody down, including myself, at 5 minutes to get
14 the testimony done.

15 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. Thank you.

16 Chairman Roe. But I have been a little more liberal
17 today than I have been, so try to keep your remarks
18 somewhere in there.

19 Ms. Gonzalez-Colon. Okay.

20 Chairman Roe. Senator Hirono, thank you. You have
21 been very patient. You are recognized.

22 Senator Hirono. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

23 This is one of the few times that we have a joint
24 House-Senate hearing because it is really important to hear
25 from all of you and, of course, to welcome all of you who

1 have come from all over the country, and so I do want to
2 extend a special aloha to the veterans who have come from
3 Hawaii, probably traveling among the farthest.

4 So I would like to recognize Francis Riddell, commander
5 of Post 17 in Hawaii; Marvin Siegfried; and David Carlson.
6 Where are you gentlemen?

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Hirono. Okay. They are in here somewhere.

9 And, of course, I want to congratulate you, Commander
10 Rohan, for being the first woman to lead The American
11 Legion.

12 We are making progress. After all, we have 22 women in
13 the United States Senate now, more than ever in the history
14 of our country.

15 [Applause.]

16 Senator Hirono. No offense to you, gentlemen, but a
17 few more women on that dais would be good too.

18 [Laughter.]

19 Senator Hirono. And, Commander, I want to thank you
20 for highlighting your key interests, that being choice, and
21 your concern that we are on a potential slippery slope to
22 privatization.

23 And I want to thank Ralph Bozella for telling us why
24 the care that you receive in the VA system is the best.
25 Thank you very much for that.

1 And, Commander, back to you, the importance of an
2 integrated electronic medical record system, something we
3 have only been working on for a number of years now, with
4 great expenditure, but it is important, and then, of course,
5 better transferability of military experience and training
6 for post-military jobs. I share your priorities.

7 Now, you mentioned a little bit about the growing
8 number of women, of course, who are veterans, and you said
9 that we could be doing better in the VA to provide services
10 for the veterans. And could it be that one of these areas
11 would be in some specialty training?

12 You mentioned in your testimony that there is a need
13 for trained gynecologists within the VA, and do you think
14 that VA is making this a priority, or do additional
15 incentives need to be considered to attract more staff,
16 specialized staff, particularly that who can work with
17 women?

18 Ms. Rohan. What I have been seeing is there are some
19 clinics that actually they have a gynecologist system in
20 place, and it is amazing. There are hospitals and there are
21 clinics that they have set aside for women.

22 As far as further detail on that, I am going to pass it
23 to let Ralph--I am going to have Ralph explain more on that.

24 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander.

25 Thank you, Senator, for your interest in this really

1 important issue of gender-specific care in the VA, and
2 through our System Worth Saving program, I believe it was
3 the 2013 year, we made our entire focus that year on women
4 veterans' health care within the VA.

5 We have learned an awful lot about that. We shared our
6 information with Congress, with the White House, and with
7 the VA Secretary at the time, and I believe VA has taken our
8 information and has made necessary changes.

9 There are three levels of women health care within the
10 VA. Level 1 is--the health care is in any normal clinic
11 where everybody goes. There is sometimes problems with
12 that. Some women are not comfortable to be in a room with
13 men at that time, for obvious reasons, based on their past.
14 A Level 2 is a separate clinic within that VA hospital, or a
15 Level 3 women's clinic is a separate building altogether.

16 We raised the issues of not only treatment, gender-
17 specific treatment, but also the privacy issues. Those
18 changes are absolutely taking place.

19 In the Level 2 and 3 clinics, when you talk into a
20 women veterans clinic, you know it immediately. The
21 atmosphere is changed. The environment is changed.

22 We cannot even go in there as a team of a System Worth
23 Saving people without special permission. That is good, so
24 we do appreciate that.

25 A lot of the gender-specific care is either choiced out

1 or feed out to the community, but more VA hospitals now are
2 bringing in mammography and OB/GYN and those kind of
3 services. It is starting to happen.

