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JOINT HEARING TO RECEIVE
LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS
Tuesday, March 1, 2011
House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, D.C.
joint with the
United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, D.C.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2:09 a.m., in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Jeff Miller [chairman of the committee] presiding.

Present from House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs: Representatives Miller, Bilirakis, Stearns, Lamborn, Roe, Benishek, Buerkle, Denham, Flores, Huelskamp, Johnson, Runyan, Stutzman, Filner, Brown of Florida, Reyes, Michaud, Sanchez, Braley, McNerney, Donnelly, Walz, Barrow, and Carnahan.

Present from Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs: Senators Murray, Rockefeller, Akaka, Brown of Ohio, Webb, Tester, Begich, Sanders, Burr, Isakson, Wicker, Johanns, Brown of Massachusetts, Moran, and Boozman.

The *Chairman.* Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for coming. Welcome to the Cannon Caucus Room.

Senator Burr has to leave to go back over to the Senate side. He wants to make an introduction of the commander. Even though he was a graduate of a home county that I used to live in, Richard thinks he is from North Carolina now, so he is going to get the introduction.

Senator Burr, you are recognized for an introduction.

And then, Commander, it will come back to me and I will do an opening statement and then we will go to you.

Senator *Burr.* Mr. Chairman, I thank you for that and I thank you for accommodating the schedule.

And I thank you and Chairman Murray and the ranking members for their willingness to continue what I think is an important process and that is to hear from our veteran service organizations.

Having spent most of my time in the chairs that you are in up there looking at the witnesses down here, grimace and grin to some degree, I found out how uncomfortable this chair is and I sort of understand why they have got these difficult

looks on their face after they sit down here for hours.

But, Mr. Chairman, it is indeed an honor this afternoon to be here and it is a privilege to introduce to you the 2011 DAV national commander, Wallace "Wally" Tyson, from the great State of North Carolina.

For years, I have known Wally as a tireless and dedicated advocate for veterans in my State, but also veterans around the country. His selection by the DAV membership to be the national commander is no surprise to anybody that knows Wally.

He is a native of Tarboro, North Carolina, maybe had a brief stint in Florida before that, and a life member of the Cumberland County DAV chapter in Fayetteville, North Carolina, a proud military town.

After enlisting in the U.S. Army in 1972, Wally was assigned to various units including the 101st Airborne. He completed his service as a sergeant first class.

After his discharge, Wally joined the DAV and rose through the ranks from the local to the state to the national levels.

I can think of no stronger leader and no greater

advocate than Wally Tyson to represent the DAV during what I think are some challenging times.

Please, Mr. Chairman, allow me to proudly present to you my fellow North Carolinian, the 2011 DAV national commander, Wallace "Wally" Tyson.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Commander, welcome. We have a few opening statements that we would like to go ahead and make and then be prepared to receive your testimony this afternoon.

Oh, yeah, one little bit of housekeeping. We will do the chairman and the ranking and I would ask the other members if they would waive their opening statements for the commander to go ahead and make his remarks.

I am honored to be here today with so many DAV members, each an American hero in your own right. Each of you has sacrificed selflessly for your country and continue to give of yourself today through membership in DAV and their auxiliary.

On behalf of a grateful Nation, I thank you for your service and your time. A special welcome to the national

commander. I thank you for being here and I do look forward to hearing your testimony.

I would also like to recognize the DAV members that still call Florida their home, sir. We have several that came by from the first congressional district, Larry Kaiser and Brian Moore, and there are several others in the audience from Florida who came by to visit with me today. It was a pleasure to have an opportunity, albeit a short meeting, to talk with you about interests that pertain to DAV.

I am pleased to be joined by my colleagues from across the aisle including Ranking Member Filner, Members of both the House and the Senate VA Committees, and I particularly want to extend a warm welcome to Chairman Murray joining us this afternoon as the first female chair of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Madam Chairman, congratulations on your assignment to this most important post. I have long admired your dedication to our Nation's servicemembers and veterans. And it is my hope that we will work closely together to accomplish our mutual goal of caring for those who have borne

the battle.

One area where I know we all share a common interest is the implementation of the Caregiver Assistance Program required under Public Law 111-163. We worked hard with our friends in the Senate to get the bill to the President and it troubles me that the first public plan that the Administration put forth regarding this important program was three months overdue and met with serious concern from advocates and stakeholders alike.

Our Health Subcommittee will be holding a hearing next week on the implementation of the Caregiver Program to ensure that VA's plans are consistent with the intent of Congress and established in a timely manner to provide important support to those who need it as quickly as possible.

I know I speak for everybody up here today that I offer my commitment to get this right for their veterans and for their caregivers.

Commander Tyson, as more American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines and coasties return every day from fighting in the War on Terror, it is a comfort to know that DAV members nationwide stand ready to support them. At a

time of continuing conflict and great fiscal constraint, the services provided by great organizations like yours have never been more necessary.

Through DAV's National Service Program, veterans are offered professional benefits, counseling, and claims assistance at no cost. In addition, I am told that last year alone, DAV volunteers provided nearly 2.2 million hours of essential services to veterans in VA medical facilities and nearly 1.9 million hours driving veterans to and from VA medical appointments.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* With thousands of servicemembers and veterans in my district, I know firsthand how invaluable these services are to the veterans who need them and I am personally grateful for the services that you provide and the leadership you show in the veteran community.

And as your testimony states, there are significant challenges ahead for VA and for this committee, not the least of which is reforming the claims processing system and ensuring appropriate funding levels for veteran programs in a time of fiscal constraint.

Mr. Commander, I was pleased to see your testimony echoed my call for rigorous oversight to ensure that the tax dollars provided to VA are being effectively and efficiently used to improve veterans' lives. And in this endeavor, I stand with you wholeheartedly.

DAV's members were the boots on the ground in conflict and now the boots on the ground at VA. This Congress is going to need your expertise in identifying areas where VA can do better.

I want today's hearing to be the beginning of an open and ongoing conversation between us as partners in creating a better future for American veterans and their families.

Mr. Commander, I do look forward to starting that dialogue with your testimony this afternoon.

And with that, I yield to the chairwoman from the Senate VA Committee.

Madam Chairman.

Senator *Murray.* Thank you very much, Chairman Miller. Thank you for your kind words. And I, too, look forward to working with you on the many issues facing our veterans. And thank you for your long-time work on these really important

issues.

I am delighted to be here today to welcome the Disabled American Veterans and I am thrilled especially to extend my warmest welcome to those DAV members who have traveled all the way across the country from Washington State to join us today, Mike Reilly, Robby Reilly, Harold Weilly, Katherine Weilly, Ryan Neighbors, William Watkins, Frank Redding, and Bobby Redding. Thank you for all that you do.

And thank you to all the DAV members who have given so much to our country previously and continue to do so today. I really appreciate it and I know our Nation does as well.

Today, as the chairman said, is my first hearing as the chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and I am very excited and honored to be moving forward in meeting the big challenges our veterans and the VA face.

My gavel is new, but I am certainly not new to the struggles and sacrifices of our Nation's veterans. My father was a World War II disabled veteran who was awarded the Purple Heart for his wounds that he suffered during the invasion of Okinawa. He was one of the first soldiers into Okinawa and was wounded. And I know the sacrifice he and

many made.

After the war, he came home and like many of our veterans raised his family, ran a small business, and very rarely talked about his experiences and asked very little in return for the service he gave.

