

mc

IG

LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF AMERICAN VETERANS (AMVETS),  
AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR, MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE  
HEART, GOLD STAR WIVES OF AMERICA, INC., FLEET RESERVE  
ASSOCIATION, MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, AND  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

- - -

THURSDAY, MARCH 29, 2007

United States Senate,  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
House of Representatives,  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:32 a.m.,  
in Room SD-224, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Bob  
Filner, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senator Akaka; Representatives Filner,  
Michaud, Mitchell, Hall, McNerney, and Walz.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. BOB FILNER, CHAIRMAN, U.S.  
REPRESENTATIVE FROM CALIFORNIA

Mr. Filner. Good morning. We are going to call to  
order this joint meeting of the Senate and the House  
Veterans' Affairs Committees. Welcome.

mc

There is another hearing in our bigger room on the U.S. Attorneys. Somehow they think they have a bigger audience than we have.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Filner. Or that is more important than we are, so we got moved to a smaller room, and I apologize for that.

My Senate colleagues are voting right now, and they will be coming in as the votes are over. It is rare that they let the House Members take over, so maybe we will declare ourselves Senators, Mr. McNerney.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Filner. It is nice to see you. I am Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and it is a pleasure to welcome you after over a year where we did not have these joint hearings. It is nice to have you back. It is very important that we do hear from you.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. We have been working with your national representatives as the budget process proceeds, but it is important that we hear you on your legislative agenda because we are in the middle of the process now. And you arrive, as you know, at a pretty important time for

mc

veterans.

I think the Nation has been presented a test; the Congress has been presented a test. Are we going to be able to respond to what Americans now know that you all knew for years and have been telling us, but now the whole American public knows. We have a system that is strained to the breaking point. When you have 600,000 backlogged disability claims, you have problems. Walter Reed has problems, as we all know. The treatment of our PTSD and brain-injured soldiers when they come back from the war, we do not have enough resources to deal with them, especially the hidden ones that we do not know for months or years afterwards.

So we have a big problem, and it is up to us to meet that challenge. You all have been telling us many of these things for a long time, and we have tried to respond.

In the first 60 days of this new Congress--or the last 60 days, I should say, we have had tremendous success as Committees in the House and the Senate and in the chambers of those two bodies in significantly increasing the resources to the Veterans' Administration and Department of Defense health care systems. When Congress does not pass

mc

the funding for this year's programs and the VA has to wait more than 5 months for a budget, how do you plan? How do you hire with that kind of situation? That is why I agree with all of you that we need mandatory funding so we do not have to go through this process.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. But in that resolution funding this year, we were able to get the Veterans' Administration a \$3.6 billion increase, the only agency that got any true increase in this year's budget.

In addition, as you know, we are debating the so-called war supplemental, to fund the ongoing activities in Iraq and Afghanistan. We were able to say that this is a supplement for war, but there ought to also be a supplement for the warriors. Between the Department of Defense and the Veterans' Administration, we got an additional \$3.5 billion for the health care of the veterans who are going to be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

We are today voting in the House. I think the Senate has voted on their budget resolution. Both of those bodies have increased the veterans budget from last year by \$6.6 billion. So the sum total of those figures is over \$13.5

mc

billion in just 60 days. That is over a 20 percent increase to do the things that we have to do as a Nation.

We are divided as a Congress and as a Nation on the events in Iraq, but we are united--I will tell you, these Committees, this Congress, and our Nation are united to say that when those kids come back from Iraq and Afghanistan, they are going to get all the help, the treatment, the respect, the honor, the dignity that a grateful Nation ought to give. We are united about that, even though you hear debate about the war. So we appreciate what you are doing to make sure that that continues.

We have 200,000 homeless vets on the street tonight, mainly from Vietnam. I think that was partly because we did not do our job. We did not do our job to support them when they came home, and they are on the street. We see evidence of it happening again, and we are determined to prevent homelessness from going further in terms of our veterans coming back.

So we are very glad to have you with us today. We are looking forward to working with you, and we are going to make sure that the veterans coming back and the veterans who have come back, whether they are from World War II or

mc

Vietnam or the Persian Gulf War, are going to get everything that was promised and everything that a grateful Nation ought to give.

I will just recognize for an opening statement my colleague from California, Mr. McNerney.

STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY McNERNEY, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM CALIFORNIA

Mr. McNerney. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and it is an honor to be here in this building facing this group and this panel of distinguished veterans from Gold Star Moms to POWs to AMVETS and so on. This is personal to me. My own son is a veteran. And I just came off a fairly difficult election campaign in which it was very clear to me, one thing throughout the district is that there is a large and increasing need for veterans--veterans from Korea, from World War II, and Vietnam, reaching an age where more services are needed, and then a new generation of veterans returning home with serious, lifelong injuries that need to be taken care of. Meanwhile, there are threats to close down veterans facilities in our district, in our State, in our country that have been there for 20--actually, for a hundred years. And I noticed that the people that work in

mc

these facilities are dedicated. They work hard. They love serving the veterans. And yet they are not given the resources to do the work that they need to provide the services for our veterans. And so it is incumbent upon us to look at the way we are doing things and to reconsider how important this is to us.

And I am very proud to be a part of the 110th Congress that added \$3.6 billion to last year's budget and is now in the supplemental adding another \$2 to \$3 billion. And so I think our level of commitment is there, and we depend on the veterans to inform us about where problems are in the system, where the needs are, so that we can respond.

So I thank you for coming. It is an honor to be here, and I look forward to your testimony.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Mr. McNerney.

Mr. Hall from New York is Chairman of our Disability Benefits Subcommittee.

STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN J. HALL, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM  
NEW YORK

Mr. Hall. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all

mc

for being here, and thank you for your service, your continuing service to our country and to all veterans.

It is an honor for me to be here. It is also an honor as a new Member of Congress to be chairing the Subcommittee on Disability Benefits and Memorial Services, where our number one priority is reducing the scandalous backlog of cases to something that is respectable, certainly lower than six digits, hopefully lower than five digits.

We have heard at hearings like this many good suggestions, including one from a professor from Harvard who came in--and she had written about the topic a couple times--and she suggested that we treat veterans' disability applications the way the IRS treats tax returns: accept people at their word, and then go back and selectively audit later to see how accurate they are. And if 88 percent of all claims are approved ultimately, then why force people who have already given so much through their sacrifice and their family's sacrifice to jump through hoops to prove that they are deserving of the benefits that should be coming to them?

So we are going to do everything we can on our Committee, and I am sure Chairman Filner and we on the full



mc

Committee will be doing everything we can to change the situation, which is a scandalous and shameful number that so many veterans have to wait so long. In Westchester County, in my district, which is the most affluent county in New York State and one of the five most affluent in the country, 20 percent of the homeless population is made up of veterans. And that is a juxtaposition that is all the more scandalous.

I also have two VA hospitals and facilities in my district, and one of them is apparently on the block. I do not know, we do not know, none of us knows for sure how the CARES Program will decide. But we are trying to influence them not to sell off VA properties for short-term profit because it is an easy way--I know from being in local and county government that it is an easy way to get a quick revenue hit that makes you look like you are balancing your budget this year. But we need to be prepared not just for, obviously, the returning veterans from the wars we are involved in today, but also for the continuing health needs of our veterans from previous wars as they get older and need more care.

So I will be fighting for those facilities in my

mc

district to be fully funded and to stay in the VA system for the purpose that they were intended for and also to reduce the claims process to a number and a time that is commensurate with all of your sacrifice and gift to our country.