4 Senator Hirono. Thank you very much.

5 And you have been asked, Commander, about the need to--
6 and we are aware of the need to retain and hire the
7 caregivers, and there is one bill that I had introduced, S.
8 899, the Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Transition
9 Improvement Act, and this bill, which I introduced with
10 Senators Moran and Tester, would focus on VA Title 38
11 employees, such as VA physicians, physician assistants,
12 registered nurses, and that they are then eligible for the
13 same additional medical leave that their counterparts in
14 other Federal agencies have access to under the Wounded
15 Warrior Federal Leave Act.

16 So for some reason, these folks who work for VA were
17 not included, and could you comment on the importance of
18 passing this legislation so that your--or the providers that
19 I mentioned would have the same kind of benefits?

20 Ms. Rohan. That sounds like a very interesting bill,
21 ma'am. Thank you so much. We will have--

22 Senator Hirono. Actually, The American Legion, you all
23 support it, so thank you.

24 Ms. Rohan. We will have to make sure that our
25 legislative team has a chance to review it and make sure it

1 falls under all of our resolutions that we have.

2 Senator Hirono. All right.

3 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

4 Senator Hirono. Mahalo.

5 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 Chairman Roe. Thank the gentlelady for yielding.

7 Senator Blumenthal, you are recognized.

8 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 Thank you all for being here, and thank you for your
10 service to our nation, and throughout the year, thank you
11 for giving us your guidance and advice, which is so
12 valuable.

13 I want to second what has been said about women's
14 health care, but simply remind you that it is not only words
15 but resources that are necessary. And in that connection, I
16 call your attention to the fact that just within the past
17 few days, one of the House subcommittee chairmen on
18 Appropriations has indicated that he would favor taking some
19 of the funds that have been allocated to repair and
20 maintenance of our VA facility, hospital facilities like the
21 one in West Haven, Connecticut, and instead devote it to
22 other uses.

23 We can talk all we want about clinics, which are
24 absolutely vital. We can talk about upgrading surgical
25 suites and other physical necessities are our VA facilities,

1 but if we take away the funding, we can just keep talking
2 and nothing will happen.

3 So I hope you will join me in advocating for proper
4 funding for VA health care facilities requiring maintenance
5 and repair. The needs are vital in every one of your
6 States.

7 Speaking of States, I understand we have three
8 Connecticut members here. George Castle, Jerry Dearman, and
9 Robert Lewis, if you want to stand and be recognized? Thank
10 you for being here.

11 [Applause.]

12 Senator Blumenthal. And I want to thank you for
13 visiting my office yesterday to remind me that my dues are
14 still owing.

15 [Laughter.]

16 Senator Blumenthal. Let me say also another area where
17 I have heard from you is on the need for returning
18 servicemen and -women to retain their employment rights.
19 This area is one that has been really troubling to me
20 because, as a dad of two veterans, post 9/11, both of them,
21 one in the Marine Corps, the other in the Navy, I am aware
22 of the difficulties that they often face coming out of the
23 military seeking jobs or going back to old jobs. And very
24 simply, under Resolution 315 of the American Legion,
25 employers would be prohibited from pressuring a veteran into

1 waiving his or her employment rights and protections.

2 I have introduced a measure called the Justice for
3 Servicemembers and Veterans Act. It is bipartisan,
4 bicameral, and it would accomplish this goal of offering
5 greater protection for employment rights.

6 We know that a job is not only about income. It is
7 about dignity, self-worth, self-respect, and on this issue
8 of mental health and suicide, 20 veterans every day,
9 intolerable in the greatest country in the history of the
10 world, absolutely unacceptable. So I thank you for your
11 emphasis on mental health and preventing these kinds of
12 really tragic events, which are preventable. They are truly
13 preventable.

14 I am going to yield, Mr. Chairman, although I have some
15 time left, and I would simply thank all of our American
16 Legion members for being here today. I am proud to be a
17 member and proud to have you here to remind us about the
18 obligation this country has to not only this generation but
19 every generation who has served.

20 I do not know whether we have any members of the World
21 War II greatest generation with us, but they have inspired
22 us in so many ways. And I thank them in particular for
23 their service.

24 Thanks all.

25 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

1 [Applause.]

2 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator. Thank the gentleman
3 for yielding.

4 Senator Sanders, you are recognized.

5 Senator Sanders. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman,
6 and thank you all very much for being here and for your
7 service to our country.

