

1 THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF  
2 THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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4 WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 2015

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

11 The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m.,  
12 in Room G-50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny  
13 Isakson, chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans  
14 Affairs, presiding.

15 Present: Senators Isakson, Boozman, Heller, Rounds,  
16 Tillis, Blumenthal, Sanders, Hirono, and Manchin.  
17 Representatives Miller, Lamborn, Huelskamp, Coffman,  
18 Wenstrup, Abraham, Zeldin, Costello, Radewagen, Bost, Brown,  
19 Brownley, Titus, Ruiz, O'Rourke, Rice, and Walz.

20 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

21 Chairman Isakson. I call this hearing of the Senate  
22 and House Veterans Affairs Committees together for the  
23 purpose of hearing the testimony of the VFW.

24 We are grateful to the VFW for their individual service  
25 to our country and for their great service post their

1 service to our country to the veterans of America who have  
2 come home. VFW is a great organization in Georgia, a great  
3 organization around the country, and we appreciate you being  
4 here today.

5 I had the chance last night to read a little bit of the  
6 overview on the Veterans Choice Act and I look forward to  
7 hearing more from you today on that, because we are  
8 committed in the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee to make  
9 the 40-mile rule work, make the Veterans Choice bill work,  
10 make sure it is not a replacement for VA health care, but it  
11 is a supplement to VA health care to see to it that veterans  
12 get the health care in a timely basis they need from the  
13 Veterans Administration health services.

14 There are a lot of other issues, but we came here to  
15 hear from you, not from ourselves. I will just welcome you  
16 for being here. Thank you for your service to the country.

17 I introduce Chairman Miller from the House of  
18 Representatives.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MILLER

20 Chairman Miller. Thank you very much, Chairman. It is  
21 a pleasure to be here.

22 Thank you for what the VFW has done last year, during  
23 the greatest, I think, scandal that has befallen the  
24 Department of Veterans Affairs. You continue to hold their  
25 feet to the fire. We will do the same thing. We need to do

1 it in concert, together, because all we want is that  
2 veterans get the benefits that you have earned in a timely  
3 fashion with transparency and honesty, and that  
4 accountability is the bell word that VA should be using  
5 these days.

6 And with that, I yield back.

7 Chairman Isakson. Ranking Member Blumenthal.

8 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BLUMENTHAL

9 Senator Blumenthal. Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

10 Like my colleagues here, I am honored to serve on the  
11 Veterans Affairs Committee and honored to have you testify  
12 this morning. Your fact finding, your uncovering  
13 wrongdoing, your constant vigilance is essential. We depend  
14 on folks like yourselves, the whistleblowers, to lead us in  
15 seeking to hold accountable the Veterans Affairs Department.  
16 And, so, I want to thank you for your continuing vigilance  
17 and vigor in making sure that this nation keeps faith with  
18 its servicemen and women after they leave that service.

19 With the teamwork that we have on this committee, the  
20 bipartisanship that has always characterized veterans'  
21 issues, we passed the first major legislation, the Clay Hunt  
22 SAV Act, signed by the President not long ago, and your  
23 support, your being there throughout that process made all  
24 the difference in the world. So, never doubt that you make  
25 a difference.

1 I would like to recognize the folks from Connecticut  
2 who are here, if you would please stand, everyone who is  
3 here from Connecticut. Thank you very much for your help  
4 and your service.

5 I look forward to the testimony that we are going to  
6 receive.

7 Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

8 Chairman Isakson. Ranking Member Corrine Brown.

9 OPENING STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE BROWN

10 Ms. Brown. Thank you and good morning. The  
11 Independent Budget has always been very important to me. I  
12 have been on this committee for 22 years, and I like your  
13 unfiltered information that you bring to the Congress.

14 Would the people from Florida stand? I met with them  
15 in a roundtable discussion. Let us give them a hand. I  
16 have got to go back to Florida. Please.

17 [Applause.]

18 Ms. Brown. I am looking forward to the testimony.  
19 Thank you.

20 Chairman Isakson. Since they have shown me up, will  
21 all the people from Georgia please stand?

22 [Laughter.]

23 Chairman Isakson. All right. Hooah.

24 [Applause.]

25 Chairman Miller. Mr. Chairman, I have a question.

1 Chairman Isakson. Fire away.

2 Chairman Miller. Will all of you who have ever been to  
3 Florida please stand.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Chairman Isakson. I think that would be unanimous.

6 Commander Stroud, we are happy to welcome your  
7 testimony. Thank you for being here today.

8 Dean Heller from Nevada will make the formal  
9 introduction.

10 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR HELLER

11 Senator Heller. John, thanks for hesitating there for  
12 a few minutes. I did not want to lose my moment here in the  
13 limelight and certainly want to welcome everybody here on  
14 the panel, obviously, everybody here in the audience. And,  
15 I have to do this. Everybody from Nevada, please stand up.

16 [Shout from audience.]

17 [Laughter.]

18 Senator Heller. I am so pleased, and I want to thank  
19 the Chairmen and the Ranking Members, and I am honored to  
20 have this opportunity to introduce Commander John Stroud  
21 today. He has been a friend of mine and he has been a  
22 wonderful friend to my office. In fact, I have a poker chip  
23 here that he gave me in 2012 to prove it. Only in Nevada  
24 would you have a challenge coin in the form of a poker chip.  
25 Thank you, John.

1           Mr. Chairman, it is very fitting that John was chosen  
2 to be the Commander in Chief of the Veterans of Foreign  
3 Wars. Since its inception in 1899, the VFW has served many  
4 different purposes for veterans. While it is known for  
5 advocating for veterans, a VFW Post is also a place for  
6 members to foster friendship with others who served.

7           In a State like Nevada, the solidarity among the  
8 veterans' community truly rings true. And within this  
9 tight-knit Nevada veteran community, Commander John Stroud  
10 has been one of the most outspoken advocates. I cannot  
11 thank him enough for all that he has done, from the start of  
12 his service in the U.S. military to today.

13           Commander Stroud first began his military career in the  
14 U.S. Air Force, serving for 21 years, from 1976 to 1997.  
15 This service includes a tour in Korea with the 51st Fighter  
16 Wing at Osan Air Base, where he was a Flight Operations  
17 Superintendent. During Commander Stroud's time in the  
18 military, he received four Meritorious Service Medals, three  
19 Air Force Achievement Medals, the Korean Defense Service  
20 Medal, and the National Defense Service Medal.

21           While like all the VFW members we have here today, his  
22 service to our country and his fellow service members was  
23 not over after his 20 years. In 1996, Commander Stroud  
24 joined the VFW in Las Vegas, and later Hawthorne, Nevada.  
25 Not only did he embrace the camaraderie of joining a Post,

1 but he also dedicated himself to serving the VFW in many  
2 leadership positions, including the Nevada Department  
3 Commander from 2006 to 2007. Commander Stroud has also  
4 served on numerous national committees, including Chairman  
5 of the National Veterans Service Committee. He also is a  
6 Triple Crown All American Commander Awards Recipient.

7 I also want to acknowledge an important person here  
8 today, the one who has to deal with the Commander's  
9 difficult travel schedule, and that is his wife, Mary. Hi,  
10 Mary. Please stand. Thank you.

11 [Applause.]

12 Senator Heller. Mary has been a committed member of  
13 the VFW Ladies Auxiliary and also works to serve our  
14 nation's veterans.

15 Thank you again, Commander Stroud, for your service to  
16 our nation as a veteran and as Commander in Chief for the  
17 VFW. I look forward to your testimony on how this committee  
18 and Congress can do better to serve our brave men and women  
19 who serve in our military. Thank you for being here.

20 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator Heller.

22 Commander Stroud.

1           STATEMENT OF JOHN W. STROUD, COMMANDER IN CHIEF,  
2           VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS; ACCOMPANIED BY WILLIAM  
3           BRADSHAW, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE;  
4           ROBERT E. WALLACE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WASHINGTON,  
5           D.C. OFFICE; RAY KELLEY, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL  
6           LEGISLATIVE SERVICE; AND GIL HERNANDEZ, CHAIRMAN,  
7           NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE

8           Mr. Stroud. Senator Heller, thank you for the kind  
9           introduction. Your commitment to veterans has not gone  
10          unnoticed by me or the VFW.

11          Chairmen Isakson and Miller, Ranking Members Blumenthal  
12          and Brown, members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs  
13          Committee, thank you for holding this hearing.

14          First, I want to congratulate Senators Isakson and  
15          Blumenthal and Congresswoman Brown for their selections to  
16          leadership roles. I also want to welcome back Chairman  
17          Miller and the returning members of the committees, as well  
18          as congratulate all of the new members for their desire to  
19          serve our nation's veterans.

20          While major troop withdrawals have occurred in Iraq and  
21          Afghanistan, America is still at war. The medical care and  
22          services they need must be there for them for their  
23          lifetime. To provide that care effectively, Congress must  
24          put a stop to the looming budget sequestration. There is no  
25          guarantee that VA will be exempt moving forward, and defense



1 and labor programs will be directly impacted by these cuts.  
2 To protect our military personnel, veterans, their families,  
3 and America's security from the harmful effects of across-  
4 the-board cuts, Congress must end sequestration. Congress  
5 must end sequestration.

6 [Applause.]

7 Mr. Stroud. Your leadership and bipartisanship has  
8 proven to the nation that veterans are a priority. Without  
9 your intense oversight, veterans would still be waiting on  
10 hidden wait lists. Oversight was not enough. Your  
11 committees and staff then worked tirelessly to pass the  
12 comprehensive Choice Act, setting a new course for  
13 accountability and access. Along the way, you also passed  
14 advance appropriations to ensure monthly veterans'  
15 disability and pension checks would continue should Congress  
16 shut down the government again.

17 Already in this new Congress, you have passed the Clay  
18 Hunt SAV Act, providing resources to help turn the tide on  
19 veteran suicide. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Stroud. Each year, in partnership with the  
22 Independent Budget, the VFW produces budget recommendations  
23 for VA's funding accounts. While VA's request comes close  
24 to reflecting the IB, several accounts fall short, including  
25 medical facilities, major and minor construction, and grants

1 for extended care facilities.

2 In April 2014, whistleblowers at the VA Medical Center  
3 in Phoenix, Arizona, exposed rampant wrongdoing, most  
4 notably, the manipulation of waiting lists. To learn  
5 exactly what occurred, the VFW held two veterans town hall  
6 meetings and surveyed our membership. What we heard was  
7 both alarming and disgraceful. From this feedback, we  
8 compiled a report, *Hurry Up and Wait*, where we outlined  
9 specific policy recommendations to fix the VA health care  
10 system and to hold its leaders accountable.

11 [Applause.]

12 Mr. Stroud. In an effort to mitigate problems with the  
13 new Choice Program and to gauge the pulse of the veterans'  
14 community, the VFW launched a webpage where veterans could  
15 learn about the program. We also commissioned a direct  
16 survey where our members can provide feedback on their  
17 experiences with the Choice Program. We then compiled an  
18 interim report on what we heard from more than 2,500  
19 veterans. The full report has been submitted with our  
20 written testimony.

21 Our members are concerned with the use of the straight-  
22 line distance to determine eligibility and not being  
23 properly informed of the Choice Program eligibility.  
24 Congress needs to amend the law by changing the Choice  
25 Program's geographic eligibility from straight-line distance

1 to driving distance.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Stroud. Our second survey indicates that VA is  
4 making progress in implementing the new law. As of February  
5 20, more than 34 percent of survey participants who are  
6 eligible for Choice were afforded the opportunity to receive  
7 non-VA care, up from 19 percent at the end of our first  
8 survey. VA must continue to provide front-line personnel  
9 the training they need to ensure all veterans who are  
10 eligible for the Choice Program are afforded the opportunity  
11 to participate.