I thank you and yield back to the Chairman.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Mr. Hall.

I do want to point out that all the Senators and Congress people on these Committees do want to be here. We have conflicting schedules, and they will arrive. I know Senators Akaka and Craig are voting right now. They will be here. I think the Republican Members of the House Committee are meeting with the President, I am told-- although he should be meeting with us, I think. And we will hear the panels after I--we just want the gentleman from Maine, Mr. Michaud, to say hello, who is the Chairman of our Health Subcommittee on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

STATEMENT OF HON. MICHAEL H. MICHAUD, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE  
FROM MAINE

Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Chairman Filner. I

mc

really appreciate all the VSOs for coming out here today. I want to thank you all for that you have done for this great Nation of ours and for your continuation in fighting for issues important for our veterans. As you probably heard earlier, we will be voting on a budget today, which I am very pleased that we are finally seeing the resources that we need to help our veterans. Can we do better? Yes. Will we do better? Probably we will. And so we are just going to continue working together, and I want to thank Chairman Filner for all your hard work and efforts in making sure that we do have a robust budget and look forward to working with the VSOs and look forward to hearing your testimony this morning as well.

So thank you. I yield back.

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Mr. Michaud.

We welcome all of you. I want to add one more thing. Many of you have been here in the last decade when I have been waving around the Independent Budget, which I believe all of you support. I think this is the first time that the budget actually has the level that the Independent Budget requested. So I think we are moving in the right direction, and we appreciate all your efforts for so long.

mc

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. I do want you all to think about it, and if you could say something today, that would be great, too. With all this money coming in, we want to make sure it is spent right. I think we need some new ways of accountability, using veterans who know the system and know the hospitals to help us, to make sure that we do not have other "Walter Reeds," that any problems that come up, we know about quickly and we solve them. We are going to need your help to do that. You have spent your whole lives doing that and we appreciate it.

We have the National Commander of AMVETS, Mr. Thomas McGriff, with us; the National Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War, Mr. Robert Fletcher; the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, Tom Poulter. Thank you. The National President of the Fleet Reserve Association, Jerry Sweeney; the National President of the Retired Enlisted Association, Mr. Patrick Corbett; and the Chairwoman of the Government Relations Committee of the Gold Star Wives of America, Ms. Rose Elizabeth Lee. Good to see you, Rose. And they are calling you the "new kid on the block": The Deputy Director of Government

mc

Relations of the Military Officers Association of America,  
Colonel Ana Smythe, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired).

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. So we are looking forward to hearing from  
you. All your written testimony will be made part of the  
record, and we look forward to your oral testimony,  
starting with the National Commander of the AMVETS, Mr. Tom  
McGriff.

mc

STATEMENT OF THOMAS C. MCGRIFF, NATIONAL  
COMMANDER, AMERICAN VETERANS (AMVETS)

Mr. McGriff. Chairman Akaka, Chairman Filner, Ranking Member Craig, Ranking Member Buyer, and Members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, on behalf of AMVETS, the AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary, the Sons of AMVETS, and our other subsidiary organizations, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify. I would like to recognize the AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary President Barbara Guth from Kentucky and also the National Sons of AMVETS Commander Dale Byrd from Ohio. They are an important part of the AMVETS family, and I am pleased that they have joined us here today at this very important hearing.

As a retired Navy veteran, I have dedicated my life to military service. Over the past decade, I have spent much of my time helping other veterans through my affiliation with AMVETS. I am pleased to say that we are making a difference.

Last year, more than 3,000 of our members, Ladies Auxiliary, and Sons volunteered over 208,000 hours of voluntary services at 146 VA medical centers. In addition, some 105 AMVETS from across the country invested more than

mc

692,000 hours in providing an array of community services. AMVETS also provided in excess of \$22 million in voluntary service to the local community. These are just a few examples of the good work our people are doing in the field.

Mr. Chairman, there is a new congressional majority, some new faces in the halls of Congress, and also on the Veterans' Affairs Committees. Despite these political changes, the overriding need of our veterans ultimately remains the same: the opportunity to make a successful and meaningful transition from active duty back to the civilian community.

One of my goals as Commander is to encourage an open dialogue that removes veteran' issues from party politics here on Capitol Hill. For far too long, VA budget hearings and veterans' issues have been utilized for political grandstanding. The simple fact remains that Congress has a moral and legal responsibility to provide funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs, and AMVETS believes that one of the best ways to fund the VA medical care is through mandatory funding.

As you know, Executive Order 13214 created the

mc

President's Task Force to Improve Health Care Delivery for our Nation's Veterans. In May 2003, the Task Force issued its final report and recommended that the VA should receive, and I quote, "full funding" and that "full funding should occur through modifications to the current budget and appropriations process by using a mandatory funding mechanism."

Recent history demonstrates why Congress should pass legislation to make VA health care funding mandatory spending. Congress has repeatedly had to add monies to the VA budget each year. And this has held true during the Clinton Administration and now for the Bush Administration. Now the Department is operating off of a continuing resolution.

AMVETS believes that mandatory of assured funding is a realistic and necessary solution to the annual funding problems of the Department of Veterans Affairs. With the exception of the VA and military health care system, most Federal health care spending is already mandatory in nature.

Last year, AMVETS hosted a National Symposium on the Needs of Young Veterans. The purpose of that symposium was



mc

to review the needs of returning Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans and make recommendations on how to address their needs. The symposium received a wide range of support from the Federal Government to include the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Office of Personnel Management.

The issues uncovered at the symposium and recommendations on how to address these issues are contained within the report "Voices for Action: A Focus on the Changing Needs of America's Veterans." Over 30 of the findings and recommendations will require congressional oversight or legislative action. AMVETS has prepared and published a copy of our final report, and copies of the report have been provided to you and your staff.

One of the simple themes from the symposium was the lack of a seamless transition from the military health care system to the Veterans' Administration. AMVETS would like for the Committees to hold DOD and the VA accountable for making seamless transition a reality.

Despite the years of collaboration on the single separation physical and development of the Benefits

mc

Delivery and Discharge exam, DOD and VA still conduct separate separation physicals and separate compensation and pension exams. Furthermore, separation physicals are still not mandatory. Congress should require the DOD to conduct mandatory separation physicals and also require DOD to utilize the Benefits Delivery at Discharge that was jointly developed and agreed to by both agencies.

Yesterday, the House passed the Wounded Warriors Assistance Act. During the Armed Services Committee markup, an amendment was accepted that would require the use of a uniform separation and evaluation physical by DOD and that the VA could use for disability ratings. It would also require an interoperable electronic exchange of critical medical information between the two Departments and further require the use of an electronic DD214. AMVETS fully supports these mandates, and we encourage the Senate to also work to codify these provisions into law.

The recent revelations regarding patient conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center highlight these issues. The real tragedy of this sad story is the fact that wounded service personnel are having to ensure an extremely long and complex bureaucratic process to transition from the

mc

Department of Defense health care system to the VA health care system. In short, there is a lack of seamlessness.

Mr. Chairman, our obligations are many. I look forward to working with all of you to ensure the long-term sustainability of our veterans' programs. Again, thank you for extending me the opportunity to appear before you today, and thank you for your support of veterans. I hope all of you will be able to join us tonight for our annual congressional reception and our Silver Helmet presentation to the Honorable Michael Michaud of Maine, to be held in Room 345 of the Cannon House Office Building from 5:30 to 7:00 p.m.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony, and I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. McGriff follows:]

mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you very much, Commander.

