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VETERANS ASSOCIATION, VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA, NON
COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ASSOCIATION, AIR FORCE SERGEANTS
ASSOCIATION, AND AMERICAN EX-POW'S LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATIONS

Thursday, March 6, 2008

House of Representatives,

Committee on Veterans' Affairs,

Joint with

United States Senate

Committee on Veterans' Affairs,

Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:30 a.m., in
Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Bob Filner
[Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs]
presiding.

Present for Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

Representatives Filner, Mitchell, Hall, Hare, Berkley,

Donnelly, Space, Walz, Buyer, Brown of South Carolina,
Miller, Boozman, Lamborn, Bilirakis and Buchanan.

Present for the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:
Senators Akaka, Burr, and Isakson.

The *Chairman.* Good morning. It is nice to see all of you. You can feel the energy in the air. Thank you for coming to Washington. Senator Akaka and I were honored to reinstate your annual visit and we are so glad to see you here because we know how important it is. And you come at a perfect time because we are right now getting the budget ready for next fiscal year. So in your lobbying and your talking to congresspeople you are right here at the moment you should be. I would like to recognize my colleague from the United States Senate, and Chair of the Senate Veterans Committee, the Senator from Hawaii who works everyday for veterans, Senator Akaka. I welcome you for an opening statement.

Senator *Akaka.* Thank you, thank you very much Mr. Chairman. And let me begin with a word that is so important to all of us coming from Hawaii and that is aloha. And welcome to all of you here today. We are delighted to have you here on the Hill to tell us what you are thinking and for us to benefit from that. In particular I want to extend a special warm hello to PFC Skinner. If you are here, will you stand? Aloha, thank you for being here. PFC Skinner is

here with the Non Commissioned Officers Association this morning and he has come all the way from my home state of Hawaii. Also, I am always delighted to welcome Dr. Roy Kekahuna of the Blinded Veterans Association. [In Hawaiian] aloha. It is very good to have you here today, Roy.

I am very pleased to join all of the leaders of the Veterans' Affairs Committee in welcoming each of you here today. This forum offers a very valuable opportunity to us, both in terms of hearing from you and your views on needed changes, but also in helping us to craft an appropriate budget for VA. All of the organizations testifying before us today have proud traditions of working on behalf of those who have served in our armed forces. I applaud each of you for all that you do to better the lives of all veterans.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am resolute that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. Caring for our troops when they return home is a solemn responsibility. Part of our responsibility is providing the best healthcare and rehabilitation. Another part of fairly and expeditiously compensating veterans for their injuries, including invisible wounds. We must, in this time of War, equip VA

with the resources necessary to carry out these missions now and into the future.

I have said this time and time again. I will keep saying it. Veterans benefits and services are the cost of War, and must be understood and funded as such. My majority colleagues on the Senate Committee and I just recommended that the VA healthcare account receive a \$4.6 billion increase over fiscal year 2008. The President's Budget took a meek approach to funding VA. We must go even further, and I want you to know that we will.

As someone who knows firsthand how valuable the GI Bill is we must make sure that the value of education assistance benefits for veterans keeps pace with the rising costs of higher education. Timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims remains an issue. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly and without needless delay.

Assisting veterans' families is the essential part of the successful reintegration of new veterans into their communities. Family members are often the primary caregivers for injured veterans. VA has taken steps to reach out to these families in recent years, but much more

work has to be done.

Providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for the newest generation of veterans is vital. Many of you have made suggestions in this area in your statements and we look forward to evaluating those.

I am proud of the Wounded Warrior provisions we enacted last year as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. I am especially proud of the provision I authored to expand VA healthcare eligibility for returning veterans from two to five years. My legislation on traumatic brain injury was also recently signed into law. VA has a responsibility to be at the forefront of TBI research and treatment.

Finally, there are some major bills that have yet to be considered in the Senate and agreement needs to be reached to debate these bills. And I hope there will be action to complete these bills in the near future.

In closing I, again, want to thank each of the national leaders here this morning, and the membership of the organizations for your service and dedication to our nation and its veterans. I thank you very much for your appearance here today. And let me apologize, but I have another obligation that begins in just a few minutes on the Senate

side so I will not be able to remain here for the rest of this hearing. So thank you very much for being here, and with that God bless all of you and God bless America.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator. Thank you, Senator. And there are approaching votes on the Senate side so we will recognize the Ranking Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, the gentleman from North Carolina, Mr. Burr.

Senator *Burr.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Chairman Akaka, my good friend Steve Buyer, let me welcome all of our guests today. Not just those who are testifying but all of you who are here to support them. And I do apologize that the Senate has decided to have votes early today.

We have such a distinguished list of organizations which will be presenting. The members of these organizations truly understand the meaning of the word sacrifice. Within their ranks are those who have given their sight, their mobility, and years of their own freedom in defense of our country. I thank all of the members of these distinguished organizations for your service, but more importantly for your sacrifice on behalf of this entire nation. And I thank all the witnesses that are here today to help us make sure

Congress knows what is important to your members. I would also like to extend a very special welcome to those from North Carolina.

I think it should go without saying that the focus of today should be on what you have to say, and not on what we have to say. So I will keep my remarks extremely brief. Mr. Chairman, although VA has a world class healthcare system, comprehensive vocational rehabilitation and employment program, and a disability compensation program, VA does not use those resources collectively to improve the lives of veterans. Despite the mental health services available from VA the number of veterans with service connected PTSD have been growing. And more troubling, their disability ratings show that they are progressively getting worse. In my view, we simply cannot allow this trend to continue. But finding a solution may require that we depart from the status quo and try new approaches that focus on treatment and wellness. I look forward to working with the organizations here today to try to move us in that direction.

Another area where I think there is significant room for improvement is the disability compensation system. All too

often, this system requires injured veterans to endure a lengthy, duplicative, and bureaucratic process at both the Department of Defense and VA to get their disability benefits. For more than five decades experts have been telling us that we need to update, simplify, and modernize this system. Similar recommendations were made just last year by the Dole-Shalala Commission, and the Veterans Disability Commission. Like past reports, those distinguished commissions recommended that we get rid of the overlapping, confusing roles of VA and DOD in the disability rating process, completely update the VA disability rating schedule, compensate, compensate, compensate our veterans for any loss of quality of life, and place more emphasis on treatment and rehabilitation of injured veterans.

I think it is clear that the disability system has needed changes for a long time. So I do not want to add these reports to the shelf with all the others to collect dust. It is time that we take action to improve the system for our nation's veterans. My goal would be to create a system that is more straightforward and up to date, that does not distinguish between combat and non-combat injuries, and that would be open to veterans of all generations. If

we are willing to change this system we can help ensure better benefits and more importantly improved outcomes for veterans who have been injured in the service of their country.

Mr. Chairman, before I turn back over to you I want to acknowledge that some may be reluctant to make changes to a system that has been in place for so long. But in my view, a fear of change should not stop us from moving forward. Thomas Jefferson said, "I am not an advocate of frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times."

I would challenge all of us that we have gone way too long without changing the system. It is time that we advance the disability system to reflect modern society, a changing economy, the new attitude towards disability. I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the Hill, the organizations that are here today, so that we might chart that new course as to how we go there together.

Again, I thank each and every one of you for your service to this country. Mr. Chairman, I yield the floor.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator Burr. And I would like to recognize the Ranking Member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, who also serves on the House Armed Services Committee. Do you serve on the Armed Services Committee, as well, sir?

Mr. *Buyer.* For eight years.

The *Chairman.* Right.

Mr. *Buyer.* A long time.

The *Chairman.* Mr. Buyer from Indiana.

Mr. *Buyer.* Thank you very much. And Richard, as you go let me thank you. I am working with Senator Burr right now to modernize the disability systems. And as many of you know, just as Richard mentioned in his comments about what it takes to be the agent of change, and I recognize whenever you have to be the agent of change it never makes you popular. And I will give you a prime example. You know, you applauded when you said, "Well, gosh we've got our joint hearings back." Well when I ended the joint hearings all of you had your opportunities to testify and when I did is I advanced your testimony so it was done in a manner that had

the greatest influence upon the budgetary process. But what has happened now is, the Chairman has taken advantage of that and now you all are testifying at the time our views and estimates are already done. So your testimony with regard to that is stale. But with regard to your testimonies today, it helps influence our views and estimates that have then been sent to the Budget Committee.

So I recognize any time that you try to change things you are never popular. I recognized that when it came time, we went through the BRAC process, and veterans learned that, especially the retirees, that they could not find themselves an access to healthcare. I had almost 380 of my colleagues were demanding that military retirees be shifted to the FEHBP. And I said no. Now come to Congress and stand up and say no to 380 members of your colleagues. And what I did was, I created TRICARE For Life. And when I created TRICARE For Life as a benefit, now many of the military retirees enjoy that as a benefit. I also, it took me three years to do the redesign of the military pharmacy system. And now, they like the pharmacy system. It took me seven years to do the redesign of the IT architecture of the VA. You know, fortunately as we went through that process we had

a bipartisan agreement. Bob Filner was very helpful to me, Lane Evans, the entire Committee over here. The Senate was not too excited about these types of changes. But it took seven years to do that. And you know what was the impetus that helped perfect that change? Was a stolen laptop, and wake up call across America that we had vulnerabilities in our systems.

So let us see, three years ago Duncan Hunter and I and some others, we created the Disability Commission. Why? Because we recognized that there were problems out there in the seamless transition of a soldier. If we are patient-centric and view our systems through the eyes of the soldier, the soldier, airman, marine, or coast guardsman, we recognize that there are tremendous problems within that system and they should never recognize that. So as we created the Polytrauma Centers within the VA, and that soldier goes from the battlefield, to Landstuhl, to Walter Reed, or Bethesda, and immediately into our Polytrauma Center, the patient should not recognize that they are moving from one system to the other.