12 While 92 percent of survey participants felt that  
13 having a choice was important, only 53 percent elected to  
14 receive non-VA care when given the option. This indicates  
15 that veterans who are presented with all available options  
16 make informed decisions that are best suited for their  
17 specific circumstances.

18 Moving forward, VA must take lessons learned from this  
19 important program and apply them to its purchased care  
20 model. While the VFW believes veterans should be given a  
21 choice for care, specialized care services are unique to the  
22 VA, must not be hastily outsourced to private sector health  
23 care providers. Veterans turn to VA for such care because  
24 it cannot be easily replicated in the private sector.

25 The House passed H.R. 280 on Monday. This is a first

1 step in improving accountability. We encourage the Senate  
2 to quickly pass this bill, as well as both chambers passing  
3 H.R. 473 and H.R. 571. Congress must do everything it can  
4 to give the Secretary the authority to discipline and remove  
5 bad employees so the good work of the vast majority of VA  
6 employees can move out of the shadow of the bad actors.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Stroud. When Congress passed the Choice Act, a few  
9 members voted no. This is unacceptable, and those members  
10 heard it loud and clear from their VFW members. We will  
11 continue to track voting records, and our membership will  
12 hold any member accountable if they do not make veteran  
13 funding, care, and benefits a priority.

14 While a majority of the focus has been access and  
15 accountability, Congress cannot neglect other health care  
16 needs. The House showed its commitment earlier this week by  
17 passing H.R. 294, which will provide increased long-term  
18 care facility options for veterans. Thank you, and we look  
19 forward to its quick passage in the Senate.

20 VA must be ready to provide the gender-specific care  
21 that women veterans deserve. VA must also focus their  
22 research on the psychological and environmental effects war  
23 has on women veterans. Understanding the differences in  
24 causes, symptoms, and treatment modalities between male and  
25 female veterans will help prevent women veterans from going

1 undiagnosed and untreated for serious conditions.

2       When severely wounded, ill, or injured veterans seek  
3 fertility treatment, they are told VA services are very  
4 limited. Congress must correct this inequity and authorize  
5 VA to furnish infertility counseling and treatment for these  
6 veterans.

7       [Applause.]

8       Mr. Stroud. While the SAV Act took steps to improve  
9 access to mental health care, more must be done. Congress  
10 and VA must also find a way to provide health care to those  
11 veterans who have been discharged from the military under  
12 conditions other than honorable. It is not unusual for  
13 service members with mental health issues to go undiagnosed,  
14 get into some trouble after returning from war, and then be  
15 given an administrative discharge. These veterans deserve a  
16 second chance.

17       [Applause.]

18       Mr. Stroud. VA must continue to research the effects  
19 of TBI on cognitive and behavioral function and develop  
20 treatment programs that show promise of bringing improved  
21 health and quality of life to affected veterans.

22       Family caregivers who provide care to veterans who were  
23 severely disabled in the line of duty truly epitomize the  
24 concept of selfless service. Our nation owes these  
25 caregivers the support they need and deserve.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Stroud. It is time to grant caregivers' benefits  
3 for veterans of all wars.

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Stroud. Veterans who were exposed to toxins during  
6 their military service deserve to know if their health  
7 conditions are associated with that exposure. Congress and  
8 VA must--must--devote resources for research to better  
9 understand the health conditions associated with toxic  
10 exposures.

11 [Applause.]

12 Mr. Stroud. We cannot allow veterans to continue to  
13 struggle. It is time that we provide them with the care and  
14 benefits they deserve.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Stroud. Over the past year, VA reduced the  
17 disability compensation and pension workload by nearly  
18 134,000 claims. VA achieved this by shifting its focus from  
19 other work, such as appeals and dependency claims, thereby  
20 creating new backlogs in those areas. The VFW believes VA  
21 must properly staff regional offices and the Board of  
22 Veterans Appeals, provide a better summary and analysis of  
23 evidence considered in deciding each claim, attach the  
24 rating narrative to each notice letter, and conduct an  
25 independent review of VA's quality assurance program to

1 ensure accuracy in the claims error rate.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Stroud. Over the past six months, representatives  
4 from the VSO community, VA, and Congress met frequently to  
5 explore ideas to improve appeals processing. These  
6 discussions have identified several ideas which could  
7 eliminate or mitigate some processing bottlenecks. The most  
8 promising of these ideas has been dubbed "Fully Developed  
9 Appeals." Under this initiative, claimants with no  
10 additional evidence to submit could elect an expedited  
11 appeal process, allowing them to receive a decision in a  
12 matter of months. This has the potential to be a win-win  
13 for veterans and the VA. However, in order for this program  
14 to work, veterans must be provided with an adequate decision  
15 notice so their due process rights are not violated.

16 Over the past few years, the work of your committees  
17 has produced significant evolution in the way military  
18 prepares transitioning service members for civilian life.  
19 To continue this progress, Congress must continue to improve  
20 skills acquisition and transferability, access to higher  
21 education, paths to entrepreneurship, as well as bridging  
22 the civilian-military divide. A primary concern for the VFW  
23 is the lack of accredited VSO involvement in the new TAP  
24 process. When service members leave the military, they must  
25 fully understand the benefits and services they are entitled

1 to.

2           Though not under the purview of your two committees, I  
3 would be remiss if I did not comment on how important the  
4 POW-MIA mission is to the VFW and our nation's veterans.  
5 The VFW supports the new Joint POW-MIA Accounting Agency,  
6 which merged the former DPMO and the Joint POW-MIA  
7 Accounting Command. Congress must fully fund this mission.

8           [Applause.]

9           Mr. Stroud. I want to again thank you for the  
10 opportunity to represent America's largest organization of  
11 war veterans, and I look forward to your questions.

12           [Applause.]

13           [The prepared statement of Mr. Stroud follows:]



1 Chairman Isakson. Thank you. Thank you for your  
2 testimony.

3 Before we start the questions, would you introduce your  
4 leadership team at the dais.

5 Mr. Stroud. Certainly. To my far left is our Director  
6 of National Veterans Service, Mr. Bill Bradshaw.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Stroud. The Executive Director of our Washington  
9 Office, Bob Wallace.

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Stroud. Our Director of National Legislative  
12 Service, Mr. Ray Kelley.

13 [Applause.]

14 Mr. Stroud. And my appointee, this year's National  
15 Legislative Committee Chairman, Gil Hernandez.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Isakson. Well, thank you for your compelling  
18 testimony, and thanks to all of you for your support of the  
19 VFW.

20 You said so many great--made so many great topics that  
21 if I started trying to do all of them, I would not do any of  
22 them justice, so I want to focus on two, if I can.

23 Mr. Stroud. Yes, sir.

24 Chairman Isakson. Holding the VA accountable was the  
25 key statement in your entire statement. We have had a

1 statement, I have felt like for some time, where the  
2 Veterans Administration held services were waiting for the  
3 next chairman of the committee to come in, or waiting for  
4 the next election so some of us were gone, so there was  
5 never a real connect between the Congress and the VA.  
6 Chairman Miller and I have made an effort to go to the VA.  
7 We have already done a town hall meeting at the VA in  
8 Washington and we are going to be traveling to VA sites  
9 around the country as the year develops so that we can get  
10 out of this mold, if you come and testify for five minutes,  
11 and then we are out of your hair and you are out of ours.  
12 We want to be in your hair. We want you to be in our hair.

13 The VFW--I hope all members will read their report on  
14 Veterans Choice, because it was a great, detailed report.  
15 One of the things you focused on is you all can be the eyes  
16 and ears that we need to tell us what is going wrong in the  
17 VA and what is going right in the VA. Secretary McDonald  
18 needs the authority to hold VA employees accountable, and  
19 that means the power to dismiss and the support from us to  
20 back those dismissals up so they take place. We do not want  
21 to just run around willy-nilly and fire people, but we do  
22 want accountability. You have accountability in the  
23 military. You have accountability in the Congress.

24 By golly, there ought to be accountability in the VA  
25 health systems, and we are going to see to it that that

1 takes place, and we are going to ask you to be our eyes and  
2 ears through the VFW, letting us know where you see  
3 problems, as you have done in the past. Let us know where  
4 you see good things. Lamar Alexander has often commented  
5 about quoting Alex Haley, who said, always look for the good  
6 in people and praise it. We always want to look for the  
7 good in the VA and praise it, but we also want to find those  
8 areas where we need improvement. We know there are a lot of  
9 areas on that.

10         The second thing I want to focus on is to let you know  
11 we are going to focus on the 40-mile rule. When Congress  
12 passed Veterans Choice and we wrote the language the way we  
13 wrote it, the unintended consequence of writing it by using  
14 the word "facility" was facility meant anything the VA had  
15 as a facility, whether or not they offered the type of  
16 health care a veteran needed. We need to make sure that if  
17 the health care that is within 40 miles of the veteran does  
18 not provide chemotherapy, or does not provide a heart  
19 transplant, or does not provide the specialty the veteran  
20 needs, that they get to exercise the 40-mile rule because  
21 the health care that they need is not available.

22         We also need to be certain that we do it how long it  
23 takes to get to the drive there, not how long it takes on  
24 the straight line. This straight-line application is just  
25 crazy. It needs to be the time from leaving the garage of

1 the veteran to pulling into the parking lot of the Veterans  
2 Administration. Senator Blumenthal and I have commitment  
3 our next hearing in the Senate will be on the 40-mile rule.  
4 Dean Heller has done a lot of work. John Boozman has done a  
5 lot of work on that. Jerry Moran has done a lot of work on  
6 that. We want to perfect the language to deliver for you  
7 what you have asked for, and that is a 40-mile rule that  
8 works for veterans. I would like any comments you would  
9 have on the 40-mile rule.

10 Mr. Stroud. Well, sir, the best way to describe it  
11 would be the North Rim of the Grand Canyon to the South Rim  
12 of the Grand Canyon is about one mile. But if you try to  
13 drive it, it is 100 miles down one way and 100 miles up the  
14 other. It cannot be as the crow flies. It has got to be as  
15 the crow drives.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Isakson. You and I did not practice before  
18 this hearing, but after listening to your testimony and  
19 reading the report, I figured you would have a great analogy  
20 for us, and that is a perfect analogy.

21 [Laughter.]

22 Chairman Isakson. I want to commend you on focusing on  
23 women's issues. We have a lot of work to do in the Veterans  
24 Administration health services to deliver the type of health  
25 care that women should have. They have unique problems and

1 unique opportunities that we need to make sure are met.

2 And, we cannot forget about sexual trauma. There are a  
3 lot of post-service problems that are soft tissue TBI and  
4 PTSD problems that are embedded in a sexual trauma incident  
5 that took place in the military. We need to make sure our  
6 mental health services are available to those people and  
7 they get the services they need to prevent the type of  
8 trauma that we have seen in the VA.

9 And, lastly, I want to commend Richard Blumenthal.  
10 Richard was the right arm that I had in the committee so  
11 that the first full meeting we had, we passed the SAV Act.  
12 He has been a driving force behind it. I want to remind  
13 Chairman Miller, we took up the House bill and passed the  
14 House bill out of the Senate to show our commitment to  
15 bipartisan and bicameral work to see to it our veterans get  
16 the health care services they need and the health care  
17 services they deserve.