8 In your executive summary, your excellent executive
9 summary of the publication which you distributed today, "A
10 System Worth Saving," you state, "The Department of Veterans
11 Affairs' health care system continues to perform as well as
12 and often better than the rest of the U.S. health care
13 system on key quality measures. These include patient
14 safety, patient satisfaction, care coordination, and
15 adherence to evidence-based medical practices."

16 I happen to agree with you. I can tell you that in the
17 State of Vermont, when I talk to veterans, they are very
18 proud of the quality care they are getting at White River
19 and the CBOCs throughout our State.

20 But I want to raise--and you have raised very strongly--
21 -the elephant in the room, and let us be honest and clear
22 about it. There are organizations and individuals in this
23 country and in this Congress who want to privatized Social
24 Security. They want to privatize Medicare. They want to
25 privatize Medicaid. They want to privatize the U.S. Postal

1 Service. They do not believe the government should play an
2 essential role in protecting the people of this country.
3 That is their ideology, and they want to privatize the
4 Veterans Administration.

5 Now, right now, the war that we have been waging is
6 whether or not we are going to strengthen the VA, whether we
7 are going to make sure that VA facilities in Vermont and
8 throughout the country are in the shape that they need to be
9 in and whether we have the staffing they need.

10 As you know, Commander, we now have some 30,000
11 vacancies--

12 Ms. Rohan. Yes.

13 Senator Sanders. --at VA facilities all across this
14 country. We have got staff trying to do a great job, but
15 sometimes people cannot get the care that they need.

16 Are you in favor, Madam Commander, of making certain
17 that we fund those vacancies and do it as quickly as
18 possible?

19 [Applause.]

20 Ms. Rohan. Senator Sanders, thank you. Thank you.

21 Yes. Yes is the simple answer.

22 Senator Sanders. I know. That was kind of a leading
23 question. I thought you would say that.

24 [Laughter.]

25 Ms. Rohan. Yeah, there you go.

1 You know, just to remind everyone, all of us veterans,
2 we did not fight for Blue Cross Blue Shield. We fought for
3 the USA, for the red, white, and blue.

4 So The American Legion is 100 percent for funding the
5 VA system, making sure that our veterans are taken care of
6 where they need it, when they need it, and as I said
7 earlier, sometimes that means choice. Sometimes that means
8 they may need to go to a non-VA provider.

9 Senator Sanders. Right.

10 Ms. Rohan. But that system we have, that is where
11 veterans need to get their care.

12 Senator Sanders. Okay. Thank you.

13 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

14 [Applause.]

15 Senator Sanders. Now, in my view--and I had the honor
16 of being the Chair of this Committee in the Senate several
17 years ago, and one of the areas we try to focus on and we
18 are still fighting for is one of the gaps in VA health care
19 is not understanding that dental care is part of health
20 care. Do you agree with me that we should be expanding VA
21 health care to include dental care?

22 Now it is--it deals with service-connected, but there
23 are a lot of veterans around this country who have serious
24 dental problems, cannot afford dental care, would like to
25 get it at the VA. Is that something that we should be--an

1 area we should be moving in?

2 Ms. Rohan. Yes.

3 [Applause.]

4 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Senator, I thank you for that also
5 because we all know that dental care goes right along with
6 your health care also. If you have dental issues,
7 eventually it will start deteriorating your other health
8 care--

9 Senator Sanders. Exactly. It becomes a health care
10 issue.

11 Ms. Rohan. Thank you. Yes, yes.

12 Senator Sanders. I know I am asking you these really
13 hard questions, putting you right on the spot here.

14 Ms. Rohan. No.

15 Senator Sanders. I am going to ask you another very
16 hard question. Under the leadership of Senator Murray and
17 others, we have moved forward in this caregiver issue, and
18 it is a huge issue because you have folks, often women, who
19 essentially devoted their entire lives to their husbands or
20 their brothers, day in and day out, and we are making some
21 progress. We fully funded the post-9/11 caregiver people.

22 The good news out of the Senate Committee has become--
23 has come, as you know, an expansion to cover caregivers of
24 all generations. All right. That is the good news.