But then as they begin to move into their rehabilitative care, that subacute care, they still should not recognize

that, "Oh my gosh, now I have to deal with a medical discharge and a rating from DOD. And then I have to worry about another one based on another type of system in VA." And then veterans over the years trying to figure out, "How do I gain both systems so I can gain access to better forms of benefit?" Well, when we asked the Disability Commission, led by General Scott and some of the nation's greatest heroes to examine all this process.

On top of that, then what happens? We had the analogous of the stolen laptop, Walter Reed. Then we get the benefit of the President's Senator Dole and Secretary Donna Shalala's Commission. So we have the Disability Commission, the recommendations from Dole-Shalala, and we have our own inputs. And that is what Senator Burr and I have done.

Now there are two paths here. We can move comprehensively, or you can move incrementally. What I think we should do, we should move smartly. And individuals in this town, organizations and individuals spend more time, money, and volunteerism on breaking and stopping things than building things. And I want to help build things and modernize this system.

Like take for example, take into account quality of

life. So how long does it take an individuals to get ready in the morning? You know, if they are a paraplegic, quadriplegic, they have lost an arm or a leg, they should be compensated for the differential in that lost quality of life and it should be accounted for in the tables. And it is not. And we want to remove the duplicative systems, take DOD out of the disability system. We want to create a retirement process. In others words, if you are discharged, medically discharged out of the military, you then receive a retirement pay, meaning you are paid and compensated based on your years of service and your rank at the time. We eliminated then this concurrent receipt. We have one form of medical discharge process. It is done in the VA. That is where the evaluations process is done, and then we modernize the tables.

Now, all of that is large and it is challenging. I cannot do it. Richard cannot do it. Bob cannot do it. None of us can do it alone. We need you to engage with us to perfect the best system for America's veterans and I want to do it as soon as we can. And let us not say, "Because this is difficult, because it is challenging, we are just going to push it off to future generations." Shame on us if

that happens.

And let me finish with this. I recognize how challenging this is. When I, back in 1998-1999 time frame, when we were dealing with retention problems in the mid-level NCOs and officer corps, I said I want to change the pay tables. And DOD looked at me as though I was crazy. "Steve Buyer, do you not realize that those pay tables came, Moses brought those down with the tablets. You cannot change the pay tables." Right? You cannot change those pay tables? Who do you think you are? Well, we changed the pay tables. And that is exactly what we are facing right now, is the modernization of the compensation pay tables. And you need to engage with us to make that happen. I yield back.

[The statement of Hon. Steve Buyer follows on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Buyer. Again, let me welcome all of you. Those of you who are going to testify and all of your membership. I want to put the budget in a little bit of context just before we begin. As you know last year, or the current fiscal year, helped by the, ironically helped by the scandal at Walter Reed, neither party could say no to veterans. And we were able to add \$13 billion of new money for healthcare. That was a 30 percent increase, unprecedented in the history of the VA. And we set the stage for dealing with all the issues that you are going to talk about. Our job and your job, of course, is to demand accountability for those dollars. Are they spending them the right way? Are they meeting your needs? And so we will work with you to do that. We are not going to get the same gains this year. But we hope, for the current fiscal year, or the next fiscal year, that we are not preparing.

You all remember when you had previous sessions here I waived around the independent budget. This is the budget put together by the veterans service organizations, which I think almost all, every one of your organizations supports. This budget is put together by veterans for veterans. It is a very professional job. I take it as my bible during the

budget process. And they recommended a much higher figure than the President recommended just several weeks ago. And the President made some, I think, terrible mistakes in his budget. He allowed for about a 5 percent increase or so in the healthcare budget. That barely covers the cost of inflation. But he paid for that by bringing down every other account in the budget, whether it was construction, or research, or anything else. We said no. We are not going to allow those accounts to decrease and we are going to make sure that there is no decrease, in fact an increase, in all those accounts for the coming year.

In addition, the President, as he has done for the last seven years, suggested that we raise enrollment fees for certain categories of veterans and double copayments for pharmaceuticals. We said no to that, as we have done for the last seven years. Not only, of course, does that give some revenue, the President calculates, but it knocks several hundred thousand people out of the system who would not be able to afford it. Now that is a pretty interesting way to look at veterans during a time of War, that we are going to save money by kicking veterans out of the system. We say no to that. We say no to that.

And we realize what George Washington said, you know, over 200 years ago. That the best indicator of the morale of our fighting troops is the sense of how they are going to be treated when they come home. So we have an obligation to make sure everybody knows that we are treating our veterans right, because it is a big factor in the morale of those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And that War, as you know, is very controversial, divisive, but what is not divisive, we are united in saying every young man and woman that comes back from that War is going to get all the care, the love, attention, the honor, the dignity, that we can bestow as a nation. And we are determined to do that.

So this Committee made recommendations long with the President's, along the lines of the independent budget. And the Budget Committee just met yesterday in fact, and they have recommended for the Congress that for the second year in a row we are going to exceed the independent budget when it is time for the budget to be approved.

So we are going to try to do the job with the budget. And when that is finished, though, we have a lot of other things to do. And you are going to, I read all your

testimony, and I think our priorities fit in with yours. I think first and foremost we have got to update the GI Bill for the twenty-first century. The benefits do not, have not kept up with the rate of inflation and the real cost of college. The housing program, with its values of refinancing and loans, are completely out of line with the market today. And maybe most important, the Guard and Reserve units, who are doing half the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan are not eligible for the GI Bill. We are going to make them eligible when they come back from active duty for those benefits.

Along with that my colleagues brought up the disability claim system. We are going to be debating that kind of change that has been advocated here. But we have got to do something first, I think. There is over 700,000 or something backlogged claims. Many of you have been fighting the VA so long on this stuff you think VA means veterans adversary instead of veterans advocate. And that is not what this agency, administration was set up to do. It was set up to help you.

How many here are Vietnam Veterans? A good number. We have a lot of apologize for, by the way, to you guys and

gals. When you came home, you did not get the honor and care and respect that you should have. Many of us who were against that War confused the War and the warrior. We should never have allowed that to happen. We are not going to allow it to happen right now, either. But as part of our effort to clean up the backlog of claims, there must be several hundred thousand Agent Orange claims. I do not care if your boots were on the ground, if you were on a ship off the coast, if you were on a plane above the country, we should honor those claims and just grant them now. That will get several hundred thousand off our rolls.

And if we, although we have put in hundreds and hundreds of new claims adjusters into our budget, that is going to take years until people get trained and work their way down. I think that, you know, when you file your 1040 tax return, I hate to remind you, it is going to be due soon. But when you fill that form out and you have a refund coming you get a check in about three weeks, subject to audit to keep you honest. And there is a certain audit procedure. Why not treat our veterans with some equal efficiency? If you filed a claim with the help of a certified veterans service

officer, grant it. Send out the check, subject to audit. We could get that backlog down to, you know, almost zero if we treat the system as a non-adversarial system, that we trust the veterans, and we trust the certified officers and begin those checks when people need them and not when it is too late for them to ever use it. So we are going to cut down that backlog and hopefully very quickly.

And a third priority would be for so called mandatory or assured funding of the budget. We know in the last couple years, and I think eleven years, the last couple years, the budget was not finalized for the VA for about four or five months. You cannot plan for the care of veterans when you do not know what money is coming and when it is coming. People cannot be hired. Vacancies, you know, are filled, research cannot start. So we are going to try, and many of you have suggestions on that. Some of you have come up with a so called forward funding proposal. We are going to look at that.

But we want to take the healthcare of veterans out of the political battlefield. The President has a number, as you heard me say we have a number. The Democrats have a

number, the Republicans have a number. The Senate has a number, the House has a number. And we fight about that. And you are watching this fight and say, "Hey, we just want to make sure our benefits and our healthcare arrive on time." So we are going to try to get a system that does not allow that to occur and gets the politics out of it, and the assured funding will be there.

So that is some of our priorities for the coming year after the budget is settled. We are going to have those bills that your organizations will be looking at. And hopefully you will all, as members in your own, back home, look at it and help your congresspeople to understand it.

So I thank you for being here. We are going to start the testimony. I will just go across. And I will first introduce the National Commander for the American Ex-Prisoners of War, Mr. Warren G. King, Senior. Mr. King, you have five minutes to present your testimony, and we have your written testimony, all of us have, for the record. Welcome.

[The statement of Hon. Bob Filner appears on p.]

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STATEMENTS OF WARREN G. KING, SR., NATIONAL COMMANDER,
AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR; RANDY L. PLEVA, SR., NATIONAL
PRESIDENT, PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA; LAWRENCE SCHULMAN,
NATIONAL COMMANDER, JEWISH WAR VETERANS OF THE USA; NORMAN
JONES, JR., NATIONAL PRESIDENT, BLINDED VETERANS
ASSOCIATION; JOHN ROWAN, NATIONAL PRESIDENT, VIETNAM
VETERANS OF AMERICA; H. GENE OVERSTREET, SERGEANT MAJOR
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS (RETIRED), PRESIDENT, NON
COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF THE USA; AND RICHARD M.
DEAN, CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT (RETIRED), CHIEF EXECUTIVE
OFFICER, AIR FORCE SERGEANTS ASSOCIATION.

STATEMENT OF WARREN G. KING, SR., NATIONAL COMMANDER,
AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

Mr. *King.* Thank you Chairman Akaka, Chairman Filner,
Ranking Member Burr, Ranking Member Buyer, distinguished
members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and guests. I
want to thank you for the opportunity to address the joint
Senate and the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on behalf
of the American Ex-Prisoners of War.