During college, I worked as an intern in the Seattle VA hospital during the Vietnam War with many young men and women who were my age at that time. And one of the many things I took away from that very important experience is the most important thing was understanding that we must not confuse our feelings about a war with how we respond to those who serve in a conflict.

When we send our young men and women into harm's way, we must be ready to take care of them when they return.

[Applause.]

Senator *Murray.* Too many forgot that during and after Vietnam and that must not ever happen again.

And, finally, over the last 16 years, I have been very proud to be a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee at a time when we have taken on a range of challenges from improving mental healthcare to fixing funding

shortfalls to preparing the VA for the influx of a new generation of veterans.

These personal and policy experiences have given me a very real understanding of the consequences of sending our servicemembers into combat and of the sacred obligation we have to care for those injured in service.

It is those experiences and the understanding I have gained on this committee that I plan to put to work on the barriers to care that we are facing today.

As many of you know and as the chairman just talked about, one of the things we are working on at this moment is to make sure that the new Caregivers Program is put in place quickly and as Congress intended.

When the caregivers bill, which my predecessor, Chairman Akaka, was a champion of, was voted on here in Congress, not a single no vote was cast against it. Yet, here we are now seeing delays and questions about who is eligible. That is unacceptable.

Once that program gets up and running in a manner consistent with the intent of Congress, we will be in a better position to think about ways to expand the benefits to

veterans of earlier wars. But we need to implement in the way Congress intended so we can move forward to that next step.

And I want to thank the DAV for their support and their work on the caregivers law and on so many other initiatives passed in the last Congress.

Caring for physical wounds is important, but mental health needs of servicemembers and veterans is critical as well.

[Applause.]

Senator *Murray.* I am glad that the DoD has begun some solid mental health efforts, but there seems to be far too little interaction with the VA and the decades of experience that the VA has under its belt.

I also have a strong and very personal interest in women veterans and in homeless veterans. I am very committed to doing more to end homelessness for veterans who live on our streets and preventing more veterans from returning and becoming homeless.

And the needs of women veterans are growing every single day. It is really vital that we provide these women with the

care and benefits that they have earned as well.

One of the overarching issues that we have to tackle is how VA handles claims for benefits. As we continue to work on this, some things have to be acknowledged at the outset. More veterans are filing claims and more are filing more complex claims. There is nothing that can be done to change that reality.

That said, we need to really focus our attention on solutions including viable IT support if we are to reach the shared goal of timely, accurate decisions on benefits claims. And I look forward to the DAV's participation and guidance in the months ahead as we work on that important and critical and ongoing challenge.

The dire need to help unemployed veterans to find job training resources and meaningful careers is also incredibly important to me. Veterans have the skills and the talents and the discipline to make vital contributions to workplaces, but they often find it very difficult to transfer those skills when they come home.

The number of veterans who are currently unemployed is unacceptable. More has to be done to give these men and

women the support they need to transition into the workplace.

[Applause.]

Senator *Murray.* As we begin the current Congress a decade into our troops serving in two combat theaters and in many other dangerous locations around the world, the concerns and the challenges are many.

Tomorrow I will be chairing a hearing on the VA budget and much of my work in the coming months as VA Committee chairman and as a member also of the Budget and Appropriations Committees will be centered on a good and fair budget for our veterans.

On balance and given that other agencies are facing budget cuts, the VA budget is a very good starting place from which to work.

Commander, I do want to take just a minute to acknowledge your Washington executive director, Dave Gorman. He recently announced his retirement plans. He is a service-connected disabled veteran from Vietnam and he has been a true champion for all of our Nation's veterans and their families. With more than 40 years of service at the DAV, Dave has played a key role in countless successes that have

strengthened benefits programs and the VA healthcare system.

And I particularly today wanted to recognize his leadership and advocacy for two historic new laws, the Veterans Healthcare Budget Reform and Transparency Act and the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 which I mentioned earlier.

On behalf of all of my colleagues, Dave, I want to thank you for your lifetime of service and for your legacy that will continue to aid and honor your fellow veterans for decades to come. Dave, thank you for your service.

[Applause.]

Senator *Murray.* With that, Mr. Chairman, we have a lot of work to do and I look forward to working with you and all of our colleagues to make sure our veterans get the care and support they need.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Senator.

Mr. Filner.

Mr. *Filner.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And welcome, Ms. Murray. As chair of the Senate Veterans' Committee, we look forward to working with you.

Welcome, Commander Tyson. Looking forward to your

testimony.

And, of course, we welcome all of you here today, especially those who come as far away as, I almost said Washington again, as California. So we thank the Californians.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* And Ms. Murray mentioned the contributions of Mr. Gorman. We rely on your Washington staff, Commander. They keep us well informed. They keep us abreast of things and they hold our feet to the fire.

And your staff's contributions and work on the Independent Budget is really vital to our work here because it gives us a point of reference from which to deal with the budget that comes from the President and the VA. This is a budget, as you say, by veterans for veterans. It has been my Bible since I have been in Congress.

I was proud to chair this committee for the last four years and every one of those four years that I was chair, we exceeded the Independent Budget. I am not sure we are going to be able to get there this time, but we are going to work toward it.

So thank you so much for this incredible amount of work that your people put so much effort into. So we are going to look at it very closely.

As Ms. Murray said, we are working on the budget. We begin to work on that. The last four years saw over a \$20 billion increase just in healthcare discretionary funding, close to an over two-thirds increase in the healthcare budget over the 2006 level.

So everybody is talking about cuts today, but we have put the VA on a basis that we are beginning to handle, you know, or provide the resources that we need to to meet the needs of our veterans.

And I will continue to throw this around because it is our marker. The President's budget has added almost \$2 billion over last year. And I think it is a good starting point. We are going to look at that very carefully. The efforts of the President and Mr. Shinseki to transform the VA into a 21st century remains unwavering and hopefully supported by the budget and one we will work to support.

I have always asked Mr. Shinseki to request what you need, but need what you request. And we are not going to

balance the budget, at least our votes are not going to balance the budget on the backs of veterans. That is for sure.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* So we are going to look very carefully at any cuts that are proposed. If they are reckless or ungrounded, we will oppose them. We also want the secretary to have a well-grounded budget proposal. He had some things in his budget that both the chair and I said we had to look at more carefully, funds that were not explicitly appropriated in any way. But we are going to look at that very carefully.

So I hope that when we look at the budget, our two committees that are represented here, that we make sure the Department of Veterans Affairs has all the funds it needs to provide the care and services that you all have earned and that we will look at, as Ms. Murray suggested, at mental healthcare which continually needs more support and support the secretary's move toward what he called a zero tolerance for homelessness within five years.

So with all the budget cuts, there should be no reason

why veterans and homeless should be in the same phrase together. These are our heroes and should be welcomed home and not be homeless.

So we will talk about the disability backlog which is an insult to our Nation's veterans as they have to wait and wait and wait for adjudication of claims that, you know, many times should be very obvious and at least given in some degree right away.

So we look forward to your testimony. We look forward to the continuing grass-roots support of your members around the country to make sure that all the Congress Members know what is going on and are fully informed.

Thank you, Mr. Commander.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Madam Chairman, I understand that Senator Boozman will be sitting in as the ranking member for Senator Burr and he is on his way, but we would like to go ahead and begin your testimony.

Commander Tyson, you are recognized and welcome, sir.