25 The bad news is we do not yet have the funding that we

1 will need. Will you join us in working to make sure that we
2 fully fund the caregiver program for every generation of
3 veterans? That is another hard question.

4 [Applause.]

5 Ms. Rohan. Thank you, Mr. Senator.

6 When it comes to caregivers, again, my theme is "Family
7 First." It is all about taking care of one another, and we
8 have so many moms and dads who are taking care of their
9 young heroes who came home injured.

10 Senator Sanders. Right.

11 Ms. Rohan. So it is husbands. It is wives. There are
12 so many of those hidden heroes out there.

13 Senator Sanders. Who have devoted their lives.

14 Ms. Rohan. Who have devoted their lives, and our
15 veterans did not just serve after 9/11. They have been
16 serving way before that. We have World War II vets, Korean
17 vets, all of those--

18 Senator Sanders. My last question, if I may, Mr.
19 Chairman. I am going a little bit beyond.

20 Everybody here knows that this country faces a major
21 opioid epidemic, very serious problem, and I know that there
22 is a good effort on the part of the VA to make sure that
23 those veterans who are dealing with pain issues get the care
24 they need without relying on opioids.

25 Could somebody comment on the need to expand

1 complementary medicine and whether we are seeing programs
2 like acupuncture or other type of efforts to deal with pain,
3 other than opioids? Is that something worth expanding and
4 exploring? Somebody want to say a word on that?

5 Ms. Rohan. Yes, Senator. It is worth going into
6 further detail about that.

7 The last couple of days, we have been having meetings
8 and presentations going on over at the Hilton with all of
9 our committee and commission members, and our committee
10 chairman of Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, Ralph
11 Bozella, if you could just explain some of the things that
12 we went over this week.

13 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander.

14 Senator Sanders, that is one of the primary focuses for
15 The American Legion and our System Worth Saving program. We
16 always visit with the mental health professionals in the VA,
17 and we want to know what are your CAM, your complementary
18 alternative medical treatments. It is very important to us.

19 At first, I would say back in 2012, 2013, VA doctors in
20 mental health were doing it almost silently. It was like
21 they could not talk about it, and we encouraged them from
22 the bottom up, "Hey, bring this information forward because
23 we are supporting it, and we need to know more about it."

24 I really believe VA needs to research on it. This
25 stuff works because it keeps them in the game. It keeps the

1 patients in the game, and there is all kind of things like
2 Yoga and music therapy, biofeedback. There is a list that I
3 will not go through. It is exhaustive, and we need to know
4 that it works. And we need to know that it works with
5 research. There is not one thing that works for everybody,
6 but if that list which is inexhaustive is there, let us be
7 sure that it is being done at the local hospital. We
8 believe in it.

9 Senator Sanders. Thank you very much, and thank you,
10 Mr. Chairman.

11 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator.

12 Ms. Kuster, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

13 Ms. Kuster. Thank you very much, and you left off
14 right where I wanted to get started, so thank you to Senator
15 Sanders and Senator Blumenthal and Senator Hirono.

16 Two of the issues that I care most about--women's
17 health and the opioid epidemic--I am Congresswoman Annie
18 Kuster from New Hampshire, and I wanted to thank you for
19 specifically referencing our Bipartisan Congressional Heroin
20 Task Force that I was the founder and now the co-chair.

21 We have 100 members of the House of Representatives
22 working together, half Republicans, half Democrats, very
23 rare in this town, and we have a great agenda for
24 legislation. We are going to be working with the Senate on
25 a CARA 2.0, Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, that

1 first passed in 2016.

2 You might recall we got a billion dollars in funding at
3 the end of the Obama administration; just in the last couple
4 of weeks, \$6 billion coming out of the budget deal. Over
5 the next 2 years, we are looking more toward \$25 billion
6 over 5 years. So this has really taken its toll,
7 particularly on rural America.

8 And I would agree with you. The veterans were first
9 in, and I want to make sure they are first out. And we have
10 got some fantastic research going at the White River
11 Junction VA on the border with Vermont and New Hampshire, a
12 terrific researcher there named Julie Franklin, who is
13 masking cutting-edge progress on alternative pain
14 management, acupuncture, all different types of alternative
15 pain management, dropping the use of opioid medication by a
16 half.