The National Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War, Mr. Robert Fletcher, welcome and thank you for being here.

mc

STATEMENT OF ROBERT W. FLETCHER, NATIONAL  
COMMANDER, AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

Mr. Fletcher. Mr. Chairman Filner and other Ranking Members, I am Robert W. Fletcher, National Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War. I was held for nearly 3 years under extremely brutal, inhumane conditions, as were more than 4,000 held captive with me. Like all POWs, whatever our war, I am as proud of my country today as I was during my captivity. That will never waver. I was only 17 when I was taken prisoner of war. We had approximately 2,000 people freeze and die of diseases. We did not have any winter clothes, about half of us. The average nighttime temperature in Korea was 45 below zero. The average daytime temperature was 35 below zero. No shoes but our combat boots, leather. No gloves and no winter coats. You would go to bed in a bombed out building, no roof maybe or no--or one side of the building gone. When you would wake up in the morning, there would be four or five dead frozen to death on the outside.

As you know, POWs have paid a high price in long-term health consequences, as well as the more immediate damage to their minds and their bodies. Yet POWs have always been

mc

reluctant to complain or seek benefits. For many years, they were virtually invisible veterans to the VA and to Congress. Beginning with the greater publicity focused on the Vietnam POWs and the research findings of the National Academy of Science and other bodies, Congress and the VA began to correct this oversight.

POWs have no medical records for the time of their confinement until Congress began establishing POW presumptives, and now we have about 22 POW presumptives that can be--a POW can get disability for.

It was extremely difficult for an individual POW to prove health problems were related to captivity. The meaning of a POW presumptive is simply that you have--the condition is presumed to be causally related to captivity. These presumptives have been a godsend for POWs. But the problem today, POWs are now dying at a very high rate. There are only 20,000 POWs still alive out of 140,000 captured in World War II to the present. Despite solid research documentation, two medical conditions, osteoporosis and diabetes, have not yet been acted upon by Congress. "Low priority for funding," "no factual evidence" were the reasons given by the Congress--inaction last year,

mc

the year before and so on. So, today, there is very little time left to help POWs with these health problems--clearly, the conscience of the American people would support anything warranted. Isn't it time for Congress to act? Supporting these proposed presumptives is clearly justified and should have top priority. The current cost would be minimal due to the diminishing members of POWs still alive who might have these two medical problems. Also, only a small portion are likely to seek these benefits or they are already rated at 100 percent disability due to other problems. There would be no additional funds. We are again urging Congress to act now on these two long-delayed presumptives. Will POWs who need this help be sacrificed for other priorities again this year?

In closing, I would urge each of you to become cosponsors of the bill introduced on the Hill by Representative Gus Bilirakis, Republican from Florida, H.R. 1197, and Senator Patty Murray, Democrat from Washington, introduced S. 848. Also, the continuing medical media publicity given to the deficiencies in follow-up care for returning disabled veterans is a border call for additional action for your Committees and the specified requests from

mc

veterans service organizations. We support wholeheartedly all efforts to give the surviving spouse of a military retiree the right to receive both SBP and DIC. The SBP has been paid for. The DIC is payable because the military retiree was rated for service-connected disability. We have worked to assure that military retirees can receive both retirement pay and compensation from the service-connected disability. The surviving spouse deserves the same consideration.

Thank you very much.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Fletcher follows:]



mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Commander. Your personal experiences show how much we owe to all of our veterans in this Nation and what we must do.

Mr. Fletcher. Thank you.

Mr. Filner. Another way of saying that we ought to have presumptions is to say the VA should be an advocate, not an adversary.

Mr. Fletcher. Yes.

Mr. Filner. And that is what we need to have happen.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. And the motto of all of us up here in regard to the SBP and DIC and other things is: "No offsets." That is our motto.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. The National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, Tom Poulter, thank you again for being here, sir.

mc

STATEMENT OF TOM POULTER, NATIONAL COMMANDER,  
MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

Mr. Poulter. Good morning, Chairman Filner, Members of the Committee, ladies and gentlemen. I am Tom Poulter, National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. It is an honor to appear before this distinguished body on behalf of the members of our Order.

The Military Order of the Purple Heart is unique among veterans service organization in that our membership is comprised entirely of combat-wounded veterans who have shed their blood on the battlefields of the world while serving America in uniform. For their sacrifices they were awarded the Purple Heart Medal. I am accompanied today by Senior Vice Commander Henry Cook, National Adjutant Joe Palagyi, National Service Director Jack Leonard, National Legislative Director Hershel Gober, and National Marketing Director Bill Bacon. Also joining us is the National President of the MOPH Ladies Auxiliary, Mrs. Nancy Lee Birschbach.

Your Committees are extremely important to the Military Order of the Purple Heart and our members. We look to you to represent the veterans of our country and to

mc

ensure that all Members of Congress understand that America must keep its promises to those men and women who have served and are now serving in uniform if we are to maintain a strong military and continue to enjoy the freedoms that we have. Veterans have earned their entitlements and benefits. This is especially true of our combat-wounded members in our Order.

My written testimony today includes 16 legislative initiatives that we support. In the time allotted to me, I will cover only six of those initiatives. I will be as brief as possible, but I request that my full testimony be entered into the record.

The number one priority: Adequate assured funding for VA Health Administration, and I will not go into detail on that because I am the fourth consecutive National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart to present that as our number one priority.

The VA must have the capability to meet their needs. Although our Order is pleased that Congress has in previous sessions enacted legislation that authorizes some military retirees to concurrently receive both full military retired pay and any VA compensation to which they are entitled, it

mc

is now time for Congress to do the right thing and correct the horrible wrong so that all those that are eligible for concurrent receipt would receive it. So we support the Retired Pay Restoration Act. MOPH supports S. 439, H.R. 303, H.R. 89, and H.R. 1436. We ultimately favor H.R. 333 and H.R. 1436 because they cover those combat-wounded, Chapter 61, medically retired veterans with less than 20 years of service, many of which make up our membership.

My third item deals with the inequities that exist in the Survivor Benefit Plan, SBP, and the offset of the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, DIC. S. 935 and H.R. 1589 were recently introduced to end the deduction of VA survivor benefits under DIC from the SBP annuity paid by the Department of Defense and to accelerate the effective date for the paid-up status for retirees to the date of October 1, 2007, for those who paid up SBP premiums for 30 years and attained the age of 70. This has been addressed in H.R. 784, and we are seeking cosponsors for this bill.

The next item concerns our MOPH Federal Charter amendment. The Military Order of the Purple Heart was chartered by the 85th Congress in 1958, Public Law 85-761. This charter allowed for associate membership of lineal

mc

descendants. That would be fathers, sons, and grandsons. With the current ongoing conflicts, we are generating many female Purple Heart recipients who are becoming members of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. The problem that we face is what do we do with the spouses of our female patriots. Their numbers are small enough that a Men's Auxiliary is pretty much out of the question, and certainly they cannot join our Ladies Auxiliary, where our wives, mothers, and daughters belong. Legislation has been introduced, and S. 743 has passed the Senate and has been referred to the House. S. 743 would amend the Federal Charter for MOPH that would permit the Order to offer associate memberships to the male spouses of our female patriot members.