Originally our membership covered about 120,000 who survived captivity. Now some 19,000 remain alive today. The average age is eighty-five years, with a life expectancy of five years. Most are World War II veterans. I was a combat medic in that War, captured in December of 1944 and liberated in the Spring of 1945 by the Russians and held as prisoners.

I am mindful today, as you are, that the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict is still continuing and casualties are returning almost daily to our military hospitals, many with extremely debilitating wounds.

Americans regardless of their views of the War, are united in their feeling that these veterans should be provided whatever it takes for as long as it takes to restore them to the highest level of independence and meaningful living as possible. Americans are also aware this high level of rehabilitation has rarely been achieved after past wars. As memories of those wars fade so does the determination to keep this promise. This concern is reflected in the Dole-Shalala Report on Iraq/Afghanistan Wounded and the broader three-year Independent Commission finding just released.

What happened to World War II prisoners of war after

they were discharged from service is a classic example of this outcome. Just released POWs were briefly sent by the military to special camps for immediate dietary and stress treatments. They were then returned to military lines, outfitted for transportation to the United States. Again, they were provided brief or no rehabilitation and then sent to separation centers for routine discharge along with the millions of other veterans being processed. They simply were returned to civilian life as an invisible part of the 16 million World War II veteran population.

Almost by accident, thirty years after this discharge, World War II POWs became visible again. The publicity being accorded Vietnam POWs stimulated this awareness. Max Cleland, then VA Administrator, initiated a review of all battle statistics from World War II to obtain an actual account of how many World War II POWs there were. Belatedly, both Congress and the VA responded to this information with long overdue action. Records of every World War II POW seen in medical centers or benefit offices were identified and presumptive medical conditions recognized as casualty related to captivity were gradually

established to facilitate treatment and disability benefits.

It has now been sixty-plus years since the end of World War II. A long time for the nation to fulfill its promise to these veterans. While most medical conditions casualty associated with captivity have now been made presumptive and World War II POWs do receive priority care, there are still two medical conditions that still deserve presumptive status, osteoporosis and diabetes. The former is directly related to bone loss due to starvation during captivity and the latter to the effects of prolonged stress and other factors of the body's basic defense system.

These two proposed presumptives have again been introduced by Senator Patty Murray and Representative Gus Bilirakis with supporting evidence. We are deeply thankful to Senator Murray and Representative Bilirakis, who again introduced these bills. We strongly urge your Committee's immediate support. We also urge your prompt support of all legislation to help veterans returning from the Iraq/Afghanistan conflict receive the rehabilitation they need to regain an active and meaningful life in their home and community.

In closing, we also seek your approval of H.R. 5315, introduced by Representative Tom Udall, New Mexico, to grant the Congressional Gold Medal Award to the surviving soldiers of the Bataan Death March of World War II. This is not assigned to the Veterans' Affairs Committee, but we urge your support when it comes before Congress. Also very important to your former prisoners of war is H.R. 156 to amend 38 U.S. Code to provide for the payment of DIC to survivors of former POWs who died before September 30, 1999 with the same eligibility as provided to payment of DIC to survivors of former POWs who died after that date. This will be of great financial aid to the surviving spouses of POWs.

Thank you one and all. Thank you, have a good day.

[The statement of Warren G. King, Sr. appears on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you, Commander. And thank you for mentioning the bill from Congressman Bilirakis. There is a Bilirakis on our panel as there has been for the last two decades, but this guy is a younger version of Michael Bilirakis who has worked so much, worked so hard to make sure we get concurrent receipt, that is the dual payment of both retiree pay and disability. And thank you, Congressman, for this legislation which we will take up as quick as we can.

The National President of the Paralyzed Veterans of America is Randy Pleva, Sr. and we welcome your testimony, Mr. Pleva.

**STATEMENT OF RANDY L. PLEVA, SR., NATIONAL PRESIDENT,
PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA**

Mr. *Pleva.* I want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and everyone who sits on these Committees. Senator Akaka kind of said my testimony, to be honest with you.

The *Chairman.* Moving on to the next--

Mr. *Pleva.* Yes, it is. But you know, since we only

have five minutes here I just, as I sit here and listen to sort of the debate going back and forth, I cannot think in the back of the room when I see all individuals in the uniforms how that, what is going through their minds when they hear all this. When I was seventeen years old in Vietnam, and was not supposed to be there, seventeen years old, I was there because I wanted to do something for my country. I did not have the opportunity to hear some of the debate that goes back and forth. Maybe if I had, maybe I might have thought twice. But loving this country as much as I do, and as the individuals in the uniforms do, when we went into combat we was not worried about what my benefits were going to be. When we went into combat we wanted to make sure this country would stay free. It is just that simple.

And that is, I understand you all have one heck of a job in front of you, I understand that. But I also want you to understand that there are a lot of people depend on what you all do, up here on Capitol Hill. There are families, we probably, I noticed the first time in, what, twenty-some years that the VA has been funded like it is. But in those

twenty-two years I myself have talked to veterans who were turned away from the VA because of this law and that law. And no, they did not have the combat injuries. But they were the ones that were carrying people to the helicopters. And because they did not get a scratch they were penalized. And that is where I, you know, this makes my fourth time coming to this Committee. A veteran is a veteran. I do not care if he is combat wounded, or he is not combat wounded. When he signed that paper to go into the service he put his all for this country. And I think at least the country could give their all back to the veteran, I really do.

Mr. Chairman, believe me, I mean no disrespect to nobody. I really do not. But the other day I was listening to an individual that is running for the highest office of this land telling a veteran that, he is having a little bit of trouble getting into the VA, and if this individual was elected he will give him a card so he can go on the outside. That put chill bumps down my back. PVA, and I will speak for PVA, no privatization of the VA should ever happen. The VA is what we have got. It just needs to be helped a little bit. It needs to be funded. We have got doctors, we have

got nurses out there, that they give their all. And they are working overtime. They are being, I do not know how you say it, they are just being overworked.

And from my understanding, we have nurses now, you know, I would like for you all to look at the nurses' staffing reports that we have. They, you know, they say they have let us say like thirty nurses. But ten of those are on light duty, and they cannot do nothing, you know what I am saying? I was shocked when I heard that they could not even hardly pick up the phone to answer it, but they are still counted as bedside nurses. This really has to be looked at.

I know my time is just about up. I see the yellow light. And believe me, I wanted to say a whole lot more but I guess I throw the ball back in your all's corner, I really do. You know, we can go out there and tell the widow, we can go out there and tell the sons and daughters that, "Hey," you know, "we are here for you." But it is you all, you are the ones that is going to have to make that promise come true. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The statement of Randy L. Pleva, Sr. appears on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you. We will take that to heart, I hope. The National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of American, Mr. Lawrence Schulman.

STATEMENT OF LAWRENCE SCHULMAN, NATIONAL COMMANDER, JEWISH WAR VETERANS OF THE USA

Mr. *Schulman.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I start I would also like to thank the men and women in uniform in this room for their service. We really appreciate what they do for our country.

Chairman Filner, Chairman Akaka, members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs, my fellow veterans and friends, I am Lawrence Schulman, the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA. JWV is congressionally chartered and also provides counseling and assistance to members encountering problems dealing with the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and other government agencies. JWV is an active participant in the military coalition, a group of over thirty associations and veterans organizations representing five

million active duty and Reserve and retired uniform service personnel and veterans on Capitol Hill. I am accompanied today by the Chairman of our Coordinating Committee, Past National Commander Joseph Zoldan; JWV's International Liaison and President of our National Museum of American Jewish Military History, Past National Commander Robert Zweiman; the President of our Ladies Auxiliary, Norma Schreiber; the Chairman of our National Executive Committee, Past National Commander Michael Berman; and our National Executive Director Colonel Herb Rosenbleeth. In the audience today are those JWV members who are here to meet with the senators, representatives as part of JWV's Capitol Hill Action Day. Members of the Committee, it was a singular honor for me to present the JWV Medal of Merit to the Honorable Marcy Kaptur at our congressional reception yesterday evening in recognition of her truly outstanding work for the American veterans. It was equally rewarding for JWV to have so many of you participate with us.

Mr. Chairman next week, on March 15 to be exact, we at JWV will celebrate JWV's 112th birthday. For these 112

years JWV has advocated a strong national defense and a just and fair recognition and compensation for veterans. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA prides itself on being in the forefront among our nation's civic and veterans' groups in supporting the well earned rights of the veteran, in promoting American and democratic principles, in defending universal Jewish causes, and in vigorously opposing bigotry, anti-Semitism, and terrorism both here and abroad. Today even more than ever before we stand for these principles. The Jewish War Veterans of the USA represents a proud tradition of patriotism and service to the United States of America.

On November 10, 2007 I had the honor of reading names at the wall for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Vietnam Veterans Wall. And the next day, on the 11th, I had the honor of being at Arlington and attending the Wreath Ceremony and listening to comments of Vice President Cheney. In their program there was a quote by Abraham Lincoln that the Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Gordon Mansfield, put in the program. And in that program it said quoting Abraham Lincoln at his second inaugural address on March 4,

1865, "Set forth our obligation to care for those injured in body and spirit by the defense of our nation, and for the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice."

It has been 143 years since those words were uttered. What has happened over the years? Since we went to War over six years ago we are constantly hearing negative stories about the treatment of our servicemen and women, and the shortage of protection equipment, and problems with shortages of funds to care for our wounded. Congressman Filner, you have already stated that the budget increases spending from 2009 will be up. However, they slashed programs between 2009 and 2013 by \$20 billion below the levels needed to maintain what the VA is doing today. We have not set aside any funds for our wounded warriors for the next twenty years. This is one reason why we ask you for a mandatory funding since every year from now on you will have to give the VA more funds than you currently plan on giving.