17 And let me tell you, I have met with these veterans.
18 They are much happier. I met a guy that was taking 160
19 pills a month, and to get off that medication and to be
20 pain-free, he had a spring in his step. He was getting
21 married, and he had a whole future ahead of him. So I
22 really want to commend that research.

23 Our task force would really like to work with you going
24 forward on your priorities, but thank you for your specific
25 reference.

1 I support everything that has been said about women's
2 health. The White River Junction also has a terrific new
3 women's clinic built right into the very old building. I
4 know you are dealing with old buildings across the country,
5 but they met with the women members, veterans, and they
6 wanted a separate entrance where they would feel safe. They
7 actually redesigned the very rooms that the physicians were
8 working in with the women and obviously a lot of mental
9 health.

10 We also have a task force on ending sexual violence,
11 and women veterans can really help us in that regard in
12 making sure that they get the treatment that they need for
13 military sexual trauma and the rest.

14 I want to turn the discussion a little bit because I
15 completely agree with Senator Sanders and others that we
16 want a strong VA. I understand our community care partners,
17 but I for one am opposed to privatization of the VA. And in
18 particular, I am concerned that over time, our colleagues in
19 the Capitol, they may talk a big game on privatization right
20 now. But down the road when they get the bill, they will
21 drag their feet, and we want to make sure that every veteran
22 gets the services that they need.

23 I think we have a terrific opportunity with our
24 federally qualified health centers, FQHCs, and I would urge
25 you to look into this. We are going to be bringing forward

1 legislation. My Republican colleague, Mr. Bilirakis on the
2 committee and I, and we have Scott Peters and Republican
3 Mike Coffman from Colorado joining us on this bill. It is
4 called VA Community Care Enhancement Act, and it is a
5 demonstration project to allow the VA to coordinate care
6 with FQHCs and provide veterans with the best options
7 available.

8 A number of reasons, though, I want to recommend it.
9 this is not private for-profit care. These are private,
10 typically non-profit organizations. They already serve
11 people, including many, many veterans, in our least-served
12 communities.

13 So in my district that is rural, these provide critical
14 lifeline care for our communities. They maintain patient
15 accountability and transparency because they are required by
16 law to be run by a board of directors in which 50 percent of
17 the members are active patients of the FQHC, and they are
18 required to see everyone, regardless of ability to pay.
19 They provide mental health and substance use counseling and
20 services in addition to primary care.

21 So I would love to ask you to take a look at our
22 legislation. We are happy to meet with you and talk about
23 this, but it would be a critical community care partner, and
24 you do not run the risk of privatization of care.

25 And then I am just going to move on. I want to hear

1 from you, but I have got so many things I want to tell you
2 as well. So my time is limited.

3 Very briefly, Manchester, New Hampshire, is going
4 through a transition in terms of our VA, and I am very
5 excited about what is going to come out of the task force
6 that is meeting there right now.

7 But we are home to some very promising innovation that
8 will mean a great deal to veterans, and that is the
9 development of something called the LUKE arm, if you have
10 ever seen it. This is a prosthetic that is quite
11 extraordinary, motorized and so advanced that it can
12 manipulate small and delicate objects like a grape or grab
13 items off shelves above a user's head. It is truly unique
14 and revolutionary, and we would like to present to you a
15 possibility of a Center of Excellence around advanced
16 prosthetics and ask if you would consider a center of
17 excellence for advanced bionics research and upper body
18 prosthetics.

19 And with that, I will close my remarks, and if you have
20 any comments on any of those FQHCs or the prosthetics, I
21 would be very interested.

22 Ms. Rohan. Okay. Well, first, thank you. Thank you,
23 ma'am, for all of that.

24 As the last years has shown us, when it comes to
25 veterans' issues, to start on your first point that you

1 made, when it comes to veterans' issues, what you have all
2 shown us is when it comes to veterans, veterans' issues
3 trump politics, and it trumps the partisanship. So I thank
4 you for all working together for all of the legislation that
5 you have passed over the last year, and it has just been
6 amazing, so I want to say thank you for that.

7 Again, we are 100 percent against privatization. We
8 need to make sure that our veterans who live in rural areas
9 have the opportunity to get their health care when they need
10 it, where they need it, but we are 100 percent against
11 privatization--100 percent.