18 Chairman Miller.

19 Chairman Miller. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

20 It concerns me when we are 90 to 120 days in the roll-  
21 out of the Choice Program that people in the central office  
22 and around the country are already waving a white flag  
23 saying the Choice Program is not going to work, not giving  
24 it the opportunity to work. As the Chairman has eloquently  
25 stated, this is supposed to be a supplement to the good work

1 that VA is capable of doing as long as people are held  
2 accountable and know that there are consequences for their  
3 actions. It is egregious to me that VA would still force  
4 any veteran to drive four hours daily to get their  
5 chemotherapy treatment just because they did not meet the  
6 letter of the law as it relates to the Choice Act.

7 And, I say that because VA has the ability and had the  
8 ability prior to the Choice Act to fee that type of service  
9 out. VA has got to understand that they are there to serve  
10 the veterans of this country and not serve the bureaucracy.  
11 They are not a sacred cow. We have got to change the way  
12 that they do business.

13 Now, that being said, I believe the Secretary wants to  
14 do that. We want to work with him, we want to work with  
15 organizations such as yours to better serve those that you  
16 represent and some that you do not represent, because not  
17 everybody is a member of your organization.

18 But, accountability, again, is the thing that I think  
19 all of us up here on the dais want to see from the  
20 Department of Veterans Affairs. And, part of the problem is  
21 it is very difficult to remove anybody from Federal civil  
22 service. The Secretary, like I said, is trying, but not  
23 with the speed with which I think any of us would expect.  
24 They want to make sure the decisions are upheld because they  
25 have the ability to appeal.

1           One of the things in the Choice Act that I am  
2 interested in hearing from you is the statement that many  
3 veterans still do not know what that program is. They do  
4 not know what they are eligible for. And, more outreach  
5 needs to be done from the VA, outreach more than just  
6 sending a card to a veteran with a letter that says, oh, by  
7 the way, this is a temporary program. That does not give  
8 anybody comfort that it is going to be around for a while.  
9 Well, I think our intention is that it will be.

10           But, how can the VA better reach out to the veteran  
11 community and let them know that this new, innovative card  
12 is available for them and what that card will actually  
13 provide them?

14           Mr. Stroud. Well, in addition to mailing the card and  
15 a letter, that is where VSOs come in a key play here, and I  
16 do know that we have regular contact with the VA and we  
17 convey that message to our members. And, we reach out to  
18 all veterans, not just members of our organization. Our  
19 service officers will file claims for VA benefits for any  
20 veteran. We do not require VFW membership to reach out and  
21 service all the veterans of our great nation. I think  
22 communicating through the VSOs is key to getting that  
23 information out and clarifying some of the information.

24           Chairman Miller. Have they reached out to you in a way  
25 that allows you to provide the most recent information, and

1 if so, how?

2 Mr. Stroud. I am going to defer that to my Washington  
3 Office that communicates with them on an almost daily basis.

4 Mr. Wallace. We meet--staff meets with the VA  
5 regularly on issues with the programs, and we also meet with  
6 the contractors, TriWest and Health Net, on a periodic basis  
7 to find out what is going on. I had a conference call last  
8 week for an hour and a half with TriWest on what the issues  
9 that they were faced with. They have reached out to us, but  
10 the problem is, you--the issue you talk about, four hours to  
11 drive, they have the right to just contract that out in a  
12 local community. Apparently, the contract that they had was  
13 too expensive, they said. Well, there has got to be a way  
14 to get around that. I mean, you cannot expect somebody who  
15 is going through oncology treatment to go four hours each  
16 way to get to treatment every day. I mean, that is  
17 unconscionable and unacceptable.

18 I think the education of the VA staff on what they  
19 should have been doing all along and what they can do and  
20 should do has to continue to go through and the VA has to  
21 continue to do that.

22 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Chairman Miller.

23 Ranking Member Blumenthal.

24 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank  
25 you for your very generous words.



1           I want to focus on a number of your findings in your  
2 report, which I think are very telling and compelling, and I  
3 want to thank you for the report and also focusing on some  
4 of the good news. The report says that 82 percent of  
5 veterans are satisfied with VA care that they receive. The  
6 doctors, the nurses, the staff at our VA facilities are  
7 doing a good job. They are plainly overburdened and  
8 overworked, and that is one of the reasons for the delays  
9 and, unforgivably, one of the causes for the cooking of  
10 books and manipulation of records to, in effect, disguise  
11 the delay times and the inadequacy of the timeliness of  
12 care. The quality of care on the part of those doctors  
13 evidently was good and satisfying many of the veterans, but  
14 the wait times were intolerable.

15           And, so, I want to focus on the very important findings  
16 of this report that indicate at the local level that VA  
17 facilities are continuing to be less than adequate in their  
18 consistent performance, that is, their inconsistencies in  
19 referring for non-VA care. There are delays in transfers of  
20 records to non-VA facilities. And, I wonder if you could  
21 comment on the recommendation that you make, in fact, that  
22 the VA must ensure non-VA care coordination teams at those  
23 local VA facilities are adequately staffed. I gather that  
24 still has not been done. There are still deficiencies in  
25 the operation of those local VA facilities. And, perhaps

1 you could comment on it.

2 Mr. Stroud. Senator, as with any new program roll-out,  
3 there is going to be unforeseen circumstances and they have  
4 got to have the flexibility to adapt when an issue arises  
5 and take care of these kind of matters, and there's going to  
6 be more things are going to come up.

7 Senator Blumenthal. And, there has to be--

8 Mr. Stroud. This is not going to be the end of it.

9 Senator Blumenthal. --better staffing at that--

10 Mr. Stroud. Yes, sir.

11 Senator Blumenthal. --level and better training.

12 Mr. Stroud. Absolutely.

13 Senator Blumenthal. Let me ask you, has the VA reached  
14 out to you after this report to, in effect, debrief you?

15 Mr. Wallace. Yes. Yes, they have.

16 Senator Blumenthal. And, how completely or thoroughly  
17 have they reached out?

18 Mr. Wallace. I would say they are more honest today  
19 than they have ever been in the past on what their  
20 challenges are and where their issues are. The reason we  
21 need to have the records sent back is it is not only quality  
22 health care, but this could affect the veteran's  
23 compensation and disability, and if you do not have those  
24 records, you cannot justify putting that claim forward. So,  
25 there is more to the puzzle than just passing records. It

1 is the veteran. It is the individual that we have to  
2 coordinate with properly--they have to coordinate with.

3 Senator Blumenthal. And, in your experience--  
4 yesterday, in this very room, I believe, I questioned the  
5 Secretary of Defense about the connectivity between the  
6 Department of Defense and the VA on exactly that issue, on  
7 medical records, on disability claims, so that there is a  
8 more seamless transfer of information. I think that is  
9 still lacking. Is that your experience, as well?

10 Mr. Wallace. Yes. In fact, there are people in this  
11 room that are younger than how many years the Congress has  
12 been passing laws to get seamless transition going and we  
13 have been talking about it. It is not there. DOD is still  
14 moving in one direction, VA in the other, and they say the  
15 two shall meet, but they are not there and a lot of money  
16 has been spent.

17 Senator Blumenthal. Let me just conclude--and I have  
18 many more questions, unfortunately, my time is about to  
19 expire--but, the Inspector General, underfunded, a critical  
20 source of accountability. A number of us have questioned  
21 the Secretary of the VA very closely on the lamentably low  
22 increase in that budget, less than a percentage increase.  
23 And, still, by the way, as you well know, the Inspector  
24 General has not submitted a report on that debacle that led  
25 to the Choice Program, which I think is very, very

1   unfortunate, in fact, unacceptable, because we need to know  
2   who was responsible, who should be held accountable for  
3   those cooking of books and manipulation of records that I  
4   referred to earlier. Has the Inspector General ever  
5   contacted the VFW?

6           Mr. Wallace. Periodically, we get contacted by the  
7   Inspector General on ideas and so forth. And, if we have an  
8   incident that affects one of our people out in the field, we  
9   obviously get called and contacted. But, it is not an  
10  ongoing process.

11           Senator Blumenthal. Maybe it should be. Thank you.

12           Chairman Isakson. Ranking Member Corrine Brown.

13           Ms. Brown. Thank you. I understand Commander Markham  
14  is here from Florida. Would you please wave your hand.

15  And, also, the Student Coordinator of the Veteran Student  
16  Union at FSU, Mr. Pierce, would you stand. I want you all  
17  to know, the reason why I am shouting out to them is they  
18  have the number one program for military in the country.

19           [Applause.]

20           Ms. Brown. Thank you. Now, my question goes to  
21  construction. I noticed that you recommend an additional  
22  billion dollars for the VA for construction of VA  
23  facilities. Now, I knew a little bit about construction of  
24  VA facilities because I have been trying to get mine done in  
25  Florida, in Orlando, for over 25 years. Do you think--and I

1 understand it is at the end now and that we are going to  
2 soon open this hospital, and I am going to invite everybody  
3 to come to the opening. But, my question is, can they  
4 handle this additional workload?

5 Mr. Stroud. Well, it is obviously going to take  
6 budget. With budget and appropriations, you have personnel,  
7 you can have oversight. But, I will be honest with you,  
8 ma'am. I have never seen a VA construction project come in  
9 on time and on budget, never.

10 Ms. Brown. So, what is your recommendation? I agree  
11 with you. And, in fact, though, part of the problem was  
12 with the Congress, because we had not built any hospitals in  
13 over 15 years. So, a lot of the expertise was gone, and so  
14 that was one of the problems. And, so, we have brought in  
15 these new five or six additional hospitals and it has not  
16 gone to plan, because the planning was not there before.

17 Mr. Stroud. One of my favorite words, accountability.  
18 Hold those responsible for these projects accountable, and  
19 also have them hold these contractors accountable.

20 Ms. Brown. Yes.

21 [Applause.]

22 Ms. Brown. I am not disagreeing with you at all,  
23 because a lot of people just want to hold the VA  
24 accountable. But, when you talk to some of the  
25 stakeholders, it is a team effort and everybody needs to be

1 on the same page.

2 Mr. Stroud. We totally agree with you, Congresswoman.

3 Ms. Brown. In the recommendation about the Choice  
4 Card, a lot of my veterans have received the card, but they  
5 choose not to use it. They want their service at the VA,  
6 even if they are on the waiting list. What do you recommend  
7 that the VA, or what can we do, because we have got to work  
8 with you as a stakeholder, to encourage them to use the  
9 Choice Card?

10 Mr. Stroud. Those folks that choose not to use the  
11 Choice Card--

12 Ms. Brown. That is right.

13 Mr. Stroud. --choose to stay with the VA for their  
14 medical care because they are getting good medical care and  
15 they trust the VA and they should have that option. If they  
16 want to drive more than 40 miles to get to the VA, if that  
17 is their choice, it should be their choice.

18 Ms. Brown. Well, I am not even talking about the  
19 drive. For example, I am talking about people that have to  
20 wait over 30 days. They can use the Choice Card. But, they  
21 choose to wait until the VA can see them.

22 Mr. Stroud. Again, it is probably because they trust  
23 the medical care at VA.

24 Ms. Brown. Well--

25 Mr. Stroud. VA has great medical care. I--

1           Ms. Brown. Really. Everybody tells me that they want  
2 their service at the VA, period. And, once they get in,  
3 they are very satisfied. I understand that the satisfaction  
4 rate is, what, is higher than the general population using  
5 the other physicians.

6           Mr. Stroud. Yes, ma'am. I personally am very  
7 satisfied with the care that I receive when I do have at the  
8 VA in Reno. So--and I live 140 miles from there.

9           Ms. Brown. But you are satisfied with the service you  
10 get once you get there.

11          Mr. Stroud. Yes, I am.

12          Ms. Brown. Good. Good. Good. The last thing is, I  
13 guess I am very concerned about the wait times, also. We  
14 are trying to do what we can to make sure that anyone having  
15 an emergency, that they can see outside physicians, and the  
16 VA has always had the authority to do that, not with the  
17 Choice Card. They had it before. So, what is the  
18 disconnect?