STATEMENT OF WALLACE E. "WALLY" TYSON, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS ACCOMPANIED BY GARRY J. AUGUSTINE,
NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; JOSEPH
A. VIOLANTE, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, DISABLED AMERICAN
VETERANS; DAVID W. GORMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WASHINGTON
HEADQUARTERS, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; ARTHUR H. WILSON,
NATIONAL ADJUTANT, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; MICHAEL J.
WALSH, NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE, DISABLED
AMERICAN VETERANS; SUSAN HENRY, NATIONAL COMMANDER, DISABLED
AMERICAN VETERANS AUXILIARY

Mr. *Tyson.* Thank you, sir.

I did not mean to start a state war by telling you I was
a graduate of Cloward High School.

I certainly want to thank Senator Burr. That was very
generous of him and I wish him the best where he is headed to
today.

Chairmen Murray and Miller, I want to congratulate both
of you on your leadership appointment to your respective
committees.

I also want to recognize former House committee Chairman, now the ranking member, Bob Filner. Thank you, sir.

I would like to extend a special aloha and thank you to the former chairman of the Senate Affairs Committee, Daniel Akaka.

I told him earlier, but it bears repeating, I want to extend a special sincere thank you to Senator Webb for his service to our Nation and his many contributions to improve the lives of veterans and their families and certainly wish him the best as he prepares to leave the Senate.

Thank you all for the historic achievements of the past four years.

Please allow me to introduce those seated at the table with me as well as some of our distinguished guests.

National adjutant, Art Wilson; executive directors Mark Burgess and David Gorman.

Mr. *Filner.* Mr. Commander, if I could just interrupt for a second. You should not have to be holding that button to get your mike working. Could I give you some help to see if that--

Mr. *Tyson.* There we go.

Mr. *Filner.* You got it? Okay.

Mr. *Tyson.* Thank you, sir.

Mr. *Filner.* Yes.

Mr. *Tyson.* Our service director, Gary Augustine; legislative director, Joe Violante; voluntary services director, Mike Walsh; our auxiliary national commander, Susan Henry of Tennessee; national adjutant, Judy Heslip; DAV national senior vice commander, Don Samuels of Tennessee; junior vice commanders, Larry Polzene of California, Mary Benzevenga of New Jersey, Joseph Johnston of Ohio; and Ron Vogli of South Carolina; national judge advocate, Mike Dobmier of North Dakota; immediate past national commander, Bobby Berrara of Texas; chaplain, the Reverend Charles Edwards from Texas; and the national chief of staff, Bobby Williams of North Carolina.

And let me also introduce Tyler Coke, a young man who is here today learning how democracy works.

Will the National Executive Committee please stand and be recognized.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* Will the members of the National Legislative Interim Committee please stand.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* And certainly they may be last but they are not least, the delegation from my great State of North Carolina.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* Madam and Mr. Chairman and Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees, on behalf of the more than one and a half million members of the Disabled American Veterans and its auxiliary, I am very honored to have this opportunity to testify before these committees today.

Madam and Mr. Chairman, since a copy of my written testimony will be made part of the record and because there are so many new Members of this committee, I would like to use this time to share a bit more about the DAV, who we are, what we do, and how we can be of assistance to your committees.

This great organization was formed because our country struggled with the painful effects of the injured and disabled veterans who returned home after World War I. Since

1920, the Disabled American Veterans has remained faithful to our sole mission of building better lives for America's disabled, wartime, service-connected disabled veterans, their families, and survivors.

Part of that mission is advocating for meaningful, reasonable, and responsible public policy for service-disabled veterans. That has been what we do on a daily basis to fulfill our sacred obligation to America's brave men and women who have served in our Armed Forces during times of war as well as conflict.

Each year, DAV's core of national service officers, all of whom are wartime service-disabled veterans themselves, represent a quarter million individuals in their claims for benefits from the VA.

Among all organizations representing veterans, DAV helps by far the largest number of claimants annually, ensuring that disabled veterans and their families receive all of the benefits that they have earned through their service and sacrifices.

According to a 2005 VA inspector general's report, it was noted that the veterans not represented by a service

organization did not fare as well as those who were represented. DAV's highly trained and dedicated NSOs provide free representation to any veteran or their dependents and survivors.

In a 2005 newspaper investigation, the DAV was recognized as the only organization that provided an extensive training program that qualifies our NSOs for ten college credit hours.

And I would encourage you to do your veterans in your district a large favor. Put them in touch with a DAV national service officer when they come to you seeking assistance. We are ready to stand by and help them.

DAV also has a Transition Service Program to provide benefits, counseling, and assistance to separating military servicemembers. This program is a huge success in helping military members transition back to civilian life and obtain the benefits and services they have earned.

Since the 1970s, the DAV has placed specially equipped mobile service offices staffed with these NSOs on the road to communities across the country to provide outreach and claims assistance to those veterans who are unable to come into our

offices. These offices on wheels are in your states and districts helping veterans, your constituents, with claims work.

Equally vital to our mission and the well-being of our Nation's hospitalized sick and disabled veterans, as the chairman said a minute ago, are 14,000 DAV and auxiliary members who volunteer their time at VA medical facilities.

Currently a value of \$40 million is placed on what these men and women give to the VA and the veterans.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* Our local Voluntary Assistance Program allows DAV volunteers to provide direct services to veterans, families, and survivors in their local communities. This may include such events as grocery shopping, home repairs and maintenance for those housebound veterans.

The DAV's national transportation network provides free transportation to veterans in every State and nearly every congressional district. Since the program began in 1987, the DAV has donated 2,368 vans to the VA at a cost to the DAV of more than \$51 million.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* Additionally, more than 13 million veterans have been transported in these vans more than 495 million miles for a total of 27 million hours by our volunteer drivers. No one gets paid.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* The DAV also works in cooperation with VA to co-sponsor the annual DAV National Winter Sports Clinic. For a quarter of a century, this exceptional physical rehabilitation program, often called Miracles on the Mountainside, has transformed the lives of America's catastrophically disabled veterans.

Veterans from all eras attend this clinic including many injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. This unique event offers many of them the inspiration to take their rehabilitation to a much higher level.

Madam and Mr. Chairman and Members of these committees, I would invite you to join us and the participants at Snow Mass, Colorado and witness firsthand what this event can do for these severely disabled veterans.

Another program that has helped many veterans but receives little attention is the DAV's Charitable Service

Trust. Since it was established in 1986, the trust has awarded more than \$65 million in grants to provide direct services to our Nation's veterans.

Unfortunately, due to the VA budget shortfalls of years past, it was not uncommon for the Charitable Service Trust to receive requests from VA medical facilities for grants to purchase or repair necessary equipment for the care and treatment of sick and disabled veterans in your districts.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* As you can see, we, the DAV, are there to provide necessary assistance to the men and women who have protected our freedom. However, DAV and those we represent need you to help ensure that VA is properly utilizing the resources provided by Congress to provide medical care to disabled veterans.

You can also help ensure that the VA is adequately staffed, training claims specialists, and that they remain focused on creating a modern paperless veterans benefits claims system designed to decide each claim right.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* When I say that, I mean get it right the

first time, not two or three times.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* Over the last two years, we have seen a renewed vigor at VA to address the claims dilemma. VA's secretary, Eric Shinseki, has been focused on comprehensive reform of the entire claims processing system.