There has been legislation also introduced in the House, H.R. 1027, 1119, and 841, which have been referred to the House Judiciary Committee. MOPH supports all legislation that would accomplish our goal, and we urge the House to pass this legislation.

This year marks--this is our Diamond Jubilee. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Purple Heart Medal and the organization of the Military Order of the Purple

mc

Heart. House Concurrent Resolution 49 recognizes this 75th anniversary, and it further recognizes that it is also the 225th anniversary of the Badge of Military Merit, which was the predecessor of the Purple Heart medal, created by General George Washington on August 7, 1782. MOPH requests that Members of the Committee support this legislation.

Our final request concerns the Purple Heart stamp. In 2003, the U.S. Postal Service issued the 37-cent Purple Heart stamp. On May 26th of 2006, this last May, the stamp was reissued as a 39-cent stamp and, unfortunately, will just become history in less than 1 year when postage rates are increased to 41 cents on May 14th. In the words of our Past National Commander Jim Randles, he stated last May at the 2006 reissuance ceremony, "The American flag is the symbol of our freedom. The Purple Heart stamp shows the cost of that freedom."

It is important that with our ongoing conflicts and numerous members of the military being awarded the Purple Heart Medal for wounds received while engaged in combat with the enemy, the stamp should be made permanent with no monetary denomination. We request that your Committee take the leadership on this issue and everything that you can do

mc

to persuade the Postmaster General of the U.S. Postal Service to make the Purple Heart stamp a permanent forever stamp, just as the recently unveiled Liberty Bell stamp is. Yes, our national flag and the Liberty Bell stand for freedom. Let the Purple Heart stamp stand for the cost of that freedom forever.

In closing, MOPH is in support of any legislation that would assist our brave men and women in uniform and the conflicts that they are engaged in. Nothing is too good for them, and this country must provide the equipment, weapons, and all the other items that they require. Congress must also realize that when the fighting ends, these veterans will still require much medical treatment and benefits to help them continue through their lives. It was our Founder General George Washington who said that the willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by our Nation.

Thank you, Members of the Committee. MOPH looks forward to working with you in any way that we can to assist our uniform military and the veterans and our

mc

country. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony, and I will be pleased to answer any of your questions.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Poulter follows:]



mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Commander.

The National President of the Fleet Reserve Association, Jerry Sweeney, is next. Thank you, sir, for being here.

mc

STATEMENT OF JERRY L. SWEENEY, NATIONAL  
PRESIDENT, FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION

Mr. Sweeney. Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of both Committees. I thank you for this opportunity to present the FRA's Fiscal Year 2008 legislative goals. My name is Jerry L. Sweeney, and I am the National President of the FRA.

An overriding FRA priority is ensuring that the wounded troops and their families and the survivors of those killed in action are cared for by a grateful Nation. The Association views revelations about the conditions at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center with deep concern and believes DOD and the Department of Veterans Affairs must improve the process of working together to ensure access standards and a seamless transition for the wounded personnel.

Unfortunately, the problems they are encountering are not new. The VA has problems assessing servicemembers real-time medical data, and delays in sharing data can be critical to the rehab and recovery. A continuous clinical record of transfers and case management for seriously injured patients as they progress through both health care

mc

systems is urgently needed. FRA supports the Wounded Warriors Assistance Act and thank you, Chairman Filner, for sponsoring the Returning Servicemember VA Health Care Insurance Act.

The proposed 2008 VA budget provides an increase over last year, but will likely be inadequate for the increasing demands of the services. The request is \$4 billion short, according to the Independent Budget, and FRA questions why the number of claims is assumed to remain about the same as last year, despite a troop surge in Iraq and other ongoing operations and an aging veterans population.

As indicated in a 2005 health care funding emergency and the Walter Reed situation, during a time of war there are significant numbers of new patients, and with rising health care costs, FRA is perplexed at the lack of planning and foresight regarding the numbers of anticipate wounded personnel and believes that the budget proposal is inadequate to meet the care needs of the growing number of veterans eligible to seek VA services.

FRA strongly opposes the plan to impose a tiered enrollment fee for the 1.3 million veterans in Priority Groups 7 and 8. The Administration's request also includes

mc

a recommendation to nearly double prescription drug copayments, a plan that FRA also opposes.

More funding is needed for medical research and for the needs of disabled veterans. The value of both programs within the veterans community cannot be overstated. FRA believes a \$2 million reduction in the 2008 VA budget for medical and prosthetic research is unacceptable.

Disability claims have become more complex and increased more than 38 percent in recent years, due in part to post-traumatic stress disorder. The Veterans Benefits Administration has a backlog of 400,000-plus claims and in 2006 an average processing time was 177 days. The claims backlog continues, and the VBA has been unable to gain any ground on this.

The MGIB is important. Double-digit inflation is diminishing the value of MGIB, and the benefits fall short of the cost of a 4-year public college or university. MGIB objectives for mobilized Guard and Reserve forces are not being achieved. Thousands of senior enlisted personnel who entered military service during the VEAP era do not have the opportunity to enroll in MGIB, and FRA urges adoption of an open enrollment period for those personnel.

mc

FRA supports the authorization of VA Medicare subvention whereby funds would be recovered from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for care provided to eligible veterans. FRA continues to advocate for full concurrent receipt of military retired pay and veterans' disability compensation, accelerating the effective paid-up SBP date, and reform the Uniformed Services Former Spouse Protection Act.

Mr. Chairman, in closing, allow me to again express the sincere appreciation of the association's membership for all that you and the Members of both the House and the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees and your staffs do for our Nation's veterans. Thank you.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Sweeney follows:]

mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Mr. President. We will try to clarify it after the testimony, but I think many of the defects that you mentioned in the budget were in the President's submittal. The House is taking up its budget today, and we remedy almost every one of those things that you mentioned. So we appreciate that.

Mr. Sweeney. And we appreciate your service as well.

Mr. Filner. And your point about the increased burden on the system, in the first statistics I have seen, we have now 700,000 veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. Of those, 180,000 claims were filed. That is an incredible statistic. If it continues, we are going to need far more resources. You are right, sir.

The National President of the Retired Enlisted Association, Mr. Patrick Corbett.

mc

STATEMENT OF PATRICK CORBETT, GYSGT., USMC  
(RET.), NATIONAL PRESIDENT, THE RETIRED ENLISTED  
ASSOCIATION

Mr. Corbett. Chairman Akaka, Chairman Filner, Ranking Members Craig and Buyer, and distinguished Members of this Committee, I am Patrick Corbett, the National President of the Retired Enlisted Association. It is an honor to appear before you today and have the opportunity to tell you of the concerns of the enlisted men and women who are now serving or have served in America's military. I would like my full written statement to be made part of the record.

I first wish to tell you how pleased TREA and other VSOs are that these joint hearings have been re-established. We have always believed that the sharing of views has been very helpful. I also wish to state how pleased we are that Chairman Akaka was able to get a \$2.7 billion increase in the Administration request for VA health care in the Fiscal Year 2008 budget resolution. We are hopeful that the House resolution, which we understand is going to be voted on today, will be similarly helpful. I assure you that TREA members realize there is a great deal of work in getting a resolution turned into an

mc

appropriation, and we intend to help you in any way we can.

TREA is a veteran service organization founded over 40 years ago to represent the issues and points of view of enlisted men and women who have chosen to dedicate a career to serving in the active-duty military, the National Guard and Reserves, as well as their families and survivors. In the few minutes I have, I need to speak to you about what we believe is the single most critical issue the Department of Veterans Affairs is facing today.