19          Mr. Stroud. Well, I am not sure. I would say that if  
20 some of the people are going to utilize the Choice Card and  
21 seek non-VA care, that in itself will reduce some of the  
22 workload at the VA clinics and the Regional Medical Centers,  
23 which may--should--reduce some of the other wait times.

24          Ms. Brown. Well, we gave them, I want to say, \$5  
25 billion so they could hire additional doctors, nurses,

1 support services. So, I would like to see them utilize that  
2 \$5 billion to do what they need to do to make sure the  
3 veterans get the care that they deserve.

4 Thank you again, all of you, for your service, and I  
5 yield back the balance of my time.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Isakson. For the benefit of the members, we  
8 operate under the early bird rule, so we are going to  
9 introduce Congressmen and Senators in order of their  
10 appearance, and the next four will be Senator Heller,  
11 Representative Titus, Representative Coffman, and Senator  
12 Manchin. Senator Heller.

13 Senator Heller. Mr. Chairman, thank you, and again,  
14 Commander, welcome. I also want to acknowledge Gil  
15 Hernandez. It is great to have two on the witness table  
16 from my home State.

17 Commander, as you know, my father is a Korean War  
18 veteran, disabled veteran, and receives the same care that  
19 you do from the Reno VA Hospital, and he is a satisfied  
20 customer, also. Secretary McDonald has had a couple of  
21 bumps in the road in his first six months. Can you give me  
22 the assessment of yourself and your organization of how the  
23 Secretary is doing?

24 Mr. Stroud. Senator, thank you for that question. I  
25 personally believe that Bob McDonald is the right man for



1 this job. He has--he accepted what at the time was the  
2 worst job in America and he has already made significant  
3 improvements and changes. It is like eating an elephant,  
4 sir, one bite at a time. It is not going to happen  
5 overnight, but he has got the VA going in the right  
6 direction.

7 Senator Heller. Commander, thank you.

8 I have got a local question in the State of Nevada  
9 dealing with the Regional Office in Reno. There is some  
10 movement. I think the speaker after me will have more to  
11 say about it than myself. But, do you have an opinion about  
12 moving that Reno VARO from Northern Nevada down to Southern  
13 Nevada?

14 Mr. Stroud. Well, sir, that--you know, it is where the  
15 bulk of the population is, and you do have that big new  
16 facility down there that we just opened up a couple of years  
17 ago. I really do not have an opinion on it. It makes sense  
18 to go where the population is.

19 Senator Heller. Yes. I am right there with you. I do  
20 not really have an opinion, either, although one is a  
21 Regional Office that works--

22 Mr. Stroud. Yes, sir.

23 Senator Heller. --for the veterans in the State of  
24 Nevada.

25 Another question. You being from Hawthorne, Nevada,

1 and Gil, you are from Elko, two rural areas within the State  
2 of Nevada, and this obviously affects all veterans living in  
3 rural parts of America, can you tell me if there is anything  
4 missing now from the VA's delivery service in rural portions  
5 of America?

6 Mr. Stroud. It is really hard to justify the expense  
7 of even, in some communities, even a CBOC. Now, there is a  
8 CBOC there in Fallon, which is 70 miles away, and I think we  
9 have expanded the CBOCs around the nation to service rural  
10 areas. That is a step in the right direction. We have--we  
11 certainly requested in our Independent Budget, we requested  
12 more for construction of facilities, and some of that being  
13 CBOCs for the rural areas.

14 Senator Heller. Let me change directions here for a  
15 minute. Do you hear any complaints about prosthetic  
16 services for veterans--

17 Mr. Stroud. I have not--

18 Senator Heller. --timing, quality of service?

19 Mr. Stroud. No--

20 Senator Heller. The reason I am asking this is I am  
21 getting phone calls, or have received phone calls in the  
22 past from vendors that would like to participate in these  
23 programs and yet it is very narrowly contracted to very  
24 large delivery services. Have you had any notions, any  
25 comments or questions raised?

1           Mr. Stroud. I have not had any experiences with any of  
2 that coming to my attention. On contrary to that, I have  
3 heard of one instance where someone lived in Pennsylvania,  
4 was visiting in California, had a problem, an infection with  
5 their stump, and went to the local VA and the physician  
6 examined him and said, "Well, the problem is you have got an  
7 infection here. Let me give you some antibiotics and come  
8 back in a week or so and we will take a look at you." He  
9 said, "No, I am here on vacation. I am not going to be here  
10 two weeks from now." And then the doctor said, "Well, you  
11 know, one of the problems causing that is your prosthetic is  
12 not right," he said. "So you are leaving in two weeks?"  
13 And the guy said, "Yes." He said, "Well, come back next  
14 week and we will have a new prosthetic for you."

15           And he got a new prosthetic while he was there, and  
16 that is a story that the VFW was happy to share with  
17 Secretary McDonald, because he needs to hear the good  
18 stories, too, and not just the horror stories.

19           Senator Heller. Yes. That is a great story.

20           [Applause.]

21           Senator Heller. Mr. Chairman, my time has run out, but  
22 I again want to thank the Commander. I do have to leave for  
23 other meetings. I just want you to know that I am very,  
24 very grateful for you and everybody that is here in this  
25 audience for what you do for veterans across this country

1 and especially what you do here in the State of Nevada.

2 Thank you very much.

3 Mr. Stroud. Thank you, Senator, for all you do for  
4 veterans.

5 [Applause.]

6 Chairman Isakson. Congressman Titus.

7 Ms. Titus. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 I, too, would like to join my fellow Nevadan in  
9 thanking you, Commander Stroud, for all you do for veterans  
10 and tell you how proud you make us in Nevada with your  
11 leadership.

12 And, it was a pleasure yesterday to meet with Gil in my  
13 office and his team and talk about issues affecting veterans  
14 from the Vietnam era all the way up to today. We worked  
15 together for a long time and I always welcome you to come  
16 and educate me on the topic.

17 I also appreciate the fact that you do not have an  
18 opinion where the facility should go in Nevada. I do have a  
19 very strong opinion about that. I think it should go in Las  
20 Vegas. That is not only my district, but that is where  
21 150,000 of the slightly over 200,000 veterans in Nevada  
22 live. We do have that new hospital, and the facility in  
23 Reno was the fifth worst in the country for the backlog and  
24 it has been without a director for over a year. They cannot  
25 seem to recruit anybody who wants to go there. When they

1 hired 15 new officers for the Las Vegas facility, they were  
2 filled just like that. I am not suggesting that people  
3 would rather live in Las Vegas than in Reno, but there is  
4 something to those figures. So, I hope to see it relocate  
5 there, if that is possible.

6 I just wanted to thank you, too, for highlighting the  
7 issue of women veterans. That is just so important. And,  
8 the number of women veterans is growing, as you pointed out.  
9 As I hear from women veterans, it seems to be that there are  
10 several things they need specifically, and I would ask your  
11 advice on this.

12 First, they need gender-specific care. Many of the old  
13 VA facilities do not even provide any privacy for women  
14 veterans coming in, so I think we need to look at that from  
15 the health care standpoint.

16 And the second thing is they are not able to take  
17 advantage of some of the benefits that are there because of  
18 the child care issue, like going to job training and going  
19 back to work, or going back to school, because they cannot  
20 get the child care that they need.

21 I think we need to look at those issues for women, and  
22 I would ask the VFW's advice, your personal advice. What  
23 are some of the things we can do to move that agenda  
24 forward?

25 Mr. Stroud. Well, we have got to share this concern

1 with the VA. Get these facilities established. I was  
2 traveling--I travel all the time, and I will be honest with  
3 you, I do not remember where I was, but I visited a VA  
4 center and they had a separate building that was the women's  
5 clinic, and I was given a tour of that and briefing by the  
6 director that their women veterans, their patients had  
7 everything that they needed. So, my advice would be, have a  
8 separate women's facility at every VA Regional Medical  
9 Center, with the exception, obviously, of some things can be  
10 jointly used, you know, the X-ray and those kinds of things.

11 But, as far as the gender-specific, I believe the women  
12 veterans should have a separate clinic where, number one,  
13 their privacy is--the integrity of their privacy is  
14 protected and they get the proper gender-specific care that  
15 they need and deserve.

16 Ms. Titus. I know we found out that--

17 [Applause.]

18 Ms. Titus. Yes. I agree with that. We discovered  
19 that about a fourth of the facilities do not even have a  
20 gynecologist on staff. So, if you will help me work with  
21 the VA--I have pointed this out to them, too--I would  
22 certainly appreciate it. And, let us look at some of the  
23 child care issues, as well, moving forward. And, so, I look  
24 forward to working with you all on that.

25 Mr. Stroud. Absolutely. We agree with you 100

1 percent.

2 Ms. Titus. All right. Thank you, sir.

3 I yield back.

4 Mr. Stroud. Thank you.

5 Chairman Isakson. Thank you.

6 Congressman Coffman.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Coffman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 First, I would like to recognize my fellow VFW members  
10 from the State of Colorado, if you could please stand up,  
11 those from the State of Colorado. Great. Thank you all.  
12 Thank you for being here.

13 [Applause.]

14 Mr. Coffman. Well, I am proud to be a life member of  
15 your organization as an Army-Marine Corps veteran, and--

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Coffman. Thank you. And, you know, I am concerned  
18 about the transition of our veterans leaving active duty  
19 right now and I want to ask you a question about that. I  
20 first transitioned out as a young enlisted soldier, and I  
21 was single, went to the University of Colorado under the  
22 G.I. Bill. I mean, that was all pretty easy. But, then, I  
23 came back after being a Marine Corps officer, being older,  
24 came back for the transition.

25 My resume was Army infantry, Marine Corps infantry, and

1 did not have a business degree and I wanted to be in  
2 business and everybody would tell me, "Thanks for your  
3 service, but we do not have a place for you in our  
4 organization." I got so frustrated, one day I joked that I  
5 put down on my resume, instead of being an infantry officer  
6 specializing in amphibious warfare, I put down that I was  
7 involved in international real estate specializing in the  
8 acquisition of beachfront property.

9 [Laughter and applause.]

10 Mr. Coffman. And that did not work.

11 [Laughter.]

12 Mr. Coffman. But, I took my savings and was able to  
13 start a small business, but most people would come out as a  
14 junior officer or my age, then chances are be married, maybe  
15 have a family, or be an enlisted soldier or Marine, airman,  
16 sailor, without the savings, maybe, that I had accrued as a  
17 junior officer where I had that option.

18 So, I am concerned about the young men and women who do  
19 not want to go to college, who do not want to go to school  
20 at all, about the availability of apprenticeship programs,  
21 of on-the-job training, where instead of utilizing the G.I.  
22 Bill, that their salaries are paid for. There is a little  
23 used program right now that does that. I think we need to  
24 beef it up. I just want to get your idea on how we can  
25 better transition the young men and women coming out of the



1 military into the workforce.

2 Mr. Stroud. Well, first of all, we need to get every  
3 State on board with professional accreditation in our  
4 licensing process. For example, a troop that spent four  
5 years in the motor pool running heavy equipment should not  
6 have to take a six-month course to get a CDL in his State.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Stroud. And, some States are accepting military  
9 certification training for licensing. Some States are not.  
10 We need to get this blanket across the board.