Under acting secretary for benefits, Mike Walcoff, together with VBA's Compensation and Pension director, Tom Murphy, have put the VA Veterans Benefits Administration on a path toward reform. Better training and quality control are not only essential, they are interrelated and must be part of continuous quality improvement both for VBA employees and the claims process itself.

Madam and Mr. Chairman, DAV and other VSOs bring vast experience and expertise gained from representing hundreds of thousands of claimants every year. The veterans we represent prepare and submit better claims, thereby requiring less of VBA's time and resources to develop and adjudicate those claims.

DAV's experienced and expert staff is at your disposal to help you better understand its VA, its problems, and

potential solutions at any time.

Today we remain a Nation at war as we have been for the last ten years. Unfortunately when you wage war, there is a continuing cost that follows war that some in government forget about. Those costs include benefits, healthcare, vocational rehabilitation, prosthetics, education, and other benefits for our veterans, their families, and their survivors.

Madam and Mr. Chairman, for high quality medical care, it is hard to top the VA healthcare system. Under the leadership of Dr. Randy Petzel, under secretary for Health, the quality of VA healthcare continues to improve.

Several comprehensive studies agree that VA provides excellent patient care equal to or better than other healthcare systems. And according to a 2009 CBO report, VA's spending per enrollee rose by only 14 percent from 1999 to 2007, while the cost of Medicare's per enrollee spending rose an astonishing 80 percent. Unacceptable.

VA remains one of the highest performing systems in terms of quality and efficiency. Sick and disabled veterans rely on the VA care system. They support it and they have

the right to use it because of their service and their sacrifices.

And when it comes to specialty care areas such as gunshot wounds, amputations, and spinal cord injuries, no other medical provider comes close to the level of care and treatment provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* It is up to the Members of these committees and this Congress to ensure that our veterans' healthcare system is able to meet the challenges of today's veterans and tomorrow's.

Recently, however, there have been some in government discussing ways to cut back on veterans' benefits and services either through freezing spending or by sending veterans out of the system and into the private sector.

Allow me to caution the Members of these committees that the DAV and its membership will not stand idly by and allow anyone to blindly cut VA services, VA programs, and VA benefits for the men and women who have sacrificed to earn these benefits.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* We would hope that these committees in particular would be at the forefront of protecting benefits and services to all veterans, especially disabled veterans who have rightfully earned through service and sacrifice their benefits.

However, we would welcome and encourage vigorous oversight by these committees to ensure that taxpayers' dollars provided to the VA are used properly to support programs which improve the lives of our disabled veterans, their families, and survivors.

Madam and Mr. Chairman and Members of these committees, I am extremely proud of the work done by this great organization. There is no other veteran service organization that contributes more to the welfare and well-being of our Nation's disabled veterans, their families, and their survivors.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Tyson.* I can assure you, Madam and Mr. Chairman, that the DAV stands ready to assist you and your committees in finding ways to improve the services and benefits that they earned by a grateful Nation.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your recognition of Mr. Dave Gorman. We are going to miss him, but the DAV is ready to continue and Dave is not going far. He will be there if you need assistance. He is a phone call away.

This completes my testimony and my staff and I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have. Thank you again for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the DAV to share our proud record of service to the veterans and our country.

May God bless America's soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and coastguard men who are in harm's way at this time and may God always shine his blessing on the United States of America.

[Applause.]

[The statement of Wallace E. Tyson appears on p.]

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The *Chairman.* Thank you very much, Commander. I associate with your remarks.

Mr. *Tyson.* Thank you, sir.

The *Chairman.* Could not have been delivered any better and in a more timely fashion.

I would like to know what would you say are probably the three most or the three top issues that your national service officers are confronted with, if you can pick three?

Mr. *Augustine.* I would say timely completion of claims obviously, accuracy of claims, and access to benefit information when needed on a regular basis.

The *Chairman.* Anybody else want to add anything?

One of the things that I am interested in finding out is percentage-wise the claims that DAV submits or other people may submit, you know. Are you getting them answered quicker in a higher percentage? I do not know. I do not know if DAV has ever studied to see what the percentage of claims that have been adjudicated right the first time, not having to go back, which is--

Mr. *Tyson.* Mr. Augustine.

Mr. *Augustine.* The VA has informed us that they have an 84 percent accuracy rate at this time. We feel that that is not where it should be. And General Shinseki has set the goal for a 98 percent accuracy rate eventually by 2012.

Mr. *Gorman.* Mr. Chairman, if I could just add to that.

The *Chairman.* Yes, sir.

Mr. *Gorman.* I think a lot of getting to that 98 percent accuracy rate goal is totally dependent upon their ability to move forward with an electronic claims processing system which they are well on their way to doing, but still have a lot of work to do.

So we are very, very supportive of that and, of course, the adequate funding and resources that need to make that happen that actually go to the issue of the backlog. The backlog is not the issue. It is the process they use to process claims that has really created the backlog. It is flawed.

And, as Mr. Augustine says, getting to that point where they have an electronic claims processing system will hopefully wipe that backlog out and let them continue in the

future to do an accurate and timely adjudication of claims.

The *Chairman.* What do you think the biggest stumbling block is besides funding for the electronic medical record? Is it with the physicians trying to get in and do their coding or do you even have an idea?

Mr. *Gorman.* I think it is just they have started from scratch. And when General Shinseki came in, this was one of his initiatives that they put forward to get it done. And I think they really had not done anything up until that point in time.

As the commander said in his testimony, VA has really turned over a new leaf in that regard and they are really moving at warp speed to try to make that happen. They are using a lot of resources, human mostly, a lot of expertise.

Veterans' organizations have been invited to participate in that process, getting some of our experience from our field NSOs of some of the issues that need to be built into that system in order to make it work and make it viable in the future.

So I think really starting from scratch, it cannot be done overnight, as you well know, and that is probably the

biggest obstacle. But we think they are moving in a very favorable position.

The *Chairman.* Thank you. I have got some other questions, but I would like to recognize Mr. Filner.

And for the record, you do not get Senators Murray's time too.

Mr. *Filner.* She gave me all the senator's time.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Commander.

I just want to try out a couple of ideas, Mr. Commander, on you. You know, as you point out, these issues are very big. The bigger ones are getting worse. And as you understand the political environment here, the resources will not be coming as quick or as large.

The claims that all pointed out is number one. And you rightly praised your veteran service officers as those who around the country are helping us.

I hate, you know, as we come closer to tax time to use the IRS as any kind of model, but the IRS used to be the most dysfunctional agency in America. You did not know when you were getting a refund, if you were getting a refund, how they

calculated or anything.

But now when April 15th comes along and you have a refund coming, you will get it back guaranteed within three weeks. How do they do that? Because they accept your return as valid. They issue a check based on that, but it is subject to audit. You are subject to audit in time, but you get your check immediately. The assumption is you are honest.

Now, what if we worked on a similar system where we said to the veteran not only do we think you are honest, but you are going to have, if you are helped by a veteran service officer that is certified, you know, either by the VA or the, you know, state agencies, county agencies, your organizations, we are going to accept your claim subject to audit and send out the check?

You know, the secretary has said we are going to beat this down by brute force. It is not working. We have hired over 10,000 new people and, as you point out in your testimony, the claims backlog gets bigger and bigger. It is up near a million depending on how you count it. And it is not coming down.