As anyone reading and watching the news knows, the American public has grown understandably worried about the care of our wounded warriors are receiving when they return home from Iraq and Afghanistan. While most of the problems that we know of are centered at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, it is clear that the responsibility of caring for these men and women when they leave the military is already straining the systems at the VA to a breaking point. As more veterans are coming every day, now is the time that we should strengthen and improve the VA before the system crashes under the weight of its present and future responsibilities.

TREA believes that the most critical problem facing



mc

the VA today is the huge backlog and ongoing delays in deciding disability claims and appeals. According to the GAO's latest study, in Fiscal Year 2006 it was taking an average of 127 days for the VA to decide an initial compensation claim and a startling 657 days to decide an average rating appeal. That is 4 months to make the initial determination and a year and 10 months for a rating appeal. And we are sure it is longer today. This is far too long.

In Fiscal Year 2006, 806,000 rating-related claims were filed at the VA. Between Fiscal Year 2003 and Fiscal Year 2006, the backlog of cases grew almost 50 percent to 378,000. These numbers are staggering and continuing to grow.

Because of the improvement in battlefield medicine, our troops are suffering the lowest death rate in the history of warfare. But with that blessing comes the fact that more and more of our veterans are coming home with serious multiple-injury conditions. These claims will necessarily be more complicated and harder to decide. This is a situation that must be quickly corrected. The first thing that needs to be done is to hire more staff. The

mc

administrative budget request of the VA Fiscal Year 2008, they asked for funding for 450 new positions to process these claims. The House's supplemental included money for 757 new positions. We do not believe even that is enough. But this is one issue that hopefully both sides of the aisle recognize is a problem that must be fixed immediately.

The next thing that should be done is to provide the standards and training necessary to ensure that the decisions, when made, are correct and consistent across the United States. The VA must develop and present continuous training for all employees working on compensation and pensions. They must give the training consistently and regularly throughout the year. And they must make sure that standards and training are the same across their VISNs.

We are well aware that the VA has been working on this issue for years, and we know they have made substantial improvements. But this is a critical time. TREA believes that this single improvement is a process that the VA completely controls and would greatly help our returning veterans transition from military to veteran status. It

mc

would also greatly help older veterans who are lingering for years in the system. This is a correction that they alone can make. It is time that is done.

I thank you for your time and interest and would be happy to try to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Corbett follows:]

mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Mr. President.

Representing the Gold Star Wives of America, the Chair  
of the Government Relations Committee, Rose Lee.

mc

STATEMENT OF ROSE ELIZABETH LEE, CHAIR,  
GOVERNMENT RELATIONS COMMITTEE, GOLD STAR WIVES  
OF AMERICA, INC.

Ms. Lee. Thank you, Chairman Filner and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees. I thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of all Gold Star Wives to present our legislative agenda for this year. My name is Rose Lee. I am a widow and the Chair of the Gold Star Wives Committee on Government Relations. I am happy to say that in the audience are several members of Gold Star Wives, including our Board Chair, Martha Didamo, who is from Nebraska.

The Gold Star Wives of America was founded in 1945, and it is a congressionally chartered service organization comprised of surviving spouses of military servicemembers who died while on active duty or as a result of a service-connected disability. Thank you for your continued support of programs that directly support the well-being of our servicemembers, widows, and their families.

Having said that, however, we are gravely disappointed that some issues we have had pending before the Congress for years, and that means a great deal to the quality of

mc

life of many of the membership of the Gold Star Wives have languished without passage. We simply request equity for our survivors. Here are the shortfalls in law that need correcting.

SBP/DIC Offset, Issue Number 1. Gold Star Wives of America has no greater priority than to eliminate the offset to the SBP, Survivors Benefit Plan, dollar for dollar by the amount of the DIC, Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, stipend. Yes, we are here before you yet again with this inequity. We believe in one death, one benefit. We ask with all respect that this be your high priority for survivors. In essence, a survivor's DIC results in voiding or reducing the benefit that the servicemember purchased--the SBP. This is simply wrong. All we are seeking is to assure that SBP annuities for survivors of 100 percent disabled military retirees and those killed on active duty following September 11th will not be reduced by the amount of DIC to which they are separately entitled. We have attached to our written testimony a copy of our recent statement before the Veterans Disability Benefits Commission, which has detailed history and justification for the repeal of the current

mc

inequitable law. We also seek repeal of all sections in Title 38 that require the widow's voluntary waiver of SBP in order to reserve the tax-free DIC. And I wish now to thank all the VSOs for supporting this issue, the SBP/DIC offset.

Second, we urge decreasing the remarriage age for retention of survivors' benefits to age 55. The current public law permits surviving spouses who remarry after reaching age 57 to retain their VA survivor benefits. Other Federal agencies use age 55. We seek equity with them. Current DIC is set at \$1,067 monthly, which is only 41 percent of the disabled retiree's compensation paid by the VA. Survivors of Federal workers have their monthly annuity set at 55 percent of the disabled retiree's compensation. We seek to raise DIC payments to 55 percent of the current 100 percent VA disability compensation. That would improve the DIC payment to \$1,359 monthly. As you can see, we are simply seeking fairness across the Government to modestly help deserving survivors.

The additional monthly \$250 child DIC payment per family only applies to survivors of deaths after January 1, 2005. This should be linked to October 7, 2001. It makes

mc

no sense that the survivors of those who died first should be prohibited from accessing a benefit given to survivors of those who died later in the same war. The lack of a COLA has dropped the value of the allowance to about \$227 this year. We request assurance that these inequities be corrected.

We also seek to provide a dental plan to beneficiaries of CHAMPVA, the VA's Civilian Health and Medical Program. We believe that the TRICARE dental program for military retirees provides a good model.

There are other issues that need attending that are in our written testimony.

In conclusion, we want neither our widows nor their children to be forgotten. Again, our priority is for the repeal of the offset to the SBP of the DIC for all widows. Our widows often talk about this being a sorority no one rushes to join. We ask you again to show the spirit of this Nation by not forgetting these widows and children whose numbers, unfortunately, grow daily.

I thank you for opening up this opportunity to hear us again and allow for further awareness of issues facing survivors daily. We will be happy to continue to work with



mc

you and devote our time and resources on all issues  
impacting survivors.

Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Ms. Lee follows:]

mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you. Very fair requests.

The Deputy Director for Government Relations of the  
Military Officers Association of America, Colonel Ana  
Smythe (Retired).

mc

STATEMENT OF COLONEL ANA R. SMYTHE, USMC (RET.),  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, MILITARY  
OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Colonel Smythe. Thank you, Chairman Filner, for the opportunity to testify before your Committee today on behalf of the 362,000 members of the Military Officers Association of America. Today I am going to focus my remarks on three issues.

First, VA funding, which has obviously been mentioned by everyone else at the table today. MOAA is deeply grateful to the Committees for their staunch support of our returning servicemembers' and our older veterans' needs, as reflected in your respective Committees' recommendations on the VA budget for Fiscal Year 2008. MOAA is particularly grateful that your Committees recognize that rising demand for VA care for our returning Iraq and Afghanistan servicemembers and have recommended substantial additional resources for mental health care services and providers. We are a long way from getting our arms around this issue, and it is going to take a coordinated joint effort to win the battle now and in the future.