You have soldiers that the administration urges the country to support. However, when they get released and become veterans, our brothers, we do not treat them as we

should. Maybe it is because less than 2 percent of our country, including the servicemen, are citizens fighting this War. They have to pick up the pieces of our walking wounded, try to maintain the families, live on food stamps, use coupons to stretch their food dollars and feed their families.

On Veterans Day Congressman Louise Slaughter wrote a letter to the editor of my local paper in Rochester, New York stating the on the battlefield the military pledges to leave no soldier behind. As a nation, let it be our pledge that when they return we leave no veteran behind. All of our representatives see and hear what I see and hear. Over the years we, you and I, have heard the pleas for better treatment of our soldiers and veterans. We leave this hearing room with our requests. I wonder why we came back with the same requests that are not met? And today I have heard some fantastic ideas from both sides. And I still do not understand why we still come back every year and ask you for the same things.

Almost 4,000 have been killed. I attended the calling hours last Friday in Rochester, New York for Specialist

Kevin Mowl of Pittsford, New York who was laid to rest on Saturday, March 1st. This War is going to cost our country trillions of dollars. The human cost cannot be measured. Thousands of our servicemen and women are broken, if not from PTSD then from TBI or suicides, broken homes, or being homeless. These are the extra costs no budget can cover. Our brothers and sisters need your help. We here today speak for them. I wonder if anyone is listening?

I see that our new Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Dr. James Peake, has increased the free medical care for combat veterans from two years to five years. That is a step in the right direction.

I will leave you with this message I received from my Canadian cousins. "It is the veteran, not the preacher, who has given us freedom of religion. It is the veteran, not the reporter, who has given us freedom of the press. It is the veteran, not the poet, who has given us freedom of speech. It is the veteran, not the campus organizer, who has given us freedom to assemble. It is the veteran, not the lawyer, who has given us the right to a fair trial. It is the veteran, not the politician, who has given us the

right to vote. It is the veteran who salutes the flag. It is the veteran who serves under the flag." Thank you very much for listening to my comments.

[The statement of Lawrence Schulman appears on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you. Thank you, Commander Schulman. Thank you, Commander. The National President of the Blinded Veterans Association is Dr. Norman Jones. And Dr. Jones, you are recognized for your statement.

STATEMENT OF NORMAN JONES, JR., NATIONAL PRESIDENT, BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION

Mr. *Jones.* Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, on behalf of the Blinded Veterans Association, we would like to thank you for giving us another opportunity to come to our capital city and present our legislative priorities to you. For some, Mr. Chairman, I would like to reiterate that the Blinded Veterans Association is the only service organization chartered by Congress to attend the needs of blind and visually impaired veterans along with their families. We would to also say thank you for letting us present these legislative priorities to you. This year, Mr. Chairman, we will be celebrating our sixty-third year of continuous service. Three score and three years we have been doing it, and we are proud to be doing it, and doing it

along with you for this unique group of Americans.

But just how unique is this group of Americans? We do not figure we are any better than any other disabled veterans. But since most of my topics have been taken, I am going to take just a minute to give you an awareness of how severe this disability is. I would like you, Mr. Chairman, along with the Committee, just for a few seconds, to close your eyes real tight. Also, everyone in the room do the same thing and I promise not to sneak out. If I could find the door. But while your eyes are closed I want to make this statement. This is the way, Mr. Chairman, that we as blind American veterans wake up to our sunrise every morning. This is the way we go to the kitchen and prepare our breakfast. This is the way we go to the closet and pull out an ensemble that will match, we hope. This is the way that we make it to the train or bus station. This is the way we go through our work day. This is the way we return home to our loved one. This is the way we watch the news and see what you are doing up here on Capitol Hill. You can open your eyes now. The only problem with us, many of us have this problem 24/7, 365 days a year. And many of us

have been doing it for ten, fifteen, fifty, fifty years, sixty years to no light.

But along with all that, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, we want to thank you for working so closely with us through the VA, through prosthetics, through our blind centers, and just continue to do the same thing.

Many of the topics that I have had on my sheet, while in Atlanta, Georgia I memorized these a hundred times over. But, Mr. Chairman, you took up some of those already. Other members of the Committee have already mentioned some, too, so I am going to make a quick turn around within this five minutes and just try to mention a few.

We have prepared a listing in front of you, a written testimony. We broke it down into fifteen different areas. But we did not want to just put this in your lap. We also at the end of that testimony listed fifteen different solutions that will help you as food for thought.

While we are thinking, too, we would also like to thank you for passing H.R 797, the Impaired Organs Bill, also H.R. 1240, the Vision Specialists Training Bill, that will help the VA to organize scholarships for younger students to go

into this area. It is great to have positions and slots, but if we do not have qualified people to put into those it is useless. Therefore, I would like to beseech upon the Senate to pass as quickly as possible Senate Bill 1672, that is the companion bill for that one.

Among the listings that we have we mention seamless transition. You mentioned that one already, Mr. Chairman. One that was not mentioned is the Eye Trauma Center of Excellence. We think this is a very important act that should be, a lot of attention should be put here. The only problem, it has been authorized with no funding. That is like giving us a, giving us a cart with no horse. Like giving an airborne trooper a helmet but no parachute. We have got to make a change in that.

We have already mentioned the backlog of VA claims. It is an antiquated system. It really needs some help, and I understand that you are putting help in that area. Many veterans die waiting on their claims to be adjudicated and that is not fair.

I have just been urged that my light is getting ready to change, and I did not see that so I would be a liar if I

said I see my light turning yellow. But I want to take just one more minute to show you how important the last item we have on that list, research. I am holding in my hand a simple cell phone, measures about two inches by three inches. But on Monday of this week it was demonstrated to us, a cell phone of this same size that is now also a reading machine for the blind. The first reading machine we had, it was the size of a home chest freezer. And I am holding it in my hand right now. You can take a picture of a printed page, and in less than ten seconds it will read that page back to you. So that is the kind of backing we need to keep research coming to us.

In addition to that, we have also mentioned discretionary spending. I was given a phone call from a blind center chief the week before I came up. And he said, "Norman, we are getting the funds but they are always late." That has been mentioned, too. It seems like everything we have on that sheet, almost, has been mentioned.

But we want to thank you for doing a great job. We know that it is a hard job you have. But we want to thank you for working so closely with us over the past years. And if

I was at home in my pool pit I would close by saying, "Can I get an amen brothers and sisters?" But since, but since I am under the present circumstances I am just going to say an old saying that I am sure you have heard many times before. We may have come over here on different ships, but we are all in the same boat now.

Therefore, therefore I am going to close with just seven words. In my profession the number seven in biblical numerics means perfection, completeness. Please continue to do the right thing. And if you do that everything is going to be all right. And in the words of Red Skelton, "May God bless."

[The statement of Norman Jones, Jr. appears on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. President, and amen.
Representing the Vietnam Veterans of America is the National
President Mr. John Rowan. Thanks for being here.

**STATEMENT OF JOHN ROWAN, NATIONAL PRESIDENT, VIETNAM
VETERANS OF AMERICA**

Mr. *Rowan.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Buyer, and
the other members of Congress who have joined us. And I am
sorry our senators had to run. In our thirtieth year VVA
has many concerns. And I would like to go through some of
them.

We thank Congress for the significant increases and the
administration for the significant increases in the VA
budget over the last couple of years. It has been a hard
fought battle and we appreciate it. However, we urge
Congress to give stringent oversight to the utilization of
these funds. We all know what federal bureaucracies
sometimes, even the VA, can do with money.

We still believe, however, that there is a need for \$3.4
billion over the administration's proposed budget to serve

the new and old veterans for all kinds of reasons, because of the increase in new veterans as well as all of the problems occurring with the Vietnam veterans and other veterans of previous wars. And we still urge Congress to reform the system through H.R. 2514 and S. 3331 to assure the VA's funding into the future as many of my colleagues have mentioned.

Three weeks ago while testifying in front of the Senate Senator Burr and I had a little discussion about student veterans and their needs. Senator Sherrod Brown has introduced the SERV Act to create one stop veterans centers on the campuses of America. I urge Senator Burr, since we are in accordance with that idea last time, to join with Senator Brown in this effort and implement this act as soon as possible. And we urge our colleagues here in the Congress on the House side to do so quickly as well.

And this effort should be coordinated with the new GI bill that was mentioned earlier. This GI Bill should be like my father's GI Bill, the greatest piece of social legislation short of the Civil Rights Acts ever to pass Congress. Those generous bills from 1946, 1947, 1948 and

those periods should be here in 2008.

The Congress must also reestablish veterans employment programs and veterans preference, which have dwindled over many years. They are just not the same old preferences they used to be. And these need to be coordinated with the enforcement of the law for veterans owned business and service disabled veterans owned businesses under Executive Order 13360 and Public Law 109-461.

Recently my secretary traveled to Puerto Rico, as I did the year before, and found the same continuous problem with the VA hospital system in Puerto Rico. It is a disaster. And while the VA has said they have a plan to renovate the hospital and build a new hospital we are very concerned about that plan. And we note that a recent IG report showed how dissatisfied the veterans are with the services they are receiving in Puerto Rico. And we urge these committees in the House and the Senate to look into this situation. And we encourage the development immediately of satellite parking, not only for the staff but for the veterans as well so that they can get to and from their appointments. Furthermore, they also need a new cemetery. The old one is

almost full.