I think we have to clear it away. And even if we have

to do something like I suggested for one year or two years to get it down to some manageable proportions, I think we have got to do it. And use your VSOs as the key there to provide that level of honesty and expertise that we could trust.

By the way, I would append that, I would add to that suggestion. Ms. Murray said we did not welcome our Vietnam vets home. And we talk about it. Many of us talk about, you know, it is time to do a welcome home. We got our Vietnam vets.

Several hundred thousand of those claims are probably Agent Orange claims. You know, our veterans from Vietnam have gotten sicker probably fighting the VA on these Agent Orange claims than they had from the original Agent Orange.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* So I think it is really time to welcome home our Vietnam vets, say welcome home, have some peace, we grant these Agent Orange claims. Get them off the backlog, say to the Vietnam vets we did not welcome you home as a society, now welcome home, have some peace, let's get these off the books.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* I do not know if you would like to respond to any of those twin suggestions. But what it does is get that backlog down to zero, you know, in a year or two.

Mr. *Violante.* Mr. Filner, I will respond to that.

Mr. *Filner.* I was hoping you would not.

Mr. *Violante.* As we discussed in the past, I mean, the VA claims process is not quite as simple as the IRS process, only because of the fact that there are a number of disabilities. A veteran could have a number of various ratings a veteran could receive. To put our service officers in the middle of being judgmental about what a valid claim is presents a few problems.

Also with regards to Agent Orange, I mean, VA is now working on expedited handling of those claims through their disability questionnaires that veterans can have filled out that should simplify the process.

You know, we believe VA is moving in a direction that--

Mr. *Filner.* I think they are, but it will take all of our lifetimes and more. Joe, you have been working too much with these bureaucrats. You are talking like one. Look, you know, there is always an answer why we cannot do it.

And Mr. Gorman said, you know, the secretary started at zero. The secretaries have been doing this for the last 30 years and they all start at zero. Why? Because, you know, the bureaucracy does not do it, so they start again. Meanwhile, nothing ever happens.

So let's cut through the red tape. Let's cut through the bureaucracy and just say, hey, we are not going to do this. You know, there are problems with any system. You know that. But right now it is intolerable. We have got people dying before their claims are adjudicated. We have got people losing their homes before they are adjudicated.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* I do not care if there is an error or two. When you have got a million claims, let's get them off the books in my opinion.

One last thing, Senator Murray. You look younger every day. Who is this guy related to, Commander? Is that your what?

Mr. *Wilson.* My grandson.

Mr. *Filner.* Your grandson?

Mr. *Wilson.* Yes, sir.

Mr. *Filner.* I was hoping you were not going to say your son.

Welcome. This is how democracy works. And I want you to listen to me at all time.

One last point, if I may, Mr. Chairman. We all know about the inability of the funding to keep up with the demand. And you guys work so hard on that advanced funding. In fact, we would be in trouble today because there is no budget, you know. They would be on a continuing resolution had it not been for advanced funding which you guys took the lead in. And so we are providing our guys with the healthcare they need regardless--

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* --of the politics. But I have another outside the box since Joe did not like the other one. I am working on this. Look, for every time there is a war bill on the floor of the House, I am going to submit an amendment which puts a surtax on the defense budget for what I am calling a veterans trust fund.

Every politician on Memorial Day and Veterans Day says, you know, part of the cost of war is funding for our

veterans. Well, let's do it as part of the cost of the war.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* Now, our VA budget is roughly 15 percent of the defense budget, so I say to start, I am going to refine this, but put a 15 percent surtax on the defense budget and say that is going to be in a trust fund to take care of the guys and gals when they come home. Let the people of America know what it costs right now.

And, you know, we had testimony by Nobel Prize winning economists who said the real cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan war is between five and seven trillion dollars because of the funding of all the folks who come back brain injured and spinal cords and PTSD, on and on.

Let's fund it as part of the cost of war. I want a veterans' trust fund that gets funded from when we vote on these wars.

I thank the chair.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Thank you, Mr. Filner. And, no, I did not bring Tyler up here to sit next to you, but I did want him--he was looking at us. I wanted him to look out here at

you.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Filner.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* Senator Boozman, you are recognized.

Senator *Boozman.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, I want to congratulate Senator Murray on becoming the new chair on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

I also want to congratulate Congressman Miller who is a very, very good friend.

And then it is good to be back with another very, very good friend who has not changed a bit, Congressman Filner, and--

Mr. *Filner.* And remind me who you are.

Senator *Boozman.* But, anyway, I do appreciate you all so much. I appreciate your service to our country, all that you represent. And I know it is not the easiest thing in the world to come from wherever you came from, but I cannot tell you how important it is that you are up here.

And the people on this committee really do work very hard in a very bipartisan way to push things forward, but I

think the guys, Mr. Violante and the rest of the crew, Mr. Augustine, Mr. Gorman, would tell you that they cannot do it. They have to have your support to push things forward. So it is so very, very important.

Mr. Tyson, we want to congratulate you and we are going to look forward to working with you.

Ms. Henry with the auxiliary, I tell the story of being with my wife at an event. And I told the group there, and I meant this with all of my heart and I mean this now, too, I told them that the auxiliary, the ladies auxiliary was the backbone of the group.

And so we were driving home. I have got a wife and three daughters. My wife looked at me and she said, John, they are not only the backbone, they are the brains. So we do appreciate all that you do.

We have got several people here from Arkansas, John Donovan, Don Kaczinski, Dave Spurgen, Jim Parker, Wes Shamblin, Paulina Acosta, and Shera Grant. I appreciate you all coming and being a part of this.

Really the only question I have, Mr. Tyson, guys, is when the folks from Arkansas were in visiting with me, they

mentioned the idea in regard to the Purple Heart of TBI, you know, some of those types of injuries as being perhaps carved out. I would really like to hear your all's thoughts on that.

And I have, you know, dealt with it. I have been on the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the House for the last nine years and really looking forward to being on it in the Senate, but this is something that is kind of unique. I really would like to have your opinion as to whether or not that is something that should be considered.

And as I told them, I think the ones that really are going to make that determination are you, you know, the service, the people that are directly connected and, you know, our various VSOs and the people in uniform.

Mr. Tyson or Mr. Violante.

Mr. *Violante.* Mr. Boozman, I will go ahead and answer that. Well, first of all, I mean, if the TBI is a result of an IED explosion, a Purple Heart should be warranted. And if it is a hostile, and I cannot imagine any other type of IED, but if it is as a result of hostile activities, they would be entitled the Purple Heart.

DAV does not have an official position on providing the Purple Heart other than under the regulations that the military has provided.

Senator *Boozman.* And currently it is an external injury?

Mr. *Violante.* I am sorry?

Senator *Boozman.* It is an external injury as far as being awarded?

Mr. *Violante.* You mean is a Purple Heart PTSD?

Senator *Boozman.* No, no. As far as getting the award.

Mr. *Violante.* I mean, I am not quite sure what the regulations specifically include. But if there is some type of injury as a result of hostile activity, the Purple Heart should be made available to that individual.

Senator *Boozman.* Good. I appreciate it. They brought that up to me. And as you can tell, you know, I am not as up to speed as I ought to be on it either, you know, as far as the specifics. But I was just curious.

Like I say, that is something that, you know, a lot of these issues do crop up, but that is one that I told them,

you know, I needed to follow-up and kind of get some more as to what is going on.