State-of-the-art prosthetics, a reality that has yet

mc

to be realized by all our returning veterans in need. VA polytrauma centers do a fantastic job, but need to be fully funded to ensure that staffing of the right professionals is matched to the demand in order to meet the ever-increasing needs at those facilities.

And, finally, traumatic brain injury treatment and rehabilitation. I truly believe we have only scratched the surface on what the demand for long-term care will be in the future--a fact that was driven home by Mrs. Mettie's testimony before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee on Tuesday, and the numerous servicemembers and their families I have spoken to personally when in command and now since retirement about their experiences in both DOD and VA treatment facilities, and perhaps more telling, the gaps in that care.

We also appreciate the fact that you have asked for extra funding for the overwhelmed VA disability claims system of which also many of us have spoken.

My second issue is really an extension of the first. MOAA has been a strong voice for many years for making seamless transition a reality, not just a buzz word. We need to stop talking about seamless transition and get down

mc

to brass tacks and make it happen. Going into the fifth year of the war on terror and two decades of earlier failed efforts, it is abundantly clear that DOD and the VA can't or won't make seamless transition a reality, at least at a pace that satisfies the needs of our wounded warriors and their families. That is why MOAA is recommending a new approach to seamless transition. My prepared statement goes into greater detail, but here is the gist of the concept.

MOAA envisions that Congress must create a separate joint transition agency or office that would implement seamless transition initiatives. This office would be staffed with full-time DOD and VA professionals charged with the mission of doing the following:

Creating a real-time, bidirectional electronic medical record, one medical record from start to finish. As Senator Burr referred to so insistently in Tuesday's hearing, it is critical we accomplish this goal, in my opinion long before the 2012 date DOD and VA have proposed.

A single separation physical, which would go far in streamlining and facilitating this transition process.

Better coordination of policies and procedures for

mc

rating disabilities in the service and in the VA.

And other related tasks, to include perhaps oversight of a patient advocate program where a single advocate stays with the patient from injury through DOD into VA and beyond, perhaps OIF/OEF veterans trained to understand both Departments' systems, and help the families and the members traverse those systems. This JTO would receive high-level guidance from the DOD/VA Joint Executive Committee, the JEC, that Congress established a few years ago. We would expect that Congress would require the JTO to testify periodically and to report annually to the Veterans' Affairs Committees and the Armed Services Committees on its progress and its concerns. The Nation provides billions of dollars for the cost of this war. Now we need to invest in those who have borne the cost of war--our warriors--and develop a world-class transition system that will prove to be a cost-saving efficiency.

Walter Reed, for all of its truly exceptional care-- and I believe that with all my heart; the care they provide is exceptional. But, still, the incident with Walter Reed proves we are far from realizing this goal, and we believe a new approach is necessary. The key is establishing a

mc

joint organizational structure to take on this mission as a full-time job. If seamless transition is to be taken seriously as a national priority, we must make it more than someone's additional duty or part-time job.

Third, and finally, Mr. Chairman, MOAA strongly supports a total force GI Bill for 21st century, a Montgomery GI Bill that matches education and training benefits to the service and sacrifice of our troops. I will close by saying that the only veterans' benefit denied our returning Guard and Reserve veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan is a readjustment benefit under the MGIB. The question is: Does Congress regard them as veterans or not? If we all agree that they are veterans, then they must be given a readjustment benefit under the MGIB. If more can be done this year, that would be wonderful, but this is an essential first step towards creating a GI Bill that matches benefits to service.

I would be happy to take any questions.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Colonel Smythe follows:]

mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you, and thank you for those very creative ideas that we will certainly look at.

The President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, Mr. John Garcia.



mc

STATEMENT OF GEORGE P. BASHER, PAST PRESIDENT,  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF  
VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Basher. Mr. Chairman, good morning, and Members of the Committee. My name is George Basher. I am Director of the New York State Division of Veterans Affairs representing John Garcia, who is our Association President and is unable to attend. Our written testimony from our President we have submitted for the record, but what I would like to do is just address some of what I consider to be the high points and things that we are most concerned about.

Members of the Committee, States are the second largest provider of services to veterans. This year States will spend nearly \$4 billion of their own money for services supporting veterans. We partner very closely with the Federal Government in order to best serve our veterans, and as partners, we are continuously striving to be more efficient in delivering services to veterans. We appreciate the leadership of the Committees for the levels of funding that have been granted to the Department of Veterans Affairs, and we think that with the increased

mc

demand on certain benefits and certain services, we will stand ready to work with you on this.

Under the auspices of Veterans Health Benefits and Services, in long-term care States are the largest providers of long-term care for veterans. We provide a little over half of all the long-term care beds for veterans in the country under the State Veteran Nursing Home Program. We strongly support the continuation of the State Home Construction Grant Program and make sure that we preserve that asset of over 124 homes in 48 States. And we would also like to continue partnering with the Congress and with the Department of Veterans Affairs in determining how long-range care can best be delivered and whether it is through an entire continuum or we continue the current process. But we stand ready to work with you on that.

We support the creation of additional community-based outpatient clinics where the need is greatest in those States that do not have them. It is clear from experience that access is something that greatly increases the utility of the VA health care system and people who use it.

Nearly 20 percent of New York's veterans use the VA health care system, and that is because there is a wide,

mc

wide network of community-based outpatient clinics to make that access available. There is nothing that works better.

We would like to see an increase in the per diem payment for State veteran nursing homes. Traditionally, the reimbursement rate has run around 33 percent of the average daily cost of care nationally. We would like to see that worked up towards 50 percent, but recognizing that the other 50 percent is something that is shouldered by the States or by the veterans themselves.

We support Medicare subvention for VA. We think that is a cost-effective idea, and if you look at the number of veterans who are using Medicare and Medicaid who are also eligible for the VA health care system, clearly we have got three insurance systems in place, and we only need one. We are paying too much money for this service, and States stand ready to work with you to work on these issues and find a better way to do this.

On issues of compensation and pension, there are nearly 4,000 employees of State and local government who work in the veterans service area, many of whom are accredited by the Department of Veterans Affairs to prosecute claims. We need to work with VA in finding a way

mc

to better integrate that 4,000-person workforce into the 8,500 people who work for VBA and do claims. Those service officers in the field, whether they work for States or work for counties or work for the veterans service organizations, do the front end of this work, and they do the brunt of it. They can do most of that development, and we should let VBA do what they are really required to do, and that is, determine service connection and then write the check, and let us do some of the rest of it, take that burden off. We think this could go a long way to reducing the amount of backlog that exists over at VBA.

When it comes to the area of education, States also operate the State approving agencies for the Montgomery GI Bill program, and we collectively approve every school program, every OJT program, every apprenticeship program throughout the country, and we strongly support the creation of a total force GI Bill that reduces and eliminates the inequities between the Guard and Reserve and active-duty troops. And we think this is something that is long overdue, given the current configuration of the force.

One of the other issues that we are deeply involved in is homelessness, and homelessness amongst veterans. You

mc

know, when a veteran falls between the cracks, whether it is through DOD's fault or whether it is through the Department of Veterans Affairs' fault--and maybe "fault" is not the appropriate word, but that veteran is always caught by State and local government. At the end of the chain, we are providing the service, and we want to make sure, whether it is homelessness or health care or behavioral health or long-term care, that we are doing this in the best possible concert with the Department of Veterans Affairs. We would support looking at other ways--and I had the pleasure and honor of serving as the Chair of the Secretary's Advisory Committee for Homeless Vets, and one of the things that we are taking a strong look at now is recommending that VA look at not just transitional housing but also providing funding for services for permanent supportive housing for homeless vets where required. We think this is a good idea. We think it is an idea whose time has come, and the States support that.