Outreach, we ask you to support S. 1314, the Feingold-Burr Bill, again, I like to see the joining of forces here, to force the VA to inform veterans about the health impacts of their service. Many veterans have diseases today that they do not understand are related to their military service in previous years. It is kind of hard to tell a sixty-year old that their prostate cancer is due to something that happened to them forty years earlier, but it is true.

The disability system we have talked about. We all want to revamp it. I urge you to immediately adopt some sort of system for virtual VA today for the new veterans. We do not have to redo the entire old system and redo all of the files and everything else. But for every new veteran walking in the door they should be under a new virtual VA system. It is all available software. It could be done tomorrow instead of people coming up with all kinds of creative, genius ideas.

We urge you, of course, in the research facilities, the National Vietnam Veterans Longitudinal Study needs to be completed. We need to fully understand the impact of that

War on us from forty years ago. And we urge you to start a new study with the new veterans today, and track them out over the next forty years. Because we know that the impacts of their service today is going to hurt them, unfortunately, and deteriorate their lives as they get older. And not necessarily when they are seventy and eighty but often when they are forty and fifty. And too many of my Vietnam veteran colleagues are already in the VA cemeteries. A million and a half of the Vietnam era veterans are already deceased and we do not know what the difference is in that million and a half between those who served in Vietnam and those who did not. Our gut tells me the Vietnam service, those who served in country have a higher death rate.

And I will leave you with one last thing. And it is not totally really a purview but that is the whole POW issue. We still support all of the efforts of the government and we hope they keep fully funding the programs in Vietnam, Laos, all over the world, to find those who gave their all. And this new DOD ridiculous acronym DUSTWUNS does not change the fact that the four soldiers that went in Iraq and are still missing in action. Thank you.

[The statement of John Rowan appears on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you. The President of the Non Commissioned Officers Association of the USA, Retired Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps, Gene Overstreet. We always take orders from the Sergeant Major. We have one of our own. He left for a little while, Congressman Walz, we had to protect us from you, Sergeant Major. So go ahead please.

STATEMENT OF H. GENE OVERSTREET, SERGEANT MAJOR UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS (RETIRED), PRESIDENT, NON COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF THE USA

SERGEANT MAJOR *OVERSTREET.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Mr. Buyer, and distinguished members of the House and Senate Veterans' Committee. I am pleased to have the opportunity to meet with this joint committee and discuss the Association's 2008 legislative agendas, and more particularly focus on those veterans, those spouses, and surviving family members. It is appropriate at this time with so many military personnel deployed in harm's way to comment on these programs. Not only do they benefit the

active duty servicemembers that we have serving today and their families, but veterans as well.

I am joined today by some that have already been recognized, and I would like to recognize them again. Throughout the room you will see members of the Non Commissioned Officers Professional Development Program, the 12th Aviation Battalion. May I ask that battalion to please stand? Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen I would point out that these are patriots and defenders of the nation here. Tonight when you go home you need to know that one of these servicemen or someone just like them wearing that same kind of uniform is going to be standing the watch. So that is the reason you can sleep well tonight.

Mr. Chairman, you already have our written full statement for the record but I would like to focus on a couple of issues and agendas, if I may, as we march down through there. Seamless transition, a great theory. There is a little more work that needs to be done with that and I have no doubt that we are going to see some programs come out of that that is going to streamline that even more. It

is very important that we do that. That we capture those military records and transfer them to the VA so that will help expedite these claims and everything else that we have.

Needless to say, we need adequate funding and appropriation for the VA. Two things there, it would be nice if we had mandatory funding and, as you suggested before, we need to do this in a timely manner so they can get on with the business at hand each year instead of pushing them back and living in a vacuum before they can do anything. If we had appropriate and adequate funding obviously there would be no increase in co-pays and no enrollment fees. There needs to be open enrollment to every veteran that served.

Healthcare, a couple of key issues here, accessibility and quality of health. For the most part we get great quality but we still have a bunch of veterans out there that is disenfranchised from the system that cannot get to it or we do not take care. It needs to be accessible to all veterans. I would also like to see mental health integrated into that healthcare system. We know with the combat situations that we are in today, with the young men and

women that we are bringing back from combat situations, we are not for sure what those mental health issues are going to be just like the guys that came out of Vietnam and some of those. We need to implement that now so we can take care of them before we get there.

To do that, we need an adequate, professional staff. And that professional staff has to marry the workload. For the amount of volume and work that they are doing, we have to have enough professional staff to take care of that. And I would continue to say, okay, those research initiatives that support signature injuries such as multiple amputations or TBI, and some of those, we need to keep that going.

Veterans Benefit Administration, as you suggested earlier, you used a number of 700,000. I have heard the number 850,000. It is projected that we are going to bust 900,000 this year. I hope we are not sitting here next year saying 900,000, looking down the bell of a million. Surely we are not going to go a million in backlogged claims. To help do that we need to secure and implement long overdue technology and hire the people we need to push that forward.

National cemeteries, ladies and gentlemen I would like

to salute you for the fast track opening. Now we finally recognize that we do not have to have everything in those cemeteries in place to start putting people in there. So thank you for that. Hey, somebody had their head screwed on straight when they made that decisions.

2008 promises to be a challenging time for your Committee, certainly in regards to implementation of issues and benefits. NCO recognizes that the Veterans Disability Benefits Commission has released a final report in 2007 and I would like to applaud many of those points evident in their recommendation. I think a lot of veterans are going to get some great support out of that. But on the other hand I would tell you this, we strongly oppose driving a wedge between a lot of veterans out there. For example, if you are talking about disabilities, the same disability of a veteran from different eras. You mean to tell me a veteran from Vietnam, a veteran from Korea, a veteran from World War II, a veterans from Desert Shield, is going to be different? I do not think so. I think a disability is the same thing is the same thing. We have to look at that.

I would hate to think that we are going to go down the

road and make another distinction between combat veterans and non-combat veterans. You mean to tell me a young Marine that loses his arm on the battlefield is going to get more than a young sailor that is in the well deck of a ship and he gets pinned against a bulkhead and loses his arm? Both are serving, both are veterans. We need to take a hard look at that.

I would suggest also one other thing. If there are state benefits and federal benefits that some veterans have, I do not think the VA should be taking a look at that and saying, "Well, because you get this benefit we are not going to give you as much as some other guy with the same kind of benefit." We need to make it fair across the board.

There are many things, and it is in our written statement, but I just want to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the entire Committee for the opportunity to come here and share some of those views with you. And thank you for what you are doing because you are doing a lot of good things. We appreciate it.

[The statement of Sergeant Major H. Gene Overstreet appears on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you, Sergeant Major. Rather than rush your testimony, Chief Dean, we are going to recess for fifteen minutes. There are two votes over at the House. That is why everybody, they are not leaving because they do not like you or anything. We have got to vote. We will be back in fifteen minutes. We will conclude our testimony and then we will have questions from the members. I am sorry we have to do this, but that is the nature. So we will recess for fifteen minutes.

[Recess]

Mr. *Hall.* [Presiding] Okay everybody, welcome back. The lively discussion was had by all, and our Chairman, Mr. Filner, is still on his way back from the Capitol so I, Congressman Hall from the 19th of New York will be acting Chair for just a minute, and Ranking Member Boozman, who is the Ranking Member on Economic Opportunities Subcommittee, will be the temporary Ranking Member of the full Committee until Mr. Buyer returns, and thus we can keep you from having to wait still longer. So the hearing is now resumed. And we will now hear, please, from Richard Dean, Chief Executive Officer of the Air Force Sergeants Association.

Your statement is entered into the record, and you are recognized for five minutes, sir.

**STATEMENT OF RICHARD M. DEAN, CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT
(RETIRED), CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, AIR FORCE SERGEANTS
ASSOCIATION**

Chief Master Sergeant *Dean.* Thank you, sir. On behalf of the Air Force Sergeants Association's 125,000 members, I thank you for all that you do and the opportunity to present our views on the critically important Department of Veterans Affairs programs.

Through your oversight, this nation honor the commitment to our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and coastguard members who make everyday free for all of us Americans. We applaud Congress' recent decisions which translate into the Wounded Warrior Programs. When America's sons and daughters are sent off to War we must be prepared for the consequences of that action. We are grateful Congress understands this solemn duty and has increased the administration's program budget in each of the last few years to fulfill that

commitment. We believe more work needs to be done.

We ask Veterans Affairs funding be moved to mandatory annual spending. This nation should hold as its highest obligation the willingness to fully fund VA healthcare, facilities, and other programs for those who are willing to serve. Recently, new categories of veterans have been created, limiting those who can receive VA hospital services. This is especially taxing for older veterans. For those veterans who are Medicare eligible, transferred Medicare funding to the servicing VA facility would lighten the financial burden for the VA and provide cost effective care for the veterans. We believe a VA-Medicare subvention would create a win-win situation for all involved.

AFSA is pleased Congress has called for creation of a joint DOD-VA office to oversee development of bidirectional electronic records. However, we strongly recommend the Subcommittee upgrade the scope of responsibilities and span of authority for the new DOD-VA Interagency Program Office to include top down planning and execution of all seamless transition functions, including the joint electronic health record, joint DOD-VA physicals, implementation of best

practices for traumatic brain injuries, post traumatic stress disorder, and special needs care and joint research.

We urge this Committee to ensure any legislative changes to the military disability evaluation and retirement systems do not reduce compensation and benefit levels for disabled servicemembers.

We applaud the actions of these committees in recent years to directly address the issues of the unique health challenges faced by women veterans. Between 1990 and 2000 the women veteran population increased by 33.3 percent, from 1.2 million to 1.6 million. Women now represent approximately 7 percent of the total veteran population. As the number of women veterans increases the VA must be funded to increasingly provide the resources and legal authority to care for female specific healthcare needs.