But we do appreciate your service, not only those of you that have served, your families. My dad did 20 years in the air force. I know how difficult it is when mom or dad is not around. And like I say, we do appreciate all that you all represent. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Mr. Walz.

Mr. *Walz.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member.

And thank you to Senator Boozman. I can tell you how proud we are to have a long-time Member of this committee go over to the Senate side. We got a senator that understands veterans' issues.

And I for one rest easier knowing you are over there, Senator Boozman. It is good to have a friend and a veterans' advocate over there. So thank you for that.

Commander, thank you for your service and for your passion with your testimony. It is obvious why you are the commander, and you are sitting in front of a group that speaks with more moral authority than anybody who comes to

this Congress. And so thank you for that.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Walz.* Got some friends out there from the Minnesota delegation and I know that they are back there sharing my concern. We have got a room with the biggest damn windows. The first time we have seen the sun since October and they are closed. So enjoy it while you are here from the Minnesota folks.

And to each of you, I think the chairman was right. This is probably the most special day for me of the year of setting here and looking out at this. That sense of what is good and what is right about America resonates from this group like none other. Bringing the young man up here to look at it is something. As long as this republic stands, this group has to be here. This group has to stand front and center.

And I think many of you, you fought these same fights we are talking about up here. You hear the frustration of Members of Congress. Well, the fact of the matter is we may always have to fight them. But knowing that you are here, knowing that that voice is here, we are going to continue to

make progress until every veteran is cared for.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Walz.* I know it is very frustrating. Trust me. I share your concern on this. It seems like if we walk across the street over there to vote that we would not be able to agree it is Tuesday. But the fact of the matter is this committee, I think, can prove to be the model for the collaboration.

When you enter this room and you enter this VA Committee, it is first and foremost what is right for America's security and those that are willing to risk all for it. Everything else is put aside. Everything else is put aside.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Walz.* But I would echo the commander's statements. And one reason I am so very proud of the DAV, it helps to hold people accountable. I think the ranking member is right. Everybody wants to give a speech and stand in front of veterans, but standing behind them becomes much more difficult.

And we have got challenging times. There is not a

person in here that does not understand that we have got to make tough choices in this country. But I for one am baffled on the choice of cutting prosthetic research, for example, to \$72 million.

Since we have been here, since this started, this hearing started until right now, we have spent that much paying interest on the debt alone. We have to make some hard choices, but, my God, not on the young man laying out at Walter Reed or not those that will come or not those that served in previous conflicts.

And I do not want to weaken that that \$72 million is real money. But in the scheme of things, we cannot find that elsewhere? We cannot find that offset somewhere else? That is the hard choices we need to make.

And so I appreciate the DAV. I appreciate the Independent Budget. It helped us, I think, move, as you said, Commander, historically forward in things like advanced appropriations. Advanced appropriations was not only the right thing to do to ensure care and good planning ahead, it will save us money. It is the right thing to do. It will cut out the duplicative nature. We can do that.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Walz.* So, Commander, I come to you as you talk to the people of the first district in Minnesota and talk to them. Where should we cut and what should we invest in?

I have to be honest with you and I know I sound like a broken record to this committee, but I am convinced whether it is claims backlog or some of these other things, the problem originates with the lack of seamless transition from the active force over into the VA.

We continue to drop people off. We create a new record. We have separate healthcare records. We have an organization today. We have some Members who are lucky enough to serve on both Armed Services and the VA. We have to do a better job of collaborating to save the taxpayers' money, to save the headaches and the frustration of veterans, and to deliver the care in a more efficient manner.

So we continue, as we said, to go brute force at some of these things. I think we are treating the symptom and I believe we have to do that.

Does DAV have any suggestions on how we actually get to seamless transition? I mean, you have talked about it your

whole career, I am sure, Commander. I have and others here. What do you think? How do we get there? How do we make it happen?

Mr. *Gorman.* Mr. Walz, I will take a stab at it. And I think the inherent problem seems to be the bureaucracies of the VA and DoD. I think that VA is there ready and willing to take that newly discharged servicemember and avail themselves to him or her to make sure they get the benefits they need.

DoD it seems on the other hand is more interested in, today's world anyway, either pushing their members out of the service altogether and not really referring them to VA or working cohesively with VA to try to make that happen, although we hear otherwise. And you would hear, as Mr. Filner said, you would hear those speeches and those remarks that we are doing that.

I think the VA is doing a better job than DoD is. And I think that at some level, there has to be something pushed down that says this is what you will do and we are going to hold you accountable to do it. But I think it is more of a DoD problem today than it is a VA problem.

Mr. *Walz.* Do you believe this is a central theme? Are we going down the right road here? I mean, does the DAV see this as one of the core problems that we have and that we end up with all these peripheral issues because of it? Do you think we are right on that?

Mr. *Gorman.* I think you are. I think it is a very important and very critical thing to start off on the right foot. Once you start down the right path, then I think everything else becomes much easier as you go through life and you go through your rehabilitation, you go through your benefit process, you go through your education process.

It is so much easier when you start off on the right foot than it is to have to battle to get the information, the know-how, the advocate, the representative, whoever it may be, but get the information to get where you need to be. If you cannot get that to begin with, you are behind the eight ball.

Mr. *Walz.* I hope you continue because I am convinced you get better care and we save money. That is the win-win. So I appreciate it.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Mr. Benishek.

Mr. *Benishek.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank Mr. Tyson as well and the entire Disabled American Veteran organization for their service and devotion to our veterans.

The DAV provides services that are indispensable for caring for this country's wounded. And I appreciate you taking the time today to further enlighten this committee on what the DAV has to offer.

I am new to Congress and this committee, but as a VA surgeon for the past 20 years, I am personally aware of the challenges that our veterans face when they return home.

I look forward to supporting you and the DAV to ensure that our veterans are receiving the best possible care.

At this time, I would like to take a moment to recognize three DAV members from Michigan's first district who are in attendance today who I met earlier in my office, Ms. Rebecca Mott, a deputy vice commander; and members Ed Reeves and Eve Berkar. Your service to Michigan's veterans is much appreciated in Michigan's first.

Mr. Tyson, I just have one question. You know, I tend

to have the same urgency as Mr. Ranking Member Filner's. Unbelievable situation with the claims process. And I read your answers, Mr. Tyson, in the report here and your hopeful observation that getting the IT right will make this all better. And you noted that by 2012, this will all be implemented.

I mean, have you seen any progress in this department yourself? Are you happy with the way this seems to be going because, you know, frankly, I think there is a lot of urgency and seeing this number rise and rise of the claims that are unprocessed. And I want to hear what you have to say as to how you think that this reorganization is actually functioning. Do you think it is actually going to make a difference by 2012 or is this another bureaucratic response to, you know, a problem that they do not seem to be able to solve?

Mr. *Gorman.* If I can, you know, you are never happy with anything until it starts to bear fruit. But I think we are very pleased anyway to look at where the VA was two years ago, where they are today. And it is turning a ship around. And Mr. Filner made the comment that we have had secretaries

that have started with nothing and we are still with nothing. And that may or may not be the case.

But I think the world has changed and the way that the VA receives claims, no matter how many people they have, if you are not adequately trained and have the right mentality to do what they are there to do right and correct the right time, they do not have the training to do it, they are moving in that direction. And the technology part of that is going to make paper records obsolete at some point in time cannot be done overnight. And I think we all realize that.