12 Ms. Kuster. And I agree.

13 [Applause.]

14 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

15 Ms. Kuster. Well, thank you.

16 Ms. Rohan. And on all those other things you
17 mentioned, we are eager to work with you.

18 Ms. Kuster. Terrific.

19 Ms. Rohan. We have a great staff. They are ready to
20 work with you.

21 Ms. Kuster. My time is well up, but just a quick
22 shout-out to our New Hampshire American Legion members.
23 Thanks so much for making the trip.

24 And with that, I yield back.

25 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentlelady for yielding, and

1 I will now--I am going to try to stay within my 5 minutes.
2 I have been very lenient today, and as the House side knows,
3 I am usually a stickler for the 5 minutes.

4 Just to address the privatization issue for just a
5 minute, when I got to Congress 9 years ago, there were
6 250,000 people who worked for the VA. The budget was about
7 \$94 billion.

8 Today, there are 373,000 employees at the VA, and this
9 year, the President asked, the administration asked for \$198
10 billion. That is a strange way if you are trying to
11 privatize if you are investing that kind of money and
12 resources.

13 And the other thing we did during that time--and I
14 voted for it at the time, in 2011, the Budget Control Act,
15 which really limited the discretionary part of our budget,
16 except we did not limit the VA. We have provided those
17 resources, both Republicans and Democrats, for our VA, and I
18 think you see that commitment here from both sides of the
19 aisle.

20 Those 30,000 empty spots are funded. They just are not
21 filled, and what we are finding in the country is it is not
22 just in the VA. It is in the private sector too, where I
23 lived for over 30 years, in health care. We are having a
24 difficult time with nurses.

25 I was driving in not too long ago listening--I am sure

1 you will be shocked--to Fox Radio in the morning on the way
2 in.

3 [Laughter.]

4 Chairman Roe. And I hear Mountain States Health
5 Alliance is looking for nurses. I mean, this is on Fox
6 Radio, national news. That was my hometown in Johnson City,
7 Tennessee, advertising nationwide for registered nurses. We
8 cover a region of the country, so finding adequate employees
9 and skilled employees is difficult.

10 I want to go through several things very quickly. I
11 support the expansion in FQHCs. I have been a huge
12 supporter of those in rural areas. It is an asset out there
13 I think you should look at.

14 You mentioned the transition assistance when folks
15 leave the military as one of your--that is No. 3 that you
16 mentioned on the way in, Commander.. I could not agree
17 more.

18 We are on top of that. I am hopefully going to have a
19 military liaison, full colonel, working with me next year,
20 and that is going to be his assignment, is to look at how we
21 do that and how we take these great skills these young men
22 and women have when they leave the service. Why would you
23 take someone and give them the GI Bill and retain them on
24 something they already know how to do? Just certify it and
25 let them go ahead and do it. They have been doing it.

1 In the State of Tennessee, if you can drive a semi with
2 an M1A1 Abrams on the back of it across my State, you can
3 drive a FedEx truck in our State, so--

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Roe. We have 50,000 empty jobs. The
6 transportation people had 50,000 truck drivers' jobs. They
7 start at \$50,000 a year. We need to get on with those
8 things. We are going to work on that, number one.

9 Two, the big one you brought up was electronic health
10 record, and although you have worked very closely with the
11 Secretary, I think he made the right decision. I have been
12 to Fairchild Air Force Base in Washington State and gone
13 through where DoD has begun to implement that, and I am sure
14 you will be shocked, but at 8:30 this morning, they had an
15 EHR meeting for 30 minutes. That is a monstrous undertaking
16 at the VA, and you veterans out there are going to have to
17 have some patience with the VA because this is a big, big,
18 big transition from this old system to this new system, but
19 it is absolutely necessary. It has to be done to transform
20 the VA to the kind of facility that we want.

21 And I will be back out in Washington State to see how
22 it works in the hospital. I do not need any more PowerPoint
23 presentations. I need to sit down in front of the computer
24 screen and actually see how a physician works and whether
25 this is time and it works. So that, I am with you on.

