

Senator Sherrod Brown

Remarks to the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing on Benefits Legislation
May 9, 2007

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Today's hearing is about benefits legislation. Many of the bills we are going to discuss today, I have proudly cosponsored.

From Senator Murray's Prisoner of War Benefits Act of 2007 and Chairman Akaka's Blinded Veterans Paired Organ Act of 2007 to Senator Cantwells' GI Bill for Life to Senator Lincoln's Total Force Educational Assistance Enhancement and Integration Act of 2007, this Committee and this Congress is putting the Veteran first.

I know we are going to spend a lot of time on these so I wanted to mention two broad points that may help us put this legislation in context.

First, I want to thank Senator Webb for his work on the Veterans Education Assistance Act. What is important about this legislation is that it looks at serving our veterans in a new post-Cold War model. Senator Webb's bill reflects a reality that our warriors in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan must be provided for in a new, modern approach that reflects a war model for the GI Bill.

Make no mistake, we are at war and our veterans benefits for those soldiers must reflect that. We are going to be paying for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for many generations.

We must include the cost of caring for our soldiers today and into the future as part of the continuing price tag for funding our military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I want to talk about this new way of thinking because I think there is an element in the Department of Veterans Affairs that is stuck in the past.

This nation is at war and while this committee has fought to bump up the budget of VA by over \$4 billion just to meet its current needs, the VA higher-ups are doling out \$3.8 million in bonuses for senior VA executives.

This money went to the same administrators who were unprepared for the massive influx of new veterans coming home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are the same administrators who oversee the claims backlog of over 600,000 pending cases with an average wait of over 175 days per claim. These are the same administrators who had the \$1 billion shortfall in the VA budget in 2005.

The \$3.8 million in bonuses averaged \$16,000. That is roughly the equivalent of a GS-1's annual salary on the General Pay Scale of the federal government. 237 recipients received these bonuses. So instead of hiring 237 new employees, the VA padded the salaries of its highest paid.

An assistant secretary and several regional directors received an average bonus of \$33,000. This is a little more than a GS-8 employee makes in an entire year.

The Chillicothe VA Medical Center in Chillicothe, Ohio has had a tough time recruiting and retaining nurses. Columbus is a short drive away and many head there for higher salaries. The average starting LPN with the VA begins at around GS 5/6. That equates to about \$28,000 per year.

So, as Chillicothe struggles to recruit and retain nurses the VA awarded \$33,000 to a number of administrators. I think that money would have been much better spent if it would have hired another nurse at Chillicothe.

VA must focus on serving the veteran and not the administrator. I've heard the arguments that these bonuses were to recruit and retain quality administrators, but with \$3.8 million total in bonuses, the VA could have hired 135 nurses nationwide. VA is also in the marketplace competing for doctors, nurses, physician assistants, physical therapists, and not just administrators. VA must work to recruit and retain quality employees in all fields of work.

I want to ensure that our legislative agenda will continue in tandem with this committee's Congressional oversight. While I continually call for some sort of assured or mandatory funding, these funds must be well spent. Bonuses for highly compensated administrators is not money well spent.

Lastly, I want to remind everyone that as this committee focuses on this slate of benefits legislation before us, we will not forget our veterans from earlier wars. We must use advancements in technology and medical understanding for all generations of warriors. We must ensure that the bills we are going to discuss today do just that.

It is the least a grateful nation can do.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.