But you have to start somewhere and I think that is where the VA is now. They have some 39 or so different pilot projects out there trying to put in place new and different and successful procedures to make this happen. And the most preeminent one right now as far as the electronic record is in Providence, Rhode Island.

We have looked at it as have other VSOs. We came away optimistic that this is the wave of the future. And if they continue to get your support, if they continue to get the oversight, and if you keep holding their feet to the fire, they are going to get this thing right. It is not going to

ever be perfect, but it is going to be a lot better than it is today and it is going to serve veterans a lot better than it is today.

And at the same time, it is going to maintain the credibility of the VA Disability Compensation Program of providing benefits to those who have earned them and providing the correct benefits in a timely way to those who have earned them.

So the answer to your question is, are we happy? Perhaps not elated, but we are certainly pleased in the way that the VA is moving along the tracks.

Mr. *Benishek.* Thank you, sir.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Benishek.* I would appreciate your continued input as this process goes forward.

Thank you.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, sir.

Senator Sanders.

Senator *Sanders.* Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

And let me just begin by thanking all of you not only for your service to this country and not only for the pain

that you have experienced for this country but by being here today.

All of us try to do our best who are on the Veterans' Committee in the House and I am on the Senate. We cannot do it without you. You are on the ground. You are talking to the men and women who are impacted by government policy and your involvement in informing us as to where we have problems and where we are making progress is terribly important. So thank you very much for all that you are doing.

I would just repeat what my colleagues have said. Everybody here understands that for a variety of reasons, we are looking at \$14 trillion national debt and a \$1.6 trillion deficit. Even in Washington, that is a lot of money.

But what I hope that everybody in this room will agree upon is that despite the budget problems facing our country, we will never ever balance the budget on the backs of the veterans and especially disabled veterans.

[Applause.]

Senator *Sanders.* It is no great secret, I am not telling anything out of school here, that for a number of years, the Veterans Administration did not get the funding

that it needed.

We have made as a Nation over the years promises to our veterans. We have made obligations. We have said you stand up and do what is right, we will stand up and do what is right. But, unfortunately, in many instances, the truth is we did not.

I am happy to say as a Member of the Senate Veterans' Committee that I believe in recent years we have begun the process of keeping the promises that we made to our veterans.

[Applause.]

Senator *Sanders.* Now, one of the issues that concerns us all is that as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have a lot of young men and women coming home with PTSD and coming home with TBI. And I would like to ask Commander Tyson or any of the other folks up here to give us their viewpoint as to how we are doing.

Is the VA responding effectively to the problems of TBI?
Mr. Tyson.

Mr. *Violante.* I will answer that, Senator Sanders. It is going to take both DoD and VA to address the problem. One of the things that we have advocated for is both pre and

post deployment screening so that you have a comparison to see who might be having problems before they even recognize they have problems. So they are not doing a good enough job in that area.

VA is moving forward. They have some great ideas. And we talked about it in the written statement. The commander did go down to the polytrauma center there in Florida and did see some advancements that are being made by VA to ensure that individuals that have brain injury can function in their homes.

So they are making strides forward, but there still needs to be more done both on the DoD side and VA side.

Senator *Sanders.* Okay. Any other comments on that?

Well, I will be brief and just conclude by once again thanking you all for what you are doing.

The dilemma that we face now within the VA, as all of you know, on one hand, we have an aging veterans' population and we are going to make sure that every man and woman who have served this country gets the care that he or she needs and, on the other hand, we have a lot of younger people coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan. That places a burden

on the VA.

And one of the things, though, and I know my friend, Congressman Filner, has made this point many, many times, it is sometimes easy to vote for war. You got all the bands marching and all the media talking. It is a popular vote. But 30 or 40 years later, when that veteran who has lost his legs or his hearing or his arms is sitting there, there are no bands and there are no photographers. And if we stand for anything as a Nation, we must never ever forget those people who served 20, 30, 50 years after the war.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Members, I would like to advise you that we are going to have a series of votes coming up shortly, but we will continue moving on.

Dr. Roe.

Mr. *Roe.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Commander Tyson, for your very eloquent presentation and representation of the disabled veterans. You do a very professional and credible job.

I also want to thank our Tennessee delegation. We had

in Susan Henry this morning who is our national commander of Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary.

And I am going to take just a moment to talk about that in a minute, but I also want to thank--when I first came to Congress, they told me that the other side were the opponents and the Senate was the enemy.

Well, one, they finally got something right in the Senate when they put my friend, Dr. John Boozman, as the ranking member of the Veterans' Affairs. You have a phenomenal advocate on the Senate side. And I, too, feel very comfortable having Dr. Boozman serving in that position. So thank you for being there.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Roe.* I met last week with a veteran's wife who was shot through the neck in 1966 in Vietnam who was just a little bit short of a quadriplegic. His life expectancy was not very long at that time, but he had a 19-year-old wife who cared for him, has continued to care for him for 44 years. Think about that. Unbelievable.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Roe.* I want to thank those heroes and heroines

out there who served those veterans when they were forgotten and left behind and have a hard time talking about it because if something happens to him today, if he were to die, she would be left with very little resources. And she has not had an opportunity to go out in the workforce because she saved the Federal Government literally millions of dollars in caring for that veteran.

So this caregiver, we have got to get this off and, as Senator Murray was saying, do it right and do it now because I can tell you I cannot do enough for her. She has done work that you and I cannot even dream of in taking care of this American hero.

I want to personally thank her publicly now, Ms. Hoyt, who lives in Morristown, Tennessee. She is my hero of the week and I wish you could meet her today because of what she has done.

Also what Senator Boozman was talking about I think with the Purple Heart, and it is not clear to me there are closed head injuries. That, I think, was what he was getting at about whether that qualifies for a Purple Heart and it certainly, I think, should.

I am a veteran and we have a VA hospital less than a mile from where I live. I think one of the most tragic things that I have seen among veterans is homelessness. And that is number one on my radar screen. To see a person who has served this military and this country honorably to be without a home, it is heart breaking.

So I have talked with General Shinseki about this. He is absolutely committed to seeing that number go down. And I can assure you every person in this room is. I absolutely know that.

Number two are jobs for our veterans. When they come back and they ETS from the military, the unemployment rate for men and women veterans is way too high. And we need to work on being sure to take those skills that they have learned, unbelievable skills they have learned in the military and transition those into the private sector.

And as I have already mentioned, the caregivers. And I am going to close because we have votes in just a minute.

When you leave here today, as Congressman Walz said, slide those curtains back and take a look out the window in the center of the Cannon building here. And you will see six

buildings with some brown stuff on top of it. I watched them put sod out in the middle of the winter on top of six buildings. If we can sod a building in the middle, we damn sure can take care of the veterans of this country.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Mr. Barrow.

Mr. *Barrow.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

On behalf of all the disabled veterans back in the State of Georgia, I want to thank all of the members of this organization from my State of Georgia.

Do we have any folks from Georgia here today? God bless you. Thank you for being here. Thank you for what you do.

Mr. Chairman, I may be the new kid on this committee, but I am not new to any of the issues we have been talking about today. I had 15 town hall meetings in 15 counties just last week, just another week back home. We talked about virtually all of these issues at every single one of them.