11 Secondly, the training that the military provides, in  
12 most cases, far exceeds that in private licensing. I will  
13 tell you what. A battlefield medic can work circles around  
14 a doctor, and I would put my life in their hands every day  
15 of the week, and they should not have to take a long,  
16 lengthy course to get their nursing license.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Stroud. We also need--you mentioned the  
19 transition. Well, there is going to be an increase as the  
20 wars draw down, and there is going to be an increase of  
21 folks leaving the military. The VFW has a presence at some  
22 of the TAP programs, which is mandatory upon separating from  
23 the service, and some of them were not. We do not have a  
24 presence. And, on some of them where we do have a presence,  
25 the VFW service officer is only give five minutes to say

1 what they can do for them, how they can help them, how they  
2 can assist them with their claims, how they can assist them  
3 with filing for their G.I. Bill benefits. So, we need to  
4 get a more significant presence in these TAP programs at  
5 these military bases where the folks are being processed out  
6 of the service.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Coffman. Thank you. I want to thank the VFW, in  
9 closing, for your work on some of these less than honorable  
10 discharges. I have been in the military during two RIFs,  
11 reduction in force, where the criteria was pretty solid to  
12 thin the ranks. It was, you are not going to be able to  
13 reenlist, or if you are passed over twice for promotion as  
14 an officer, you are going to have to leave. But, there was  
15 solid criteria.

16 And, what we have found in Fort Carson, Colorado, with  
17 the United States Army was that they were dismissing  
18 soldiers coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan with minor  
19 infractions that during my time on active duty it never  
20 would have occurred that somebody would have been dismissed  
21 with a less than honorable discharge, with no access to  
22 services as a veteran. I mean, I just think that is  
23 appalling and I just want to thank you for your focus on  
24 that issue. God bless you for all you do. Thank you.

25 Mr. Stroud. Thank you.

1 [Applause.]

2 Chairman Isakson. The next four to be recognized, in  
3 order of appearance, are Senator Manchin, Congressman  
4 Abraham, Rice, and Bost. Senator Manchin.

5 Senator Manchin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I thank all  
6 of you for your attendance here and for the service you have  
7 given our great country.

8 I would like to have a shout out to my West Virginia  
9 "almost heaven" veterans if they are here. They were here  
10 yesterday--

11 [Laughter.]

12 Senator Manchin. They had to get back to "almost  
13 heaven," did they not?

14 [Laughter.]

15 Senator Manchin. Anyway, let me just say this. There  
16 are a couple of things that I want to talk about, and I  
17 think it is very important, Commander, that we do, and first  
18 is the unemployment of our veterans. To me, it was just  
19 astounding when I came to the U.S. Senate to find that some  
20 of the highest percentage of unemployment in any ranks are  
21 our veterans returning. The younger veterans, especially,  
22 our older veterans, are all having problems with this.

23 We are having a hard time. We started a Veterans Jobs  
24 Caucus, and then we have a campaign called "I Hire a Vet."  
25 I do not know how many of you are aware of that and how many

1 of you have been involved, but I think it is imperative that  
2 every one of you go back to your home and make sure that  
3 businesses understand how important it is to give a veteran  
4 an opportunity.

5 First of all, it starts here. If we in Congress cannot  
6 hire veterans in our office, we cannot lead by example, and  
7 I encourage every office here, 535 offices of Congress, to  
8 make sure they have veterans working in their office.

9 [Applause.]

10 Senator Manchin. Next of all, we will help you with  
11 that "I Hire a Vet" campaign. Also, we have worked on a  
12 single portal, that anyone mustering out, or anyone who is  
13 looking for type of employment, in whatever part of the  
14 country they live in, they can go to this portal and  
15 basically give their skill sets where they want to be in the  
16 country and we have businesses committed towards that. We  
17 have a lot of the big box stores now. We have  
18 manufacturing, DuPont, all of them, committing to hire a  
19 certain percentage of veterans. So, we need to keep that on  
20 for all of us.

21 Next of all, something we have to wipe out, and I heard  
22 Bob McDonald, went and spoke with him, is homelessness.  
23 There is no way on earth that a veteran should be homeless.  
24 No way.

25 [Applause.]

1           Senator Manchin. And, let me just give you all  
2 something to think about, and you know it better than  
3 anybody else. Tonight, when you go to bed, when you have a  
4 bed to sleep in, there will be 50,000 homeless veterans  
5 sleeping somewhere, not a bed, I assure you. That has got  
6 to change and we have got to make sure that we wipe that  
7 out. So, I hope it is a campaign that you keep on the front  
8 burner for all of us.

9           And, finally, on the Clay Hunt veterans' suicide, we  
10 have 22 veterans every day committing suicide. This is  
11 something where the VA clinics, we are putting the Clay Hunt  
12 bill--I think you are all aware of that, it was to address  
13 the suicide--making sure we had more people that could help  
14 identify, and I think a lot of you in your post know those  
15 who need help. You have got to make sure that we get them  
16 into the system.

17           So, if you want to speak on any of the joblessness,  
18 homelessness, suicide rates, what you think that we can do  
19 more of, or are we moving in the right direction.

20           Mr. Stroud. Well, we have got to do more on the  
21 veteran suicide issue, because this rate of 22 suicides a  
22 day is not new. It was--that rate was three years ago, and  
23 it has not gone down. So, that is critical. That tells me  
24 that we are not making any progress. So, we have got to  
25 give it more attention. We have got to reach out and have

1 more awareness.

2           Senator Manchin. Do you think they are aware of the  
3 Clay Hunt? Do we need to do more from our end, making sure  
4 that our veterans all over this country understand there is  
5 help and help is on the way and it is coming in the form of  
6 more resources towards PTSD and all the other problems they  
7 may have? We are having a lot of them coming out from our  
8 era, the Vietnam era, are just finally coming out and  
9 looking for this help, and basically have held all this in.  
10 We just need to be able to contact them. We think that you  
11 are all the best facilitators that we have.

12           Mr. Stroud. We reach out to our folks at every  
13 opportunity. Even in my State, my State Commander has got a  
14 personal project, is suicide prevention. And, we are  
15 spreading the word to look out for each other, be the Battle  
16 Buddy, you know, because a lot of times, they will not want  
17 to go to anybody and seek help, but someone that they are  
18 close to, someone that they trust, if they reach out to  
19 them, "Jim, what is the matter? Are you okay?" With that,  
20 if you save one life, then it is worthwhile.

21           [Applause.]

22           Senator Manchin. Let me just say that my time is  
23 expiring and I want to thank all of you again for your  
24 service to our country and continued service for the  
25 veterans who need all the assistance and help that they

1 deserve, and God bless each and every one of you. Thank you  
2 for being here.

3 Mr. Stroud. Senator, thank you--

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Stroud. --and thank you for reaching out to me  
6 with a personal phone call when I was in your State.

7 Chairman Isakson. Congressman Abraham.

8 Mr. Abraham. Good morning. Commander Stroud, I read  
9 all your report last night. It was concise, informative,  
10 and on topic. We had a meeting with our Louisiana  
11 delegation from the VFW last night and they espoused and we  
12 definitely talked about exactly the issues we are talking  
13 about today. So, Louisiana was represented very well and we  
14 are proud to be a part of that small community and we  
15 appreciate everybody here for your service.

16 I want to ask, I guess, a question on Operation Ranch  
17 Hand. That is, certainly, what you know, is where they did  
18 spray the 2,4-D and 2,4-T and Agent Orange, not only once,  
19 but several times, because they could not seem quite to get  
20 the concentration right, so they kept spraying you guys over  
21 there over and over. And, being a physician, I have read  
22 the medical reports on dioxin toxicity.

23 My question is, what area do we need to focus on first,  
24 or prioritize, as to finding out more of our veterans that  
25 have been exposed--I understand we are working on the brown

1 water issue, but where do we need to look to help these men  
2 and women, certainly our soldiers that were in the jungles,  
3 get treatment?

4 Mr. Stroud. Well, not being a medical professional and  
5 not really being medically smart--I know how to put a band-  
6 aid on--

7 Mr. Abraham. We are not that smart.

8 [Laughter.]

9 Mr. Stroud. I would say research. We need more  
10 research and science to identify just how many and more  
11 specific ailments that these toxins are associated with  
12 causing and being associated with. I know there are more  
13 out there, because a couple times a year, it is announced  
14 that a new ailment that is Agent Orange related. So, there  
15 is more. And, what about other toxins, not just Agent  
16 Orange? I mean, we have got specific Gulf War illnesses  
17 that folks were exposed to burn pits and things like that.  
18 So, the research, the science of it needs to identify what  
19 the issues are and then we can apply resources and  
20 treatments for these conditions.

21 Mr. Abraham. Okay. Thank you.

22 And, another question--we will switch gears a little  
23 bit--pawning off Senator Manchin's and your previous  
24 discussion on our suicides, in your report here, you said  
25 that only 13 percent of non-VA facilities are actually good



1 enough or competent to provide the services that we need for  
2 our veterans as far as mental health issues. The question  
3 is, would your organization rather see more resource as far  
4 as personnel and money go to the VA for training or to non-  
5 VA, or would you so-called split the sheets a little bit?  
6 Where would you prefer, or where would your organization  
7 think that the resources could be best used for our mental  
8 health?

9 Mr. Stroud. Well, we need the resources in both DOD  
10 and VA, because we do have a military suicide rate that is  
11 much too high, as well.

12 Mr. Abraham. That is what I am referring to, just the  
13 veterans' rate. But, in your report, you said of non-VA  
14 facilities, only 13 percent actually were up to speed, so to  
15 speak, as compared to being able to afford good mental  
16 health care. And, my question is, if we are able to supply  
17 more resources on the mental health issue, would you prefer  
18 in the VA system, more resources spent outside the VA system  
19 for mental health services for our veterans, or a little bit  
20 of both?

21 Mr. Stroud. Well, I would say both, because we are  
22 going to have those veterans that are not being treated--do  
23 not get treatment at VA facilities.

24 Mr. Abraham. Okay. And, I guess that leads to my next  
25 question--I am getting out of time--on the choice option.

1 As a physician, what I see is certainly the VA being centers  
2 of excellence in a lot of issues, a lot of areas. But, if a  
3 veteran needs treatment for something more minor, a  
4 bronchitis, a pneumonia, maybe infection on his or her toe,  
5 we certainly want that veteran to be able to go locally,  
6 quickly, efficiently, and free up that appointment time for  
7 a veteran that actually needs to be in the VA system for  
8 that center of excellent help. So, as a physician, I see  
9 that part of choice hopefully working well for you guys and  
10 girls. Thank you.

11 Mr. Stroud. Thank you.

12 [Applause.]

13 Chairman Isakson. Representative Rice.

14 Ms. Rice. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

15 So, I want to welcome all of you. Thank you so much.  
16 I am a brand new Congressperson and it is my great honor to  
17 be able to serve on this committee. Is Joe Cignitore here?  
18 Well, Joe, I was lucky enough to see Joe and Gene Ratigliano  
19 and Dave Czarnecki, who are all local New York VFW leaders.  
20 I was fortunate enough to see them yesterday.

21 But, Commander, I would like to just follow up on a  
22 question that Representative Tutus asked about treatment for  
23 women veterans. I was fortunate enough to meet with Bill  
24 Santini, who is the Commander of the Nassau County, where I  
25 come from, Nassau County VFW, and he was expressing to me

1 the difficulty--obviously, we know the difficulty in  
2 ensuring that women get the proper health care that they  
3 need, but he expressed a difficulty in being able to recruit  
4 women counselors so that when women do present for health  
5 care needs at a VA facility, they can speak to another  
6 woman. So, can you tell me what steps, if any, you have  
7 taken, or you think that VFWs can help with recruiting more  
8 women to serve as counselors.