1 A question I want to ask--and what I want for care is I
2 want the best care for the patient, the veteran, that they
3 can get. I do not care where it is. I want you to get the
4 absolute best care that this country can give you, and if
5 you are in Oregon, where I was not too long ago and it snows
6 at Mount Hood and you cannot get to Medford, then you need
7 to have care at your local community--and we need to make
8 that timely care.

9 At Medford, Oregon, they have eight PAC teams. They
10 need 12. They are four short. So what do you do there?
11 Well, those veterans have to go out in the community, and
12 there are areas where you have to drive hundreds of miles.

13 Greg Walden, who is a Congressman there, his
14 congressional district has more square miles than my State
15 of Tennessee does and I know more than Vermont does by a
16 bunch.

17 So I think there are ways that we have got to combine
18 the best of both worlds so that veterans get the care that
19 they have earned and deserve.

20 And the question, Commander, before I run out is, if
21 you were designing a comprehensive VA community care
22 program--that was what The American Legion was doing--what
23 criteria would you set to determine the circumstances in
24 which veterans are able to seek community care? In other
25 words, how do you get that care?

1 Ms. Rohan. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 You know, I keep looking at everything we do, and it is
3 all about common sense to me. But I do not have to work
4 with all the stuff you guys have to work with and all of
5 those considerations you need.

6 Now, Lou Celli, who is our Veterans Affairs and
7 Rehabilitation director here in Washington, D.C., I would
8 like to have him expand a little bit more for you.

9 Mr. Celli. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10 And as you know, we have always been a strong proponent
11 and advocate that the VA provides the best possible care for
12 our veteran. So, with that, we always want to make sure
13 that VA is the center of all veteran care, and when veterans
14 need to go off campus and see community providers, we need
15 to ensure that a VA provider is monitoring and making that
16 transition and that handoff, those medical records are being
17 shared back and forth. So as long as VA stays the nucleus
18 of that care, we support to make sure that veterans can get
19 care exactly when they need it, with the quality health care
20 that is provided not only at VA but in the communities as
21 well with the oversight of VA.

22 Chairman Roe. Okay. Let me just quickly--and I am out
23 of time, and I am going to say this. The way I envision the
24 Choice program working is this. Look, I have a primary care
25 provider, my Blue Cross Blue Shield plan. That primary care

1 provider has a--I have a list of specialists and other
2 people I can see in that plan.

3 The way I envision the VA care going is that they are
4 the gatekeeper basically of the care. As you come into the
5 VA, they are the gatekeeper. They then decide of a
6 specialist in the VA that can be seen. They are seen there.
7 If the doctor and the patient said--"Well, we really do not
8 have that expertise here. Let us send you out in the
9 community so you can get the care you need," exactly the way
10 it is done in the private sector, except the VA is the
11 gatekeeper. Does that seem reasonable to you?

12 Mr. Celli. That is exactly what we look for.

13 Chairman Roe. That is a managed care plan that VA
14 would be the gatekeeper of all the care. That is the way I
15 see it, and if you cannot get in, like in Medford, then you
16 can go outside. And you are correct. This EHR is so
17 important because of sharing that information.

18 I have been the provider on the outside. Our group was
19 the OB/GYN department for the local VA hospital. So I have
20 been in that role before and know how it works very well.

21 Well, my time has expired. I am gaveling myself down.

22 Ms. Rohan. Mr. Chairman, I think we are very lucky
23 that we have a doctor as a Chairman also, so thank you.

24 Chairman Roe. Well, thank you, Commander.

25 [Applause.]

1 Chairman Roe. I appreciate very much the testimony.

2 It has been great questions and comments.

3 I will now yield to Mr. Takano for any closing comments
4 he may have.

5 Mr. Takano. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I
6 appreciate this hearing. I appreciate the contribution of
7 The American Legion and all of you who have traveled here to
8 Washington.

9 Commander, I was so moved by your statement, your
10 answer to Senator Sanders. You all did not fight for Blue
11 Cross or Blue Shield. You fought for the United States of
12 America, and I am going to stand with you--

13 [Applause.]