We would also like to see in the burial and memorial affairs an increase in the plot allowance to State veteran cemeteries. There are State veteran cemeteries in all but about five States right now in this country, and it is a

mc

terrific supplement to the National Cemetery Administration program. So we would like to have Congress take another look at that.

Mr. Chairman, my time is up. I thank you for your indulgence and the opportunity to testify before you, and I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Basher follows:]

mc

Mr. Filner. Thank you. And thanks to all of you. Your testimony was very eloquent, and we intend to take it very, very seriously.

You met several of our Members who are working so hard for veterans. I would like to introduce the highest-ranking enlisted man ever to serve in the Congress, and that is the gentleman from Minnesota, Command Sergeant Major Tim Walz.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. If you would like to make a statement.

STATEMENT OF HON. TIMOTHY J. WALZ, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE FROM MINNESOTA

Mr. Walz. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to each of you for being here. It is a humbling experience. I am glad to see that it is standing room only, but I can tell you that I am a little uncomfortable sitting when members wearing Purple Hearts are standing. It is good to have you all here, though, and I said we invited you to the table figuratively to have a part in what we need to do for veterans. We should have invited you literally and made sure you got a chair to sit on while you are here.

mc

But I am very pleased to be here. As the Chairman said, I am honored to have served 24 years in the Army National Guard, retiring as a Command Sergeant Major. That is our gunner sitting at the table there.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here, and what I have to say on this is that I sat where you were as a veterans service organization and spent many years making sure that people who were sitting up here were listening and making sure that they understood. That Independent Budget is not just an exercise in futility. This is the gold standard for what needs to be done to take care of our veterans. A lot of thought, a lot of time, a lot of energy, and a lot of expertise went into that piece of work, and the things you bring us today are what need to get done.

When we create a budget and the one that we will pass this afternoon, this Chairman is going to have the distinction of adding the single biggest input to veterans' care in the history of the VA. We are going to approach for the first time what needs to be done for our veterans, and when I say "approach," we are just getting started. There are inequities, and you have spoken eloquently about



mc

them. You have spoken about gaps that need to be fixed. And I can tell you, I did not come here to hear the same old line: "Oh, we have always told veterans we would take care of them, and we never did." That time is over. The time in this Congress is--

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. That document, that budget document that is voted on this afternoon, is a moral document. That document is a reflection of this Nation's values, and if that document does not provide the coverage that is adequate for our wounded warriors who are providing our freedom, it is a lack of our moral conviction to get it done. So when there is a vote this afternoon, a yes vote on that document will show that. And I do not care and there is no place in this debate for political ideology. We have seen far, far too many people that want to stand in front of soldiers, but that does us nothing. Standing behind them for the entire time they serve and when they come home and through their life and with their families, with their children, is what this Nation has to do. It is an absolute moral imperative. It is an absolute national security imperative. This Nation can do nothing less.

mc

So I can tell you that serving on this is something that--is the proudest moment for me. And I say that I am always pleased when the Chairman introduces me as the Command Sergeant Major, not from my own personal achievement but to understand what that position meant. Everyone in this room understands that my sole purpose in life was to take care of those soldiers, and that has not changed. So I said I think the highest compliment I have ever received in my life was when a veteran, a World War II veteran came up to me and said, "It is about damn time they got a Sergeant Major in Congress."

[Laughter/applause.]

Mr. Walz. So I thank you for that. I can tell you this Committee is 100 percent committed. I have never seen anything like this, and I have talked to people who have been coming here on this, and we are listening, we are taking your advice, we are enacting it, and we are fighting for this. And I do not care about the politics in this for one second. What I care about is let's get it right this time. The Nation is with us. They are ready to do this. They are ready to do whatever is necessary to sacrifice to get it done. So I think that the Colonel made a good--

mc

Colonel Smythe. Let's just quit the talk. It is brass tacks time to get it done. So thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. Thank you. You can see why this Committee has become so aggressive. Thank you, Mr. Walz.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Filner. Another new Member who has helped us a great deal is the Chairman of our Investigations and Oversight Committee, the gentleman from Arizona, Mr. Mitchell.

STATEMENT OF HON. HARRY E. MITCHELL, U.S. REPRESENTATIVE  
FROM ARIZONA

Mr. Mitchell. Thank you very much. And I do appreciate you being here, listening to all the testimony--

Mr. Filner. Is your mike on? There is a little button there.

Mr. Mitchell. Thank you. I appreciate all of you being here. This is the second hearing of this type that we have had. I appreciated very much to get down to the people who really are affected. I cannot talk as eloquently as Mr. Walz, but let me tell you, we are in here to do what we can do to help you. And the best thing that

mc

you can do for us--I think it has been said many times before. There is an old story by FDR that there were a number of people that came to his office one time to convince him on a particular issue. And before they left, he said to them, "You convinced me. Now go put the heat on me." And that is what is great about what you are doing. It is not just here, but it is talking to your individual Congressmen, your individual Senators, and putting the heat on them, because that makes our job much easier.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Michaud, you are recognized for any questions, and after you we will recognize the great Chairman of the Senate Committee, Mr. Akaka.

[Applause.]

Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I know we have votes coming up shortly, so I will be extremely brief.

I want to once again thank you all for coming and giving your testimony. It is definitely encouraging to see that not only are you asking for additional money, which we

mc

have to give you, but you are also bringing forward ideas, as the Colonel had mentioned, on how we can actually improve the system with the resources that we do give the VA. We really appreciate it. And as Congressman Walz mentioned, we have had studies all too often. The seamless transition, the Presidential task force made its report back in 2003. We know what has to be done. Now we just have to act and make sure that we get it done.

I agree with a lot of the comments that were made this morning, but I also want to--even though we do have a good, robust budget, that is the first part of the process. Now we have got to make sure we actually adequately fund the budget that we will be voting on today. And I look forward to working with Chairman Filner as he aggressively moves forward and making sure that we do actually provide the adequate funding for our veterans.

So, once again, I thank each and every one of you for all that you do and continue the fight. I feel really good, very optimistic that in this upcoming Congress we will improve the way that we have been treating our veterans.

So, once again, thank you very much. God bless.

mc

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. Senator Akaka has come back to reclaim authority in this side of the aisle. When we talked about the budget earlier, it was the Senate budget that added \$6.6 billion to last year's budget that Mr. Akaka was so much a part of, and fortunately the House was able to follow the Senate and do the same thing. Thank you, Senator Akaka, for your leadership, and we return the chair to you.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DANIEL K. AKAKA, CHAIRMAN, U.S.  
SENATOR FROM HAWAII

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Chairman Filner. Thank you, Bob, for your leadership and for all you have done for the veterans of our country.

I wanted to apologize and say I was late because we just did what we call a "vote-a-rama." We started at 9:00 this morning, and we just had final passage of the supplemental bill that will help our cause. We will certainly help our troops, wherever they are.

Let me begin by saying aloha. I want to welcome all of you here today to this meeting. I am so glad we have been able to reinstate joint meetings like this with the

mc

veterans service organizations, and there is no question we are feeling the spirit that is there, and it is moving in the right direction. With your help, we can do even better. Since January we have done better, and we will continue to do that.