9 Mr. Stroud. Well, when we reach out to VA, we present  
10 them with the same issues that we testified here today with.  
11 We totally agree with you. Women are more comfortable  
12 seeing women, and that needs to be done. The VA needs to  
13 get their resources out there to attract these employees.

14 Ms. Rice. How do you think they can do that? What is  
15 the best way to recruit women?

16 Mr. Stroud. Well, they have got to be careful, because  
17 the HR laws, you know, you cannot--cannot be sexist, and--

18 Ms. Rice. I guess I am asking you a--I do not mean to  
19 put you on the spot there, but--

20 Mr. Stroud. But, they can--

21 Ms. Rice. It is just raising awareness, I guess, for  
22 women to be in those positions.

23 Mr. Stroud. They need to advertise for the positions  
24 better, I would say.

25 Ms. Rice. Yes. Now, one other thing that I want to go

1 on, what Senator Manchin talked about. Recently, Secretary  
2 McDonald was talking about, obviously, that very disturbing  
3 statistic of 22 veteran suicides a day, and I asked him, out  
4 of those 22 people, how many of them were connected to a VA  
5 service. And, he said, out of the 22, they did not know  
6 about 17 of them. That, to me, is the second most  
7 disturbing statistic. Twenty-two is too high, but the fact  
8 that 17 of those veterans were not connected to a VA service  
9 for whatever reason, how do we address that issue?

10 Mr. Stroud. We have to address--and this starts while  
11 they are serving in the military--make it clear that every  
12 troop understands that it is okay to say, "I need help."

13 Ms. Rice. Yes.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Stroud. Even though it is the brute, macho thing,  
16 "I can do this," you know. There is a--it keeps people from  
17 stepping forward.

18 Ms. Rice. Yes.

19 Mr. Stroud. We have got to reintegrate, reemphasize  
20 that it is okay, and I think DOD needs to rethink one of its  
21 policies of, if you walk into a mental health clinic, you  
22 lose your security clearance. A lot of people are not  
23 getting help because they do not want to lose their security  
24 clearance, lose their job.

25 Ms. Rice. Yes.

1 Mr. Stroud. We need to look at that.

2 [Applause.]

3 Ms. Rice. I could not agree with you more. And,  
4 Secretary McDonald addressed this issue by saying that they  
5 were going to take off mental health section, so that--  
6 because it is very much that type of stigma that prevents  
7 people from getting that help.

8 I want to thank you, Commander, and everyone in this  
9 room for all of the work that you do through the VFWs all  
10 across this country for the incredibly brave men and women  
11 who put their--all of you in this room who have put your  
12 lives on the line for all of us. Thank you so very much for  
13 your service, and I yield back my time. Thank you, Mr.  
14 Chairman.

15 Mr. Stroud. Thank you.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Isakson. Representative Zeldin.

18 Mr. Zeldin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I also want  
19 to echo the thoughts of my colleague, Congressperson Rice,  
20 who is thanking you all for your service.

21 We are both from Long Island, both freshman members,  
22 and both honored to serve here on this committee. We live  
23 in a great, free, exceptional nation, thanks to your service  
24 and sacrifice. If you were not willing to risk life and  
25 limb to protect our flag and our Constitution and freedoms

1 and liberties, my family would not be safe, and I would be  
2 remiss if I did not ask you all for your service. I am also  
3 a proud VFW member myself--

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Zeldin. I really do appreciate all of your service  
6 and your families' service.

7 I wanted to spend my time today, we have just a few  
8 minutes to have a little bit of a dialogue about PTSD, our  
9 service members coming back looking like they are in one  
10 piece, but they are coming home with the mental wounds of  
11 war. So, I wanted to share some ideas. I have some ideas  
12 with regards to peer support. I want to hear what your  
13 thoughts are with regards to peer support.

14 For way of background, in New York State, we started a  
15 program called the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer Support Program,  
16 which is active in my home county of Suffolk, as well as  
17 Nassau County and ten other States [sic] in New York. Do  
18 you have any thoughts, observations of what you are seeing,  
19 of what is working and not working as far as the peer  
20 support model in other States in the country? And, I would  
21 also like to share some of my personal experiences with you.

22 Mr. Stroud. Well, Battle Buddy program, looking out  
23 for each other, knowing someone has your back, and not being  
24 afraid, like we spoke out a little bit ago, to reach out and  
25 say, "I need some help," not being offended when someone

1 comes to you when they recognize, "Wow, you are acting  
2 different. What is going on? Can you get some help?" And,  
3 that is your peer support that you are talking about, in my  
4 mind.

5 It is critical. It is critical, because, you know,  
6 years ago, it was how you--it is shellshock. You will get  
7 over it. No, it is serious. PTSD is serious. I mean,  
8 people are having nightmares, not sleeping, sleepwalking,  
9 losing their temper, committing crime. Until you get all  
10 the answers, we need to keep giving it attention.

11 Mr. Zeldin. So, one word that is used a lot with the  
12 veterans we lose for PTSD is suicide. Many of those  
13 veterans are committing suicide. I think it is also  
14 important to note, and I know this is a very sensitive topic  
15 for many of the families, is that some of our veterans we  
16 are losing to PTSD are, literally, their last words are  
17 saying, they are saying, "I do not want to die." In some  
18 cases, a veteran is not committing suicide. In the case of  
19 PFC Joseph Dwyer, who inspired us to create our program in  
20 New York, he was huffing to get temporary relief.

21 We use a model where we have eight to ten veterans in a  
22 room. We have someone in charge, kind of as a mentor, who  
23 receives training and advice. There is debate whether or  
24 not that mentor should be a veteran or not, whether or not  
25 the eight to ten people who are sitting at that table should

1 all be from the same conflict or can be from multiple  
2 generations. Location--sometimes you can meet inside of a  
3 VFW. There is a debate as to whether it should be a VFW,  
4 should it be inside of a school or a church, should it be at  
5 the VA. And, I also think it is important to do an  
6 important job bringing everyone together between the VA, but  
7 also connecting with an organization such as the VFW, to a  
8 local county Veteran Service Officer, to local experts who  
9 are able to--they are willing to offer up their expertise,  
10 volunteer their time to assist to build, to train that  
11 mentor.

12         These are a few things. I just want to know if you  
13 have any thoughts on any of them.

14         Mr. Stroud. Anything that is done to help our veterans  
15 better cope with their issues, that helps them fight that  
16 war that never seems to end until they end the war  
17 themselves, any place with anyone, as long as it is  
18 happening, is a good thing. That is my view on that, sir.

19         [Applause.]

20         Mr. Zeldin. I look forward to continuing the dialogue  
21 with the VFW. Thank you again to the Chairman for hosting  
22 this joint hearing, and I yield back.

23         Chairman Isakson. Thank you very much.

24         The next to be introduced will be Congressman Walz,  
25 followed by Congressman Huelskamp, Brownley, and Senator



1 Hirono.

2 Mr. Walz. Thank you, Chairman, and Commander, thank  
3 you for being here. To the Minnesotans who are here, I met  
4 with you yesterday. Just so you know, it is going to be  
5 warmer at home there than it is here, so tell every local  
6 you see here that to make them happy.

7 [Laughter.]

8 Mr. Walz. To the folks who came here today from across  
9 the country and for giving of your time in the VFW, I have  
10 to tell you and let you know that this front table here, you  
11 are as well represented in Washington as any organization in  
12 this country by these folks. Their professionalism and  
13 their dedication represents you all well. So, I know that  
14 is an important piece of it.

15 A special thank you--you heard Senator Manchin talk  
16 about the Clay Hunt Suicide Act. I think it is very  
17 important to know that Ray Kelley, Bob Wallace, your team  
18 here played a key role in working with Iraq and Afghanistan  
19 Veterans of America to make that bill possible. And,  
20 yesterday, I got a note from Clay's father, who said, like  
21 so many things, he was grateful that we are making sure no  
22 other family goes through this. But, he said something I  
23 think all of you should be very proud of. He said, while so  
24 many Americans are frustrated with our system, he said, "I  
25 believe so deeply when I watch the Veterans Service

1 Organizations and members of Congress and Secretary McDonald  
2 and Democrats and Republicans stand on that stage and say,  
3 we will not let this stand. We will not let one more  
4 suicide take place." And, he said, "that, in Clay's memory,  
5 is something that makes me proud." So, thank you all for  
6 making that happen. You are a key part of that.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Walz. And, again, my message to all of you, and  
9 you are hearing some great ideas, and to my colleagues who  
10 sat up there, this is a committee that is dedicated to  
11 getting it right. It has a well earned reputation through  
12 the decades of working together to serve our veterans. But,  
13 I mentioned this the other day and I say to this, wondering-  
14 -for all of you--what difference does it make if you come  
15 here? What difference does it make if you sat in a chair in  
16 a room and you listened to people up here? What is the  
17 impact?

18 I would tell you, it makes all the difference in the  
19 world, because my point on this is that the care of our  
20 nation's veterans is the one thing that unifies all of our  
21 constituencies. You will find no one in California, Hawaii,  
22 Minnesota, Georgia, wherever it may be, that does not say,  
23 make this a priority. What tends to change is the people  
24 who sat up here. The constant is you as the conscience of  
25 those people and the veterans.

1           So, I am thinking of this, when I hear these things, as  
2 I am watching this front table, they literally have nearly  
3 heard it all over the decades, I think, and I was thinking  
4 about this issue of this Skills to Jobs Act, and Senator  
5 Manchin was talking about this. If you remember, we passed  
6 a bill a few years ago, the Veterans Skills to Jobs Act, and  
7 we have more work to do, but to show you what your work did  
8 on this, I have a webpage up.

9           I represent the Mayo Clinic in Southern Minnesota, and  
10 if you go to the Mayo Clinic's website, it says, "A life  
11 changing career. Your service made you a leader with  
12 strengths in commitment, quality, and teamwork. Leverage  
13 these traits in a civilian career with a new mission and  
14 purpose. Mayo Clinic values these qualities to achieve the  
15 mission, the needs of the patient first." And, if you go  
16 in, they have a calculator in here that lets you put in your  
17 MOS and then it shows your skill set and the jobs that are  
18 available in your area. That is what you asked for. That  
19 is what you are going to get to do.

20           And, you know what surprised me, is I put in my 13-  
21 Bravo and there are actually jobs for a cannon crewman--

22           [Laughter.]

23           Mr. Walz. --because they took it--

24           [Applause.]

25           Mr. Walz. They took it and they said, operation

1 manager, crew supervisor. So, if you are a First Sergeant  
2 in an artillery unit, and I think a lot of our troops do not  
3 know that, you made that happen. So, it is about staying  
4 with it. It is about staying consistent.

5 And, on toxic wounds, you fought the issue and we came  
6 to the conclusion, and we saw clusters of Parkinson's  
7 amongst Vietnam veterans that absolutely defied all odds.  
8 We presented that medical evidence, as your Commander said,  
9 and lo and behold, then Secretary Shinseki said, you are  
10 right. Let us grant those claims. And, we did not have to  
11 go through this three-year, or three-decade fight with your  
12 own government. We said, the evidence is there. It fits  
13 it. It is right. The same thing needs to happen with Gulf  
14 War illness. The same thing needs to happen with the burn  
15 pits, and we need to stop it from happening.

16 Mr. Stroud. Yes, sir.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Walz. And then we need to recognize, when you do  
19 that and you add tens of thousands of people to the system,  
20 it is going to put a strain on it. It is not an excuse that  
21 the Nehmer claims caused a backlog, but it is certainly one  
22 of the reasons. It does not go beyond it.