14 Mr. Takano. --in fighting those forces that want to
15 privatize the VA.

16 And you know what? I agree with my Chairman Roe about
17 looking at the VA as the coordinator of care. We have an
18 in-network. We all know about in-network and out-of-network
19 care. We want to make sure the network that is the
20 veterans' health system is filled with physicians and we do
21 not have to go outside. We need to reduce that, that need
22 to go outside, and that means filling these 30,000
23 vacancies. They are funded.

24 And Mr. Chairman is correct that we have shortages, and
25 part of the reason we have shortages is that since 1996, the

1 GME program under Medicare has been frozen. An exception to
2 that was when Senator Sanders and I inserted into the Choice
3 bill, 1,500 graduate medical school education slots, which
4 is the largest number of slots we have had in a long, long
5 time.

6 But you know what? That is not enough. The American
7 Medical Association and all the allied specialty professions
8 and medicine think that we need more. We have a shortage in
9 this country. We do not have enough of these slots.

10 People do not know that the Federal Government is
11 primarily responsible for the supply of doctors. We can
12 have more medical schools out there, more slots, but without
13 graduate medical school education, there are not more
14 doctors, and we need to fund more slots because we need to
15 populate the VA as we do need the rest of the medical needs
16 in this country.

17 And lastly, let me just say what we do in this country
18 and how we spend our money is a moral statement. It is
19 morally correct to take care of our veterans and to make
20 sure that they are cared for.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Takano. This Congress approved \$1.8 trillion in
23 tax cuts, 83 percent of which went to the wealthiest
24 corporations and wealthiest people in our country, and we
25 cannot find \$4 billion for our caregivers? There is no

1 morality in that, and we must correct that.

2 Thank you.

3 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding, and
6 I want to thank all of you all. I look out across you. I
7 took a picture, in case you did not notice, of this crowd.
8 I hope I did not disturb anybody, but it is great to see all
9 of you. I know it is an expense and an inconvenience to be
10 away from your families to come from as far as Hawaii and
11 other parts in between, to come all the way to Washington,
12 D.C., and advocate.

13 This past Sunday, my wife's grandchild was in, and he
14 had to interview a veteran. So he picked me. So I got to
15 reminisce a little bit about--and I did not tell him all the
16 stories, by the way. I left some of them out--about my time
17 in the military. I had not really thought about it much
18 lately, but they asked me what were the things that I
19 remembered, I think, the most, and I think it is the
20 friendships.

21 I do not know about you, but I had a buddy of mine that
22 I had not seen in 40 years, came to see me a year ago, and
23 it was like we had never been apart after 40 years, and it
24 was that camaraderie.

25 And I know what it is to be away from your family. I

1 had a 6-week-old son when I left the country. I know what
2 it is to be deployed and leave your family at home, and you
3 do not think about families. They are there struggling too
4 when you are not there. You may be in a situation where you
5 are in a tough spot, but so are they. And they have got to
6 do things--my wife did that she would not have otherwise if
7 she had had help raising a small child.

8 I missed the first year of his life. Many of you have
9 done the same exact thing, and I just want to thank you for
10 the service that you have done for this great nation, and it
11 is a great nation.

12 And, by the way, I believe our country spends more
13 money on its U.S. military veterans than any other country,
14 as a matter of fact, than all of the countries in the world
15 put together. I am proud of that.

16 And there are three things that I will--as a
17 Congressman will never apologize for spending money. I am a
18 fiscal conservative, and I am from a part of the country
19 where Attila the Hun is a liberal, okay? East Tennessee.
20 One is when you are a military--when you are on active-duty
21 military and you are in harm's way, I want you to have
22 whatever you need to take care of you and your family--you
23 and your buddies, I mean.

24 Number two, when you come home and you provided that, I
25 want you to have whatever you need to help take care of it.

1 And number three, I will never apologize for supporting
2 my farmers because I like to eat.

3 So that is three things.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Roe. Commander, you did a wonderful job. I
6 know the Legion is extremely well led. You have got a great
7 staff that we work with very closely. Thank you for that,
8 and I ask unanimous consent that all members have 5
9 legislative days in which to revise and extend their
10 remarks. Hearing no objection, so ordered.

11 We are now adjourned.

12 Ms. Rohan. Thank you.

13 [Whereupon, at 11:46 a.m., the joint committees were
14 adjourned.]

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