Congress supplemented the administration's VA Construction and Renovation Budget last year. We applaud you for that, and ask for your action again to supplement the President's fiscal year 2009 VA Budget for Construction and Renovation. This is a critical matter and must be dealt with in light of the increasing number of patients, many

very young and facing long term care as we continue to wage this lengthy War on Terrorism.

State Home construction appropriations have been cut and the backlog for State Home Construction Grant Projects is now nearly \$1 billion. One year ago there were ninety-two pending projects but funding sufficient for only twenty-two. AFSA urges this Committee to earmark substantial funding in fiscal year 2009 for the construction and renovation of State Veterans Homes. Investment in these homes is a wise one. State Homes provide nursing home care at less than 30 percent of the total cost provided by the VA itself. We urge adequate support and funding for these important veterans facilities.

We are extremely pleased the President mentioned transferability of the Montgomery GI Bill benefits during his State of the Union. Shortly after, both houses of Congress introduced legislation that would allow such transferability. We have said the Montgomery GI Bill is a benefit. With us today, I have Senior Airman James, from the United States Air Force Honor Guard. He has two children and a wife. If this Montgomery GI Bill is truly a

benefit then Senior Airman James should be able to spend that benefit as he so desires. Several changes need to be made to both the active duty, Guard, and Reserve Montgomery Educational Programs in order to make them a more viable benefit. It needs an overhaul to make it fair and equitable to all military members. It is time that the benefit became a true benefit for all our personnel in uniform.

We would be remiss if we did not mention the Veterans Educational Assistance Program, the one we normally refer to as VEAP. It was a lousy program. Many of our military personnel were counseled to not enroll in the program, and many have and are now exiting military service today with absolutely no educational benefit. And I think that is a crying shame that we are putting these people in that kind of predicament. We need to correct this and provide an open window for all those VEAPers to enroll in the Montgomery GI Bill immediately.

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, this Committee has a daunting task and so do the Americans who step forward to ensure our freedom and liberty. This nation must be fully committed to their care. We are pleased by the hard work of

this Committee and its commitment to America's veterans. On behalf of all Air Force Sergeants Association's members, we appreciate your efforts and as always are ready to support you in matters of mutual concern.

[The statement of Chief Master Sergeant Richard M. Dean appears on p.]

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Mr. *Hall.* Thank you, sir. Thank you, Chief Dean, we appreciate your comments and take them to heart. And we are going to at this point recognize Mr. Boozman for any comments or questions he has.

Mr. *Boozman.* Thank you, Mr. Hall. I just want to very quickly welcome you all here and tell you how important it is for you to be here and how important it is to be with your members of Congress. The Veterans' Affairs Committee in a very bipartisan way works really hard to try and get these things accomplished. But we cannot get it done without you all. So we really do appreciate your efforts. I especially want to thank the guys from Arkansas that are here, and as I said with a group the other day, I am not going to make you call the hogs, but we really do appreciate your being here and making the trip.

What I would like to do is go ahead and defer the rest of my time to Mr. Buchanan.

Mr. *Buchanan.* Yeah, again I would like to thank all of the veterans' groups who are here. As excited as my colleague mentioned, we need your input, all of us on the Veterans' Affairs, because with that input we can better

represent the veterans' groups. How many, I am from Florida. How many members do we have, or how many people here from Florida, just out of curiosity? So we are glad you are here. Again, we are all up here fighting hard, making sure we get the share of the budget that you deserve and we are trying to make a difference every year. I think we had a pretty good year last year but we have got a lot more work to do. But again, I appreciate everybody being here and we appreciate the opportunity to get a chance to visit and better understand your issues. Thank you.

Mr. *Hall.* And the Chair will recognize Mr. Brown for comments or statements?

Mr. *Brown of South Carolina.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I too would like to thank the gentlemen on the panel today. This is my eighth year on the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I chaired the Health Committee and the Benefits Committee in the past. And it is a pleasure to work for veterans. My dad was a World War I veteran. He served over in France. I had the privilege to speak on Memorial Day two years ago at Normandy, and we recognize that there is a tremendous price that has been paid for our freedom and we

never take it lightly here. We are grateful for you, that has come today, to petition for those needs of our veterans that have come home after performing such an admirable duty.

And I also would like to recognize anybody from South Carolina? Is anybody here from South Carolina? Oh, very good. Well, thank you very much. We are grateful that you have come this far, and to participate. But this is the great freedom that has been afforded by our veterans, to come and petition your needs and concerns, and we are grateful to be able to listen today. And thank you very much.

Mr. *Hall.* Thank you, Mr. Brown. And I will just recognize myself for a moment. I am honored to have been asked to chair the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. And we are working very hard on that Subcommittee to reduce the backlog that unfortunately in recent weeks has gone up from 177 days average to 183 days from the time that a veteran presents a complete claim until that claim is adjudicated and granted or denied, in which case the appeal takes an average of about two year. So this is a scandalous, shameful length of time for our veterans to

have to wait to get the disabilities that they earned, to be made to jump through hoops and prove service connectedness, and prove that they have actually suffered these injuries and disabilities in the service of their country. We are very quick to send men and women in uniform abroad. And unfortunately slow to take care of them when that comes back, and that will change.

I am honored, especially to recognize Commander Schulman and Mr. Rowan, other members of New York organizations who are here, some of whom I had breakfast with or met with over the last couple of days. I cannot help but notice the diversity within the veterans' community that you and your auxiliaries represent. Although there are many different periods of service or rank among you you are all here to serve your fellow veterans and your country, and that is something we all thank you for.

I heard a lot of interesting testimony over the last six month of hearings of the Subcommittee. I will just give you a couple of sound bytes. Colonel Norton, a West Point grad, talking in front of the Economic Opportunities Subcommittee that Mr. Boozman is Ranking Member of and Stephanie Herseth

Sandlin is the Chair of, said that it is important in today's time when Guard and Reserve are being used and redeployed over and over again alongside regular active duty servicepeople that they have the same educational and economic benefits when they come home. And he said his slogan is same service, same battlefield, same benefits. And I agree with him wholeheartedly, that they should receive that.

As far as the seamless transition that we have heard so much about, I was in Landstuhl, Germany in October on my way back from Iraq and I had the chance to talk to the Commander of the hospital about this. And he told me that, you know, in the early days of the War in Iraq that soldiers who were wounded would have something written with magic marker on their forehead describing the injury and the diagnosis, and how much morphine or whatever they had gotten, and then they were loaded on a helicopter and shipped off to Balad to be stabilized. Now, he says, as of October that there is an electronic record that is being created. He called it an onion. And every step of the way they add another layer of information to the onion. One layer is added at the

battlefield, one layer in Balad, one layer on the plane to Germany, another layer in Landstuhl, each one saying what further diagnosis, what improvement or deterioration in their condition, what surgery or medication they have received. And that whole thing comes home with them to Walter Reed, or Brooke, or Bethesda, whichever DOD facility they are at. And when it is time for them to separate, if they determine that they are not fit for service, able to continue, they, or whatever time they decide to separate from the service, that that entire thing, starting in December, two months ago, could be handed off. And they were beginning to hand this off as an electronic file to the VA.

Now about two weeks ago in a Subcommittee hearing I asked Under Secretary for Benefits Walcoff, Michael Walcoff, if he knew how close the VA is to achieving this, to having compatible software that can receive the medical file from DOD so that they have a starting point that confirms without the need for stacks of paper and going back through old files, that confirms that these injuries or exposures or blast damage and TBI or loss of limbs, or loss of mobility,

or vision impairment, or what have you, that it was caused on such and such a date by such and such an attack. And the Under Secretary's answer was, "I don't know."

Now that is not good enough for us on a bipartisan basis. We on the Committee are determined to try to move this forward. and we realize you cannot do everything with artificial intelligence. You cannot do everything with computers and software. But private industry is not moving boxes of papers from one desk to another with rubber bands wrapped around them and sticky pads. Private industry is working with computers, with rating systems that can be computerized. And we have been told by some of the experts from the private sector that they think we could get to the point where about 80 percent of our claims are ratable by a properly designed computer and software system. And that is something we are seriously exploring and pushing for as part of speeding up the claims process, and also of speeding up this seamless transition that we all want.

Of course, there will be problems. Of course, there will be cases, we hear about 20 percent of all cases, regardless of technology, will require human interaction and

somebody to go through the most complicated or the most severe of these injuries and deal with them. We have also had things as far afield as a grandmother with her orphaned granddaughter, a seven-year-old girl whose name is Kayla, I cannot remember that last name of the family. But her mom last summer was at that time the 184th single mother who was killed in Iraq. So the grandmother was trying to talk to us about how to raise a child who needs clothing and school and food and all the expenses that any child needs to be taken care of on a fixed social security income. And we are going to work on that. We are going to work on raising the DIC payments so that it amounts to something that is a workable fund for the custodial surviving family member to take care of an orphan in this War.

And of course, we have had more women, as more than one of you have mentioned, more women deployed in these Wars that we are involved in today than any other time in our history. So this is a relatively new problems that we are dealing with.

At any rate, I want you to know that the DAMA Subcommittee, like the full VA Committee, I believe is

operating in a bipartisan, nonpartisan basis and we want to get this job done, and we want to get it done now if not yesterday. But the process is slow. The bureaucracy is entrenched. People are used to doing things a certain way. And also, there is a legitimate concern, which we hear from you as well, that we do not do something that makes it worse. We do not want to leap into something that, in all good intentions, actually makes a bad situation worse. But I want you to know that we hear you and that we are determined that our actions will complete the part of the contract that the American people owe to the veterans who fought for America. That you and your comrades kept your part of the contract, and it is a solemn contract with the citizens of this country. And we need to make sure that we uphold ours, at which point we will be worthy of your service. And with that, I would return the chairmanship to Chairman Filner.