23 And, then, we need to stay--Commander, you said it  
24 exactly right--we need to stay accountable. We need to  
25 continue to say that we will be the staunchest supporters of

1 the VA. We will be your harshest critics when you fail us.  
2 Continue to remain vigilant. Continue to be that  
3 conscience. Continue to ask for the best quality care.  
4 Continue to ask for the delivery of benefits with the  
5 benefit of the doubt going to the veterans.

6 And, you know what comes out of that? Progress. And,  
7 it comes out what the American people want. Care for those  
8 who are willing to serve us. Care for those who are willing  
9 to put their lives on the line to defend our freedoms. Come  
10 back and make the system work as well as it can. When we  
11 make mistakes, admit it, fix it, get rid of the people who  
12 made the mistakes, get the folks in who want to do better.

13 And, I would say this. All of that will only happen if  
14 these chairs are full of VFW members every single time you  
15 need to be here. So, thank you for your service, and I  
16 yield back.

17 [Applause.]

18 Chairman Isakson. Representative Huelskamp.

19 Mr. Huelskamp. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you,  
20 Commander, for being here, and the other gentlemen in the  
21 room.

22 I want to thank you, as well, for your efforts of  
23 helping out with the roll-out of the Veterans Choice  
24 Program. The website, the 1-800 number and the survey has  
25 been very helpful. I have heard from plenty of constituent

1 veterans that we need to do a better job of that.

2 My district is uniquely positioned in this country. It  
3 is in four different VISNs, which creates all kinds of  
4 difficulties, and in many cases, my veterans are hundreds of  
5 miles from the nearest VA facility, but they have local  
6 options. I also appreciate, Commander, you laying out that  
7 the VA has more authority than they have used as far as  
8 providing additional choice and options for veterans in  
9 rural areas.

10 I wonder if you could describe some of those items of  
11 how the VA could expand choice and provide more options for  
12 our veterans in rural areas. Commander.

13 Mr. Stroud. Do you have data on that?

14 Mr. Wallace. I think we are seeing that going slowly.  
15 They had to create the networks and so forth. We have got  
16 to do more. The VA has got to do more. It is  
17 unconscionable--and, the 30-day rule, the 30-day rule has to  
18 be a medical decision. We cannot just say, even if the  
19 veteran says, I want to stay in the system and the doctor  
20 says, you have got to be seen within 30 days, they have got  
21 to be seen and VA has got to figure out a way to see them.  
22 They have got to explain to the veteran, we cannot see you  
23 in the VA, but we can get you somewhere. You have got to be  
24 seen because of a medical need that has got to be seen and  
25 addressed.

1           It is a slow process. I mean, you know, you gave them  
2 three months to put it together, and I think TriWest and  
3 Health Net did a pretty good job. We need to educate the VA  
4 more on what they can do and should not do, and it has got  
5 to be a "can do" attitude, not a "can't do" attitude. When  
6 a veteran comes to them and they see a problem, they have  
7 got to take care of it right away. And, we are working with  
8 them and we are working with the committees and we will do  
9 whatever we can for getting the word out and pushing VA and  
10 pushing you folks, also, if we see something that needs to  
11 be done legislatively.

12           Mr. Huelskamp. Well, you identified in your  
13 presentation that more training is necessary of VA employees  
14 so they recognize. According to your survey, only one in  
15 five veterans were told about their choice. I suspect there  
16 might be a few people in the VA that are not happy with the  
17 choice provisions, and that is an option. And, the  
18 Secretary in testimony to the committee did commit to making  
19 this a permanent option and making certain that,  
20 particularly for veterans in rural areas, that they  
21 understand and have access to that choice.

22           I will note, working with the contractors, they are  
23 helping the VA can step it up. They have some options that  
24 would improve the system. But, yes, it is difficult to roll  
25 it out, issuing Choice Cards to those who do not qualify for

1 that. I am not for certain that was the best decision by  
2 the VA. But, it is going to take a while to work through  
3 that. But, I have cases where people literally travel--  
4 veterans travel hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles  
5 one way to get care. In the meantime, they will drive by  
6 ten local community hospitals that are more than willing to  
7 tap into that network and to be a resource for our veterans  
8 and we need to allow them to step up and perform those  
9 services. But, driving 300 miles for a cardiology  
10 appointment one way when you have a cardiologist in your  
11 local town is not only silly, it is stupid and we have to  
12 change that.

13 So, I appreciate your efforts, Commander and the rest  
14 of the VFW, in saying, hey, here is the choice you have.  
15 And, most veterans will probably choose to stay in the  
16 system. But, again, I had not even thought about the  
17 situation, Mr. Wallace, if you have got to wait more than 30  
18 days and a doctor says you cannot, we have to have the  
19 flexibility in the system to say, hey, here is where you can  
20 go.

21 So, we will continue to work together. Thank you for  
22 your efforts on that part. Mr. Commander, thank you.

23 Mr. Stroud. Thank you.

24 [Applause.]

25 Chairman Isakson. Representative Brownley.



1           Ms. Brownley. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to  
2 join all of my colleagues here today expressing my gratitude  
3 to you, Commander, to your team, and to all of the veterans  
4 who are here with us today of foreign wars. We really  
5 appreciate your service to our country and your continued  
6 service as veterans to all of our returning men and women to  
7 make sure that they get the services that they have earned  
8 and deserved.

9           I also want to associate myself with all of the  
10 comments and concerns in the areas that we need to continue  
11 to work on, whether it is homelessness or suicide,  
12 unemployment, women's health issues.

13           I also want to say, all of you returned, thank God, but  
14 many of your colleagues did not return, and so we also need  
15 to make sure that we work very, very hard that each and  
16 every one of those who did not return, that their families  
17 are taken care of, their children are taken care of, their  
18 spouses are taken care of appropriately so that they have  
19 the quality of life that they also have earned and deserved.

20           [Applause.]

21           Ms. Brownley. Thank you.

22           I wanted to drill down a little bit more on women's  
23 health care. So, Commander, as you said, I am also not a  
24 medical professional. I think I know how to put a band-aid  
25 on, too, but that is kind of where my expertise ends. But,

1 I do--this is a hypothesis of mine, based on some testimony  
2 that we have had around toxic exposure, that I think we are  
3 getting a grip or a handle on toxic exposure and other  
4 diseases, whether it is cancer and other kinds of things. I  
5 also think--this is my hypothesis--that toxic exposure is  
6 also impacting the mental health side of the equation and  
7 that our veterans are suffering, and it might be identified  
8 as PTSD or a suicide candidate, but I think that some of the  
9 cause may actually be their exposure to toxins in their  
10 service to their country.

11 So, I think this is an area where we need to do more  
12 research and drill down further to understand that, but I  
13 just wanted to hear if you agree with me on that hypothesis  
14 and what your comments might be.

15 Mr. Stroud. We totally agree with you on that, ma'am.  
16 And, as a matter of fact, it frightens me when I think that  
17 the possibility that we may have just scratched the surface  
18 on this. So, yes, we need more research. We need to look  
19 into this. We need to keep eyes wide open on it. Yes, all  
20 this takes money. We have got to do funding for these  
21 things.

22 Ms. Brownley. Chairman Benishek and I yesterday had a  
23 roundtable and had a lot of people there to speak to this  
24 issue around toxic exposure. There was a doctor there who  
25 came and offered her conclusions, a doctor from Cornell

1 University, and she talked about some specifics in terms of  
2 mental health impacts from toxic exposure and the fact that  
3 women, based on her research, that women are symptomatic  
4 earlier than men are in some areas.

5 So, anyway, I think it is an area that I agree on and  
6 would love to work with you to drill down further on some of  
7 these issues.

8 So, again, I thank all of you from the bottom of my  
9 heart for your service to our country. We have got a lot  
10 more work to do and I look forward to working with you to  
11 get that accomplished.

12 Mr. Stroud. Thank you. We do, as well.

13 [Applause.]

14 Chairman Isakson. Next will be Senator Hirono,  
15 followed by Senator Rounds and Representative Costello.  
16 Senator Hirono.

17 Senator Hirono. Thank you, Chair Isakson and Chair  
18 Miller, for convening this meeting, and to Commander Stroud  
19 and all of the rest of the panelists, thank you very much  
20 for being here. And, of course, to all of the veterans who  
21 are in the audience.

22 I would like to take the opportunity to give a shout  
23 out to the folks from Hawaii, the veterans from Hawaii who  
24 are here, and I hope that the Chairs will allow them, if  
25 they are still here, to wave, because you have come a long

1 way. It is Fred Chang, George Barlett, Norbert Enos back  
2 there, Frank Bragg, and Carlos Santana from my State office.  
3 I am really proud to see you here, Carlos.

4 [Applause.]

5 Senator Hirono. Thank you very much.

6 I chaired a Veterans Committee field hearing in Hawaii  
7 last year and heard many of the concerns that you have  
8 expressed this morning. I have a question about veterans'  
9 homelessness. When I met with Secretary McDonald just a few  
10 weeks ago, and also in his testimony before the Senate  
11 Veterans Committee, he said that his goal is to eliminate  
12 veteran homelessness by the end of this year. So, Commander  
13 Stroud, do you think that the VA is on track to meet this  
14 goal of ending veterans' homelessness by 2015, by this year,  
15 and could you provide your thoughts on VA's efforts to do  
16 this and whether you think that they have the tools  
17 necessary and the resources necessary to end veterans'  
18 homelessness.

19 Mr. Stroud. I applaud the efforts of the VA to end  
20 veterans' homelessness and they are making headway. I do  
21 not have an opinion on whether or not they are going to end  
22 it totally--

23 Senator Hirono. By end of 2015.

24 Mr. Stroud. --by the end of this year. It is  
25 important that we do end veteran homelessness, because I

1 just--I find it appalling that someone defended this great  
2 nation--

3 Senator Hirono. Yes.

4 Mr. Stroud. --and cannot have a roof over their head.  
5 I am not advocating for all these handouts, but I would be a  
6 big advocate of a hand up.

7 Senator Hirono. Completely agree.

8 The VA has said that they will be undergoing an  
9 assessment process to determine whether facilities should be  
10 closed or should be consolidated. Secretary McDonald says  
11 that this realignment of VA's medical facilities is being  
12 undertaken to best serve veterans and to shed those  
13 facilities that are not economically viable and no longer  
14 provide value to the veterans. Assuming that this process  
15 is necessary, Commander, how would you want the VA to  
16 proceed with this assessment, and what kind of involvement  
17 is there for VFW in this assessment process?

18 Mr. Stroud. Well, we would be actively involved with  
19 it. If they were going to propose closing a facility, we  
20 did not think so, they would hear from us, and so would you.

21 [Laughter.]

22 Senator Hirono. I know I can count on that.

23 Mr. Stroud. Now, we do--we will acknowledge that the  
24 demographics of our nation is changing every year. There  
25 are more people headed West than ever before. Some towns

1 are getting smaller. So, yes, we have got to adjust to  
2 whatever the demographics are, but I would certainly be wary  
3 of eliminating any facility that some veterans were counting  
4 on using for their care.

5 Senator Hirono. I think it would be very important for  
6 VA to hear your perspectives, because you folks are really  
7 very much on the ground in terms of the veterans' needs in  
8 your own areas.

9 This is a short question regarding licensing and  
10 credentialing, because, of course, we want our active duty  
11 people, when they become veterans, to be able to get jobs in  
12 the civilian sector, and a lot of this has to do with  
13 transferring the experiences that they have while on active  
14 duty to the civilian side. So, you mentioned in your  
15 testimony, Commander, that the DOD spends nearly \$2 billion  
16 each year to finance veterans' unemployment benefits and  
17 that we need to do more to expand DOD pilot credentialing  
18 programs to help our service members get the licensure and  
19 other credentials they need. So, can you give your thoughts  
20 on how we are proceeding, how we are doing with these  
21 efforts.