As Bob said, we have talked about the budget, and you know that last week the Senate did pass the budget and increased the funding for veterans above that of the Administration.

I want you to know that your input is very valuable to us in the work we do on behalf of our Nation's veterans. You are all very, very important to what we are trying to do here. All the organizations testifying before us today have proud traditions of working on behalf of those who have served in our Armed Forces. I want to thank each of you for all that you do to improve the lives of veterans.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to ensuring that we adequately fund VA so that the Department can furnish the necessary health care, rehabilitation, and compensation to those who have served. Anything less I feel is a breach of our obligation to those who wear and have worn our Nation's uniforms.

mc

Although VA is one of our Nation's top health care providers, many veterans are waiting far too long for primary and specialized care. Unfortunately, VA has not had adequate resources to meet the growing demand, and it continues to grow rapidly. In the budget process for the coming Fiscal Year, the Democratic Members of the Committee and Senator Sanders, who caucuses with us, recommended to the Senate Budget Committee in our Views and Estimates letter that VA receive an additional \$2.9 billion over the President's budget request for VA health care. I am very pleased that the Budget Committee was very responsive to the needs of our Nation's veterans and followed our recommendation in the Senate budget resolution, which was passed by the Senate last week.

I also remain concerned about VA's ability to provide benefits in a timely and accurate manner. The wait for benefits and adjudication is far too long. Now is the time for VA to hire and train staff to meet present and future demands on the system.

My majority colleagues and I recommended to the Budget Committee that VBA be authorized to spend an additional \$50 million for compensation staffing and training. In this



mc

area, too, the Budget Committee and the full Senate have provided additional funding. This is a step in the right direction, and for now it is quite a big step.

As Congress debates the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must ensure that VA is given the resources needed to carry out its vital missions, not only for our newest veterans and those Guard and Reserve members coming home from conflict, but for veterans of all wars.

I share in the commitment to ensure a seamless transition from military to civilian life for our newest generation of veterans. VA must work actively with both the Departments of Defense and Labor so that our newest veterans do not slip through the cracks. There is so much more work to be done in this area, and the Senate Committee will be holding more hearings on various aspects of the transition issue. The word that I get from the other body is our House Members as well, under Chairman Filner, have been working hard on that side as well.

Again, I want to thank all of the national leaders here with us today and the membership of all the participating organizations for your service, for your dedication to our Nation and its veterans. God bless you

mc

and God bless this great country of America.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Senator. Thank you for your leadership, and thank you for such a good, cooperative relationship between the House and the Senate as we proceed to do what the Nation has promised.

Mr. McNerney, you are recognized for any questions you may have.

Mr. McNerney. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is not very often that a freshman House Member gets to sit between two Chairmen, so I appreciate the opportunity.

[Laughter.]

Mr. McNerney. Your testimony was very informative. I have to say, Mr. Garcia, that I appreciate the degree to which the States are contributing to this big effort and this big undertaking to service our veterans. Thank you for your service.

I have a couple of questions. Mr. McGriff, have you had a chance to look at how the new budget proposals from the House will impact our veterans? And if you have, do you believe that that is going to be enough to meet our growing needs for the coming year or so?

mc

Mr. McGriff. Well, of course, only time is going to tell that because we do not know what the numbers are going to be coming out of this war that are going to impact the VA this year.

However, we think that those numbers are encouraging. We are still looking at our mantra that has been going on for a number of years for assured funding. That is the only way that we are going to guarantee that every veteran is served.

We are encouraged by the new budget. We thank you for the increase. But only time will tell if that is going to meet the needs because we do not know what the returning population is going to be back into the system. It is growing every year. They were surprised just a year and a half ago when they expected only 25,000 to 27,000 veterans to come into the system, and 105,000 came in. So if you have those kinds of surprises, then, no, the budget will not be enough.

We thank you for your increase, but we are continuing to urge for mandatory funding of the Veterans' Administration. We think the time has come to do that, and I think it is only what our veterans deserve, sir. Thank

mc

you.

[Applause.]

Mr. McNerney. Thank you for your answer.

Rose, I want to thank you for the list of inequities and for the work that you are doing for the Gold Star Moms. I am--Gold Star Wives. A blunder there.

[Laughter.]

Mr. McNerney. I am aware that the young wives are often intimidated by officers and by the VA system. What can we do to reach out to those young wives to make sure that they are aware of their benefits that are due to them?

Ms. Lee. Well, you know, sir, our young widows do have problems dealing with their casualty assistance officers, in the Marine Corps they are CACOs. Gold Star Wives sponsors a chat room for these young widows. A couple of others and myself are on that chat room to help monitor and answer questions concerning benefits and things of that sort to help them along.

I do not know what else could be done, but there has to be constant communication with them. Some of them are very intimidated, like you say, and they have not really reached out. It is us that has to reach to them. And I

mc

think it has to be an ongoing process all the time. We have new widows coming onto the chat room and others dropping off. They may just be taking sort of a recess, and then they may come back on. The older widows are helping some of the younger ones, which is very good, and I think they help each other more than they get help from the casualty assistance officers, which is unfortunate.

About once a month, I do send a list of the headquarters level casualty assistance officers' contact names, phone numbers and e-mails to the chat room so they have these contacts, but I find that some of them are not willing to really reach out to headquarters CAO. They have to wait for somebody to reach to them and answer their questions on the chat room. I do not know how else it could be handled, though.

Mr. McNerney. Okay. Thank you. I yield back.

Mr. Filner. Thank you. Thank you all for being here and for your tireless work on behalf of veterans.

You know, this whole country is ready to reach out and embrace the veterans, both those returning and those who have been here. We have to ask them, the President has to ask them: there is so much we can do as a Nation even

mc

without money.

I was visited by a group of college students yesterday who looked at the VA Web site and found it badly constructed in terms of friendly usage. They are going to take it as a project to redesign the Web site, and I am taking them over to meet Secretary Nicholson today. That is the kind of interest this whole country can be involved in. We all have to know what PTSD is. We all have to welcome, even like a Neighborhood Watch, the veterans that return and make sure people visit them.

I talked to another Congressman just yesterday about how might we bring in volunteers, even beyond what you have done as an organization. We have had a Peace Corps. We have had AmeriCorps. We have retired nurses and doctors and young people who can work as a Vet Corps, and maybe we need to mobilize people on behalf of all our veterans.

So thank you for your testimony. We will as Committees, I think, do a GI Bill for the 21st century, not only updating the benefits but getting the Reserve units in there.

[Applause.]

Mr. Filner. We will move along this seamless

mc

transition, and we had some very creative ideas today. We passed a bill in the House yesterday. That is a good first step. We will bring justice for our older veterans, even back to World War II where we have those who participated in atomic testing who were not told about the dangers and are still trying to prove to a system that their cancers are caused by that radiation.

We need to move from a VA that is a veterans adversary to one that is a veterans advocacy. We will clean up this benefits backlog. I think the budget allows for over 1,500, up to 2,000 new positions in that area. And our homeless vets, as was mentioned, we will try to help them.

We are energized, we are working hard, but as our Members said, you have to keep the heat on back home, make sure every Member is visited all the time. There are less than 100 House Members that have had military service out of 435. It is not that they are evil. They just do not know. I am in that situation. I was not a veteran. There is education that has to be done, and you are the best to do it. You have done it, and I know you will continue to do it. We thank you for your input today.

This hearing is adjourned.

mc

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 11:05 a.m., the Committee was  
adjourned.]