The *Chairman.* You may stay there. You look good up there.

Mr. *Hall.* I yield back.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Hall. I thank all of

you for being here. It is very important, and especially as you lobby your individual congresspeople.

Let me respond to a sense that I had from several of you, but Mr. Pleva especially, of frustration, of a sense that are we listening, and why are we talking about the same things again and again. I think that is a real sense. And, you know, hundreds of thousands if not millions of veterans sometimes feel that. And what the hell are we doing here if we are not doing the job that we know we have to do? And I, I mean, I do not want to have to necessarily give you excuses. But I just want to mention two things which I think are important and you can help us with.

Clearly, everything, although everything is not a question of throwing dollars at, it costs money, what we are doing. And when you deal with money and a budget you are dealing with priorities. Your priorities, I think, are my priorities too. Veterans should be first. We should not balance the budget on the back of veterans. We should not force veterans out of the system to save money. You do not turn veterans on each other and have them compete. And, you know, in context we have a \$3 trillion budget. So when we

are \$3 billion too short it sounds like a lot of money, you know, on the surface. But that is one-tenth of 1 percent of our budget. We cannot afford not to do that. Come on. I mean, it is a question of priorities.

And we have the money as a society. I mean, there is no question. We are at War. We want to spend, we are spending \$1 billion every two days. We find the money when we want to do it. As all of you said, this is a cost of War. We should put in the supplemental that funds the War the supplemental for the warrior, because we have got to pay for it. We have got to pay for it.

And every congressperson who comes Memorial Day and Veterans Day, and we say, "Oh yeah, we support you." You have got to follow it and, you know, for your members, how they vote. Do they vote the priorities that they give lip service to? So we have a lot of work to do as a nation, whether it is in education or environmental protection or, you know, healthcare. And we say, "Well, we cannot do it all so we have to prioritize." Well, your job is to make sure we prioritize the veterans. And we sometimes do not do it. You have got to go back next year and try again. But

that is, you know, that is the politics of this thing and I know it is frustrating, and I know it is, it feels like we are not doing the job. But in America the politics is pressure politics, unfortunately. It is not who does the right thing or what we owe you, it is who puts the pressure on. You have got to do that too. You should not have to. You should not have to. We made a contract with you. We should live up to the contract. But the fact is, we are not. And you have got to pressure us.

And that leads me to a second point here. When many of you were in active duty, 80 percent of the United States Congress were veterans, or had active duty. It has reversed itself in recent years. Now barely 20 percent have been in the armed forces. I am one of the 80 percent who has not. Now that does not mean we are evil or anything else. That just means we do not know the issues as personally as those who served have. Your job is to tell your story and make us understand.

Now, we on the Committee, but there is only twenty-nine, tend to get those issues. Others may not. So when you go home, it is important that you are here, but when you go

home you have an even bigger job. You have got to go see your congressperson. Just say what you are going through, your stories. I mean, we call it lobbying but it is just telling your stories. And you have got to remember that these people do not have the background that you might assume. They have not been through the process. You have got to educate them. So we need your help to do that.

So going home and talking to individuals about the budget, about the kind of testimony that we heard so eloquently today. You just have to keep doing it. Because if you are not there telling your story, someone else is. The oil companies, the banks, you know, the special interests. They are all in there getting their stuff. And you should not have to be there. But that is the nature of the beast. You have got to do it. And I will tell you, you have enough numbers to either elect or throw out any person at any level of government if you decided you wanted to.

Now you are not supposed to be political, you know, as organizations. But your people have got to be politically aware and informed so they can do what they have to do when an election comes along.

So we have heard you. Many of us are passionate about responding to you. We need your help because we have to make it a priority, and we have to make it, as I said, a part of the cost of what everybody recognizes. It is a part of national security. Somebody has estimated that the cost of the next ten years of the veterans just from this War will be about \$60 billion a year. I mean, that is three-quarters of the budget now. We should be putting the money in there so we have the money when these kids come home with PTSD and brain injury because we are going to have major problems, as we see from some of your comments from earlier wars.

You know, my colleagues will kill me because, you know, congresspeople are supposed to have the last word. If any of you would like to make to make a statement after the--

Mr. *Boozman.* Say one thing?

The *Chairman.* You want to say something first?

Mr. *Boozman.* Yes, sir.

The *Chairman.* I want to give you all a last word in response to anything you have heard or underlined. But my friend Mr. Boozman from the other side wants to say

something first.

Mr. *Boozman.* Yes, sir. While you were gone I deferred to some of my colleagues.

The *Chairman.* Oh, I am sorry. I thought you had your time.

Mr. *Boozman.* No, no. I had a very short, anyway.

The *Chairman.* Okay, please. I apologize.

Mr. *Boozman.* I, he did.

The *Chairman.* By the way, Mr. Boozman and I spent a week recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. And we traveled together, and we put on our vests together, and our helmets. And we were blown away by the incredible professionalism, the bravery, the solidarity that these troops had. But we know when that adrenaline breaks down, and the comradeship is gone, and the reality of what some of them are asked to do comes, there is a lot of needs. So we have to stick with these kids and do what we have to do. Thank you, Mr. Boozman.

Mr. *Boozman.* No, I agree totally. I was looking at Sergeant Dean. My dad was in the Air Force for twenty years, retired as a Master Sergeant, so I was telling we

have a Sergeant Major, you know, on the Committee now and he is a great advocate, you can imagine, you know? I was telling the guys the other day, though, that I was a little nervous being around him. Like you, I always feel like he is getting ready to tell me to do something like my dad, you know? But I grew up, literally, reading the, you know, the Sergeants Magazine, the Air Force Magazine that is put out, which is an excellent publication.

And I would agree with what Mr. Filner said. You know, this, again, this is a very bipartisan endeavor. I would say though that because of you all you cannot get discouraged. I mean, a lot of the issues that we have worked to, Chris Smith was a great advocate, a lot of the issues that we, you know, that we have grappled with for the last six, seven, eight years, concurrent receipt went back to the Civil War. Again, we were able to make some inroads there. The widows tax, you know, is another thing that has been laying around for years. So we really have made some significant improvements. As you know, the spending is not where it ought to be. But there has been a lot of sad things that have happened as a result of 9/11. One of the

good things is is that I think people, despite the fact that many of them, as Bob was alluding to, many of my generation did not serve. But my uncles, my dad, I grew up in a military family. We all did, because of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Many of the young people now, though, have no idea at all, though, because there have been, but the good thing is that the population as a whole is very, very supportive of the military.

And that is due to your all's efforts. You have got tremendous staffs that help out up here. So I would just encourage you. It is easy to get discouraged, but like I say I would encourage you. We have got a lot to do. And then also, as Bob said, the only way we can get that done, we cannot get that done individually, it takes you all pushing hard. So I appreciate you very much.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Boozman. You know, a great friend to all of us and to all of you retired during the current year, and that was Lane Evans from Illinois. He should have been in this spot right here, a tough Marine who came down with Parkinson's and had to retire, and is trying to fight that. A former employee of his is his successor.

And his successor is going to fill very big shoes but he is going to do it because he is passionately for veterans. And the gentleman from Illinois, from Rock Island, Illinois, is Mr. Hare, and I want to recognize him.

Mr. *Hare.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* And think of Lane Evans as we do that.

Mr. *Hare.* I am much better looking than Lane, I just want you all to know that. I really appreciate the panel and all of you for coming here today, and I apologize. I was on the Floor for a while.

But I just want to say a couple of things. First of all, I am proud to serve on this Committee. Bob Filner is a wonderful Chairman. When he talks about veterans' issues, and I listen to these all the time, nobody speaks with a greater passion and a greater sense of commitment than the Chairman does. I have introduced, as many of you know, H.R. 2514, the assured funding bill for veterans. That is my big bill here. I have 118 cosponsors and the list is growing.

One of the things that I have heard from every service organization is how can we possibly function, how can VA healthcare possibly function? For eleven years in a row we

have not even known how much money we are going to have? So as someone justified earlier, it just seems to me the right thing to do is to put the VA on assured funding so that every year they know what they are going to have and they can provide the healthcare for our veterans.

And I would like you to do me a favor today. I would like this 118 co-sponsorship to grow, and the Chairman has committed to this, and I thank him for giving me the opportunity to lead on this bill. But if you are lobbying other members ask them to get on this bill as cosponsors. And we will push this and we will keep pushing harder.

The *Chairman.* Give them the number again.

Mr. *Hare.* It is H.R. 2514, the Assured Funding for Veterans Healthcare Act.

Let me, just a couple of other things. You know, we have talked about the disability and the Chairman is right. VA is supposed to stand for Veterans Advocate not Veterans Adversary. And I do not know why in heaven's name we have to err on the side of the VA. We have claims that are backed up for years. And why cannot we do it, when I was talking to the Chairman and Joe Donnelly from Indiana, why

do we not treat these like we treat taxpayers? You file the claim with the VSO, get the paperwork, we start the claim processing immediately for you. We can hire a bunch of people, but by the time they get trained up people are retiring and we are kind of back to where we were before we started. Why do we not err on the side of veterans instead of the VA? Start the claim, pay the claim. It is not going to cost us any more money because at the end of the day they are going to make the claim, we hope, retroactive.

Plus, one other small problem, as the VA would say, but I think large, is that if you are in the middle of this process of claim, and the spouse dies, or the veteran dies, the spouse has to start all over again at square one. I cannot think of anything more disingenuous to do. You know, my bottom line here to all of you is if this nation makes a promise to our veterans, when we make that promise you keep it or do not make the promise. It is just really that simple.