22 Mr. Stroud. We have a long way to go. We still have  
23 States that are not recognizing military certifications for  
24 private licensing and those States need to get on board and  
25 do the right thing. Like I said earlier, I would trust my

1 health care to a battlefield medic every day of the week.

2 Senator Hirono. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 [Applause.]

4 Chairman Isakson. Senator Rounds.

5 Senator Rounds. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 I know I talked to a couple of the crew from South  
7 Dakota that were in the office earlier today. Is my South  
8 Dakota crew here yet? Where are they? There you are. All  
9 right. Hello. Thanks for being here.

10 Look, ladies and gentlemen, I am not going to take a  
11 lot of time asking a long question. I do think that, at  
12 times, we do more talking and less listening than we  
13 probably should. I would like to use a few minutes just to-  
14 -you have been through a long committee hearing today, and I  
15 am thinking from the time that you started until the time  
16 that we end, that you might have had some thoughts that you  
17 had said, if I get an opportunity, I want to say something.  
18 I am going to give you a few minutes here, if you would  
19 like, to say something on it.

20 But, let me personally begin by just saying thank you  
21 to all of you out there. I am one of the recipients of what  
22 you have done for my generation. If it was not for the men  
23 and the women that have so proudly worn the uniform of the  
24 United States of America, we would not have anything here.  
25 The freedoms that we enjoy, the opportunities that we have

1 would not be here if it was not for your sacrifice and your  
2 service. So, I thank you for what you have done.

3 Right now, I would just like to ask any one of you, do  
4 any of you have any thoughts that you would like to share  
5 with this committee that you maybe have not had an  
6 opportunity to share up until this point?

7 Mr. Stroud. Yes, sir.

8 Senator Rounds. Please.

9 Mr. Stroud. I would like to share with you that I have  
10 the greatest job in the world. The reason I have the  
11 greatest job in the world is because I get to sit here and  
12 be an advocate for the greatest people in the world, and  
13 that is our nation's heroes and these people sitting back  
14 here.

15 Senator Rounds. Thank you.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Stroud. Also with us this trip, and we have  
18 decided we are going to do it again, we partnered up a  
19 couple years ago, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with  
20 the Student Veterans of America, and this year, at this  
21 conference, we brought ten members of Student Veterans of  
22 America here with us as Fellows to this Legislative  
23 Conference. Would your SVA Fellows please stand and be  
24 recognized.

25 [Applause.]



1           Mr. Stroud. And, we have not only decided to continue  
2 doing this in subsequent years, but we are going to expand  
3 it, and the goal--

4           [Applause.]

5           Mr. Stroud. The goal is going to be to bring a Fellow  
6 from every single State.

7           Senator Rounds. Love it. Love it.

8           [Applause.]

9           Mr. Stroud. Well, that is about the horn that I wanted  
10 to toot.

11          Senator Rounds. Mr. Chairman, with that, I would just  
12 once again thank you for everything that you have done, and  
13 we are very grateful, because we would not be able to be up  
14 here if it was not for you and everything that you have done  
15 for us. So, thank you very much. And, Mr. Chairman, I will  
16 yield back.

17          Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Senator Rounds.

18          Commander Stroud, we have been called for a vote on the  
19 Senate floor, so I am going to turn the gavel over to  
20 Chairman Miller, but I would like the permission of Chairman  
21 Miller, if I can, to make an acknowledgment.

22          You know, leadership by example has always, to me, been  
23 the best form of leadership. It is obvious to me that you  
24 are a great leader. It is obvious to me the VA is lucky to  
25 have you, and it is obvious to me that you have our back as

1 we move forward in making the 40-mile rule work, making the  
2 VA work, getting the services to our mental health so our  
3 veterans who suffer from PTSD and TBI get the services they  
4 need. But, most importantly of all, you and your members  
5 are the eyes and ears of these two committees to report to  
6 us what is going right, to report to us what is going wrong,  
7 and to be our cheerleaders as we go about trying to make the  
8 fix.

9 But, I just want to thank you for your service to the  
10 country, for your service to the United States of America,  
11 and for your appearance here today.

12 Chairman Miller.

13 Mr. Stroud. Thank you, Senator.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Miller. [Presiding.] Thank you very much.

16 Mr. Costello, you are recognized.

17 Mr. Costello. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Thank you all for being here today and sharing with us  
19 your testimony, as well as those seated behind you. If I  
20 could just ask those from Pennsylvania here if you could  
21 stand up and just be recognized real quickly.

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Costello. I have the great honor of serving on  
24 this committee and work with other members of the  
25 Pennsylvania delegation to make sure your concerns are

1 addressed, and I just wanted you to know, whether you are in  
2 my district or not, we in Pennsylvania work very well  
3 together on veterans' issues and I am very pleased to be  
4 serving on this committee. Chairman Miller has been a  
5 tremendous advocate and provided us all a great tutorial on  
6 how to be effective members on this committee.

7 Commander, I ask you this question, and if you would  
8 like to share it or have another member seated there answer  
9 it, that is perfectly fine. You pointed out in your written  
10 testimony the need for health care services does not peak  
11 until years, sometimes decades, later, after veterans leave  
12 military service. And you pointed out that the VHA in the  
13 future will need to be more flexible. My question is  
14 directed towards the concept of flexibility.

15 In order to provide the high-quality care and services  
16 that our veterans deserve, what should we be doing, what  
17 should the VHA be doing to ensure that when that peak need  
18 arises, the VA is equipped to serve them well? And,  
19 specifically in talking about flexibility, what do we need  
20 to do to improve care in the future for our veterans?

21 Mr. Stroud. Well, they need to accurately project what  
22 the need is going to be in the future. You know what a  
23 military strength is at any given time and also know that 81  
24 percent of those folks are not going to be career military  
25 folks. They are going to separate after their enlistment is

1 up. So, now, you have got a benchmark to shoot from. You  
2 know that if you have got a significant drawdown in military  
3 coming, that you are going to have a higher veterans' health  
4 care issue. So, you need to project what your expectations  
5 are realistically and prepare for them so that you are ready  
6 when it happens instead of backpeddling and doing crisis  
7 management.

8 Mr. Costello. And, it is fair to say that improvement  
9 needs to be made on that front.

10 Mr. Stroud. Yes.

11 Mr. Costello. Thank you. I yield back.

12 Mr. Stroud. Thank you.

13 Chairman Miller. Thank you very much.

14 Also let the record show that the House has just taken  
15 over the entire Senate.

16 [Laughter and applause.]

17 Chairman Miller. Mr. O'Rourke.

18 Mr. O'Rourke. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 Commander Stroud, let me begin by thanking you and all  
20 those who are here with you today for your service to this  
21 country in uniform, out of uniform, day in, day out. I  
22 think you make all of us up here much better at what we do,  
23 given your expertise, your experience, your advice, your  
24 direction, and, yes, your pressure to get us to do the right  
25 thing. I feel like I have benefitted enormously from that,

1 and I see Mr. Kelley up here, Mr. Wallace and others who  
2 have appeared before us in committee and subcommittee  
3 hearings, and they shed a lot of light on issues that I am  
4 only beginning to understand. So, I want to thank you for  
5 that.

6 And then I would like to apologize for not being here  
7 earlier. I also have the privilege of serving on the House  
8 Armed Services Committee, as do some of my colleagues up  
9 here, and we had a chance to meet with General Campbell  
10 about our continuing operations in Afghanistan. And, we  
11 recently had the Third Brigade, the Bulldog Brigade, from  
12 the First Armored Division at Fort Bliss was just there, and  
13 I wanted to make sure I understood what the conditions are  
14 like there, what our strategy is, and what the goals and the  
15 objectives are, and what we are going to do to achieve them.  
16 And, then, understanding that, I want to make sure that I  
17 support our service members to the hilt.

18 At the same time, serving on this committee, I want to  
19 make sure that my colleagues on HASC and my colleagues in  
20 Congress understand that the total cost of war is not  
21 assumed in the decision to go overseas, to fight our enemy  
22 there, that much of that cost is incurred when our service  
23 members return and transition into civilian life. And,  
24 while I think we are doing a near exemplary job in  
25 supporting our service members going over, I have been

1 sorely disappointed in the job that this country has done  
2 when those service members come back.

3       There are bright points of achievement and progress,  
4 and you all have done a wonderful job of highlighting those.  
5 But, there are areas of poor performance that absolutely  
6 should not be accepted and are not accepted by us, and by  
7 myself in particular. Access to mental health care, access  
8 to primary health care in a reasonable amount of time,  
9 understanding the performance metrics from the VA and being  
10 able to trust them, those are all things that you have  
11 helped us to better understand.

12       One of the hearings that we had recently as part of  
13 this committee was looking at the troubled history the VA  
14 has had in building major medical facilities around the  
15 country. And, I am sure there are some good examples we  
16 could point to, and we think that, by and large, those  
17 veterans in El Paso, whom I have the honor of representing,  
18 when they can get in, get terrific care, and they make a  
19 point of telling me that. But, far too many cannot get in.

20       We looked at one of the more egregious failings of the  
21 VA in Aurora, Colorado, a project that originally was  
22 expected to cost about \$600 million. Today, we think  
23 upwards of \$1.1 billion, perhaps even \$1.4 billion. And,  
24 one of the alluded to, not yet proven, conditions that might  
25 have caused that is the fact that, originally, that VA

1 facility was to be affiliated with a teaching institution  
2 and the decision was later made to separate that.

3 I want to ask you or anyone that you would like to  
4 refer the question to, how flexible should we be, should you  
5 be as a major VSO, should our veterans be in how that care  
6 is delivered? We want to make sure that we are ultimately  
7 seeking world class health care that is accessible to all  
8 veterans in a very timely fashion. How flexible are we  
9 willing to be in how that is delivered? In other words,  
10 stand-alone institutions, affiliated institutions, pursuing  
11 this idea of choice? I would like to hear your thoughts on  
12 that.

13 Mr. Stroud. If it is anything less than the finest  
14 medical care in the world, our veterans deserve nothing  
15 less. It is just that simple, sir.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Stroud. And, I have no objection to being in a  
18 training environment. However, there had better be a darn  
19 good instructor.

20 Mr. O'Rourke. If I could characterize Aurora, with  
21 perhaps not having all the facts to support this, it was a  
22 case of allowing the perfect to become the enemy of the  
23 good. We had something really good, achievable within a  
24 reasonable budget. My understanding is that we held out for  
25 a stand-alone veterans' only facility that ended up costing

1 us a lot. And, as someone who supports and serves veterans  
2 in El Paso, I look at that as hundreds of millions of  
3 dollars that could have been spent to support health access  
4 in communities like mine that are now being invested in a  
5 very expensive, not very efficient or effective use of  
6 capital dollars.

7 So, my time is up. I would love to continue to get  
8 your feedback on how we do the best with limited resources  
9 to deliver what I agree should be the minimum, which is  
10 world class health care for each and every veteran.

11 Thank you again for your service and for being here  
12 today. Appreciate it.

13 Mr. Stroud. Thank you.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Miller. I want to thank all the members for  
16 attending today.

17 I want to thank you, Commander, for your testimony and  
18 your very encouraging answers to the questions that this  
19 committee has, in fact, posed to you. I want to say that,  
20 together with your 1.9 million members of your organization  
21 and the Auxiliaries, we will keep pushing forward. Let us  
22 work together. Let us work with the VA. Let us get the  
23 benefits that have been earned and are deserved.

24 And, with that, ladies and gentlemen, this hearing is  
25 adjourned.



1           Mr. Stroud. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2           [Applause.]

3           [Whereupon, at 11:51 a.m., the committees were  
4 adjourned.]