And the Chairman and I were talking last night, and this old adage of, "Well, how are we going to afford to do all of these things?" That is not the question. The question is,

"How can we afford not to do these things that we need to do?" I mean, I have only been here, as the Chairman said, I am sort of the new kid on the block, but I have to tell you I have seen this government throw away millions and billions of dollars and yet we always have to seem to try to fight it out, slug it out, to find out if we can afford prosthetics for veterans, or clinics, and hospitals, and all this nonsense. Look, we make the commitment. And the commitment is, is that the people that have served this country, that are serving this country, and that will serve this country, they are the best and our brightest and we owe them everything we have.

Let me close by saying one thing. Yesterday in my office I had two representatives from the Paralyzed Veterans of America. And I think this kind of summarizes. One of the gentlemen has a rotator cuff problem, and he is trying to move his chair. He has been slugging it out with the VA and now he is probably going to, now he is going to go do it. This is a gentleman, by the way, who came here from Germany, went through the process of becoming a citizen, and in 1969 was drafted and served this country. Now he is back

here. And he is in, besides the rotator cuff problem, he is in his sixth year of a claim that he is filing. And this gentleman was smiling, and was upbeat, and outgoing. And I said, "How can you do this in the face of everything that happened?" And he said, "My service to this country came first. I wanted to be a citizen." And let me say he is exactly what every person in this room and your families are all about.

And one last thing. When we help our veterans we have to remember we have to help the families too. They pay a terrible price for these injuries and things that happen. So for the families, we owe it to them as well. And I just want to say, I hope we can get this bill through. I thank the Chairman for his leadership on this bill. But let me tell you, we will get it done. It may take a little bit of time. But when we do, we will not have another eleven years of having to wrangle about a budget so we can provide healthcare for our veterans right away. And I just want to thank you all for coming today. I really appreciate your being here. You are the best and the brightest. And as long as I am on this Committee, you know, we will keep

slugging it out for you. And I thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Hare. Again, I would be happy to hear any last thoughts given what happened, starting with Mr. King and just going down the row. If you have anything, or you can pass. Mr. King, anything? Or Mr. Pleva?

Mr. *King.* I do not have any other comments at this time. I appreciate it. Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you. Mr. Pleva? Thank you.

Mr. *Pleva.* You know me. I will say this, sir. I said it the first year I came in front of this Committee, and I know some people back in the back room are going to cringe. But you are absolutely right. You give us a call, and we will do our damndest to get 20,000 wheelchairs up here. I mean that, sir.

The *Chairman.* Thank you. You know, we take what you said to heart. We get recommitted to the battle when we hear from you. So, you know, it is very important that we hear even though there is frustration, etcetera. But thank you. We will work hard together. Mr. Schulman?

Mr. *Schulman.* Yes, thank you. Two things. I had the honor of attending a Subcommittee hearing in New Windsor, New York that Congressman Hall had, and at that time the subject came up about if a veteran goes to the VA with more than one problem and the service officer sees him and sees he has more than one problem, and he has visual problems in the sense that the service officer can see that there is problems, and he submits five or six different items, and unfortunately the VA wants to go through the whole system before they give him funds for the items. And you have said it already, that they ought to take the serviceman at his word, start the process, give him the money, and then check on the other items later. And so, I would like to see this happen primarily because it is a fantastic idea and it would get rid of the claims. And this is basically what we are trying to do. We are trying to emphasize cutting down on the number of claims that are out there and try to make the system work better.

My other comment that I have is I am in receipt of a letter from an attorney in Georgia that wrote to General James Conway, Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, where he

was, he apparently is sending out gloves and various items and eye protection to some Marines. And he got a letter back from one of the Marines, and I will just read it. It says, "Thank you very much for the eye protection that you bought for us. It was originally for another Marine in my platoon, but I took a blast from an IED that ruined my last eye protection. I was lucky that I had them on because I would have lost my eyesight. These new glasses cover my eyes better and definitely make me feel more comfortable riding in the front. Thank you so much. I hope that you know you have made a difference to us in the military."

Now, you know, it is shocking to me to have a copy of this letter. I cannot understand why we are funding this War with so many billions of dollars, why are the troops being shortchanged? Can you please help us with this answer?

The *Chairman.* I cannot use expletives, I am sorry.
We hear you.

Mr. *Schulman.* Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Dr. Jones?

Mr. *Jones.* Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee,

as I closed my discourse earlier, I just want to say please continue to do the right thing. We realize that you all have hard jobs here in Washington. But as we make it back to our homes, please continue to speak for us while we are gone. Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, sir. President Rowan?

Mr. *Rowan.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. You know, if I could highlight just three things. First of all, the War will end some day. I mean, we all think it will not but it will. And that makes it even more important that the assured funding bill that Mr. Hare is pushing and others goes through. Because when the War is over and the bands stop playing is when the problems begin. And we only have to look at our experience as Vietnam veterans, and look at the fact that we have come back here year after year kicking and screaming to get the VA to finish their study of our travails as veterans, and that is the National Vietnam Veterans Longitudinal Study. And it is just absurd that that study has not been completed.

I would also urge you, and particularly as House members, to join with Senator Brown, and I hope Senator Burr

will pick up on that cue and join with Senator Brown, in creating and following through with this SERV Act. I think it is a brilliant idea. As a Vietnam veteran one of the best things we had in those days was on the campuses was the federally funded programs that brought together the veterans on the campuses, and gave us information, and gave us each other. Now that we know so much about PTSD and other things we can only improve upon that in some sort of one stop shopping center.

And last but not least is the issue of outreach and our support of S. 1314 and hopefully there is a House version soon of Feingold-Burr bill, on getting the VA to do outreach. And an example of that occurred in November of last year when we had our twenty-fifth anniversary of the Wall parade. And at the end of the parade we had an Agent Orange tent, and giving out information to people. And we had a couple came in with their daughters. The veteran was a Vietnam veteran, suffered from both diabetes and prostate cancer. And the daughters both suffered from spina bifida. And none of them knew they were entitled to compensation from the VA and healthcare from the VA. And that should

never, never occur. And unfortunately, far too many of my colleagues are in that situation. The VA, as I pointed out, has presently got about 250,000 Vietnam veterans collecting disability for Type 2 Diabetes. That is about 10 percent or a little less than those who actually stepped foot in Vietnam. We think that number is at least double if not triple that. Which means anywhere from a quarter million or more Vietnam veterans are walking around with Type 2 diabetes that do not understand that they are not just fat, and they are not just old, they are Vietnam veterans and they were exposed to Agent Orange. And that is why they got the damn diabetes and everything that flows from it. And the same thing with prostate cancer, and lung cancer, and all of the other laundry list of presumptive diseases. Never mind the fact that there are many diseases that probably should be presumptive that are not.

So we urge you to pass all of those legislations. And we need it today. You know, again, we have been kicking around these things far too long. And I would also urge one more thing. I know that the VA is going through some process now of putting out an RFI, I believe, for finally

creating some sort of virtual VA. There are hundreds if not thousands of software companies in the United States today who could probably give them tomorrow a fully functional operation. I know when I retired five years ago from the New York City Comptroller's Office I worked in a virtual program to review 1500 page contracts at will through a computer screen. And there is no reason why that or some other similar kind of software cannot be bought by the VA tomorrow and not spend millions of dollars on research, and on RFIs, and everything else because they want to have their own version and not somebody else's. So I would hope that we would push them to finish this once and for all and move on. Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, sir. Sergeant Major Overstreet, please?

Sergeant Major *Overstreet.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, we appreciate the opportunity to testify before you and bring some of these issues out. As I look around this room one thing comes to mind. As we get new recommendations coming down the line, I think one of those recommendations may be to kind of overhaul the benefit program here. But I

would caution the Committee here, as we look at reoverhauling those benefits, I think we ought to bear in mind that we have a lot of veterans out there who have adjusted their lifestyle and their quality of life based on what they get right now. So I am suggesting to you, as in our testimony, that we grandfather those veterans in there. Because if you start changing what they are getting right now it is going to be catastrophic for them and their families, and it is really going to change their way of life.

Coat tailing on my neighbor's presumption here, I have had the opportunity to testify before a number of committees and I would like say something about presumption. When we stood up at Disability and Compensation I realized those folks thought that that might be bigger than what they could get their arms around so they stood up a couple of other subcommittees for that and one of those was a presumption committee. And I had the opportunity to testify before that. And I said to the Presumption Committee, "I am not so sure what presumption is. But I can tell you what presumption is when it comes to any a young serviceman and

some of these folks sitting behind me." When they raise their hands for so many years of honest and faithful service, their presumption is that we are going to give them the best equipment and the best training that money can buy. They also presume if one of them should get hurt, we are going to take care of them. They also presume if one should fall in battle and not come home that we are going to take care of their family. Every one of them, and every young American out there today that we deploy that raised their hand, they have that presumption. I think we certainly need to live up to that, sir. Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you for those definitions. I think they are very important. Chief Dean?

Chief Master Sergeant *Dean.* Thank you again, sir, Mr. Chairman, for allowing us this opportunity. It has been said, I am not sure I can say it any differently. But a disability is a disability, and a veteran is a veterans. It does not matter if it is active, Guard, Reserve. We are depending on our Guard and Reserve today more than we have ever done in the past. And when they are out there on the battlefield, it does not matter whether they are in the

plane at 35,000 feet or on the ground. We need to treat them all the same. Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you. Again, thank you all for being here, both those in the panel and those in the audience. We learned a lot. We do think about the things you said and we will take action. Thank you so much. The hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:05 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]