I want to build on Ranking Member Filner's concept and it is kind of counterintuitive. The idea that the IRS, the agency whose job it is to shake us down in order to be able to raise the money to pay for the government, the tough guy

agency, at least in terms of efficiency, sort of compares favorably to the VA whose job it is to extend and give benefits to folks who need it. I know it runs kind of counterintuitively, but as a matter of efficiency, it is a fair statement.

I recognize Mr. Violante's point. The questions are relatively simple in the vast majority of cases that the IRS has to audit. And the questions of medical causation are very complicated. I understand that. That is true. But we do have a model in this country that I think may serve as a further illustration of the problem and may be, may be sort of a way out.

And, you know, it comes from another area you might not expect to draw a favorable comparison from. We have a way of dealing with some end-of-life issues in this country that may provide something, an illustration of how screwed up the current system is in the VA and things we can do differently.

For example, who remembers in this country when you had the problem of Karen Ann Quinlan? Anybody remember that case? Everybody remembers it because the press and the whole Nation's imagination was focused on this issue that really

did not exist until medical technology, advances in medical technology served up the problem for us to deal with for the first time.

The problem was what do you do with somebody when the spirit has flown from the sepulcher but the body is still alive? What do you do in a situation like that? Medical technology never had that problem. But advances in technology presented that problem and it fascinated the country. And we as a Nation went through this issue and dealt with it.

And one of the ways in which we chose to deal with it, we tried to deal with this issue in advance, we came up with procedures to try to address all of the concerns you could pose, you could raise about what it means to pull the plug on somebody. And we created some things called durable powers of attorney for healthcare.

And in a remarkably short period of time, virtually every State in the country came up with a way of solving this incredible problem that literally did not exist before and in a way we have all come to live with and accept as reasonable.

We have doctors, two doctors, disinterested doctors who

have to sign a statement in writing and under oath and they are putting their medical degrees and their license on the line when they do that. And they state that in their opinion based on their examination of the patient that the brain is no longer functioning and life is gone from the body.

And then under those tightly constrained and highly regulated and amazingly uniform regulations all across the country, we give doctors the awesome power to turn off life support when it will do no good.

And it seems to me if we can give doctors the awesome power to turn off life support when it will do no good, we ought to give them the power to turn on life support when it will do some good.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Barrow.* And maybe there is a way of accepting the bureaucracy that we have got and putting 10,000 more hearing officers in the current system is a lot like what Lincoln said to McClellan when he kept asking for more troops. Giving them more troops is like shoveling fleas across the barnyard. Nothing ever gets to the other side.

Maybe we can think of a way of leaving the present

bureaucracy in place but having a drop-in procedure, a drop-in technology, something that will basically say you can jump past all of this if you can get the right certification and the right language by folks who make these kind of snap decisions all the time in the life and death decisions. If it is good enough for them, it ought to be good enough for us.

Mr. Violante, do you have any ideas as to how we might be able to superimpose something like that on the current bureaucracy that we have got that might help?

Mr. *Violante.* Well, VA is already looking at that with fully developed claims. If a veteran comes to the VA with their claim fully developed, that means they have the medical evidence that is necessary, any lay statements, anything to support their claim, VA will rate that case on an expedited basis. So that is available and they are moving forward with it. Congressman Donnelly has legislation that would codify it.

One of the concerns that we have had and we have talked to VA about is to ensure that--sometimes it takes a veteran a while to gather up that evidence. And right now if you file

an informal claim, that is your effective date. And VA was not recognizing that informal claim in a fully developed case. But they claim that they are moving in that direction and they will. So there is a process in place. We are looking at all these angles.

Mr. *Barrow.* It is very much along the lines of what we are talking about up here, but it still puts a burden of production and a burden of persuasion where I think that could be carried by the medical care professional if he or she is willing to put her life's work on the line, their license, their degree. It seems to me we ought to be able to move much further along those lines.

And I want to close by saying to all of the men and women here in this organization today it is our job to be up here in Washington doing what we are supposed to be doing. It is not your job.

I want to thank each and every one of you for volunteering for what you do. By my lights, what you are doing is a whole lot more important than what we are doing. God bless you and God bless the United States of America.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Mr. Johnson.

Mr. *Johnson.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would first like to thank the members of the Disabled American Veterans, all volunteers, who have come to Washington from my district in the great State of Ohio. I appreciate your efforts to be here today to advocate on behalf of the segment of society most deserving of our gratitude and our assistance, our veterans. So thank you all for being here.

I also understand that you are veterans yourselves, so I would like to thank you for your service to our country. In fact, would the members of the Ohio delegation here today, would you raise your hand or stand so we can see who you are.

Okay. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Johnson.* I am grateful to your service to the DAV and your dedication to ensuring that our veterans, their families, and survivors are receiving the care and the benefits that they have earned. Whether you have provided transportation to a veteran for a doctor's appointment,

assisted with disability claims, or volunteered with other DAV programs, your individual efforts are all commendable and very much greatly appreciated.

Your mission of building better lives for our Nation's service-disabled veterans, their families, and survivors is truly admirable. The sheer volume of veterans the DAV has assisted proves your effectiveness and commitment to that mission.

I share your commitment to those who have sacrificed so much for our great Nation and I look forward to working with you along with my colleagues here on this committee to ensure that our veterans are receiving the care and the benefits that they are entitled to.

I would like to ask one quick question. First of all, as a 27-year veteran myself and as a former chief information officer for a global manufacturing company, I understand the challenges that the VA is facing with this claims processing system or the process. Unfortunately, I also understand that it is not rocket science. I am not a patient person and you can rest assured we are going to be looking closely at why we are not making better progress than we are in solving some of

these problems.

In your testimony, you stated that the claims backlog is not the core problem, but rather a symptom, and that the VA must focus on creating that modern paperless claims processing system.

What suggestions do you have that have not perhaps already been mentioned that we can look at so that the VA gets it right the first time when it comes to the claims process?

Commander or any of the members.

Mr. *Violante.* Mr. Johnson, I will answer that question. You know, I think it has been about a decade since we have seen programs that companies have put together that would scan in the records, would allow for a searchable database, would be rules based so that, say, if a veteran comes in with a knee condition, that adjudicator can pull up every reference in the record to the knee, can also pull up all the regulations regarding knees, and be able to adjudicate that. The program would tell them when they have sufficient evidence or when they needed more evidence to make a decision. They are out there.

The problem that we are hearing from companies is that VA is looking at this thing, this is great, but then trying to do it on their own. But with your IT background, I hope, and part of the oversight, that you can get to the bottom of it to see why that is happening and why VA has not moved further quickly.

Mr. *Johnson.* We are certainly going to be getting into that.

What in your opinion is the most important thing? I assume the oversight processes, you want us to use that extensively and we plan to. I can assure you. Is there anything else that you believe this committee can do to help aid in that?

Mr. *Violante.* Just, you know, our situation is we are advocates for veterans and the way we do that is by getting VA the proper level of funding. But, unfortunately, that is where it stops. We are not there to make sure that they are properly utilizing those funds.

And, again, that is, I think, what this committee can help us in doing is getting VA in here to make determinations or to question them about how this funding is being used, are

they properly training their personnel. We do not believe they are.

And there is no accountability. I can do a decision wrong 75 percent of the time, but as long as I am doing decisions and reaching that mark, I can still qualify for a bonus. So those are situations that need to be looked at.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Johnson.* Well, we have opened up a very deliberate dialogue with the VA, with the under secretary for IT, and we are going to be exploring all of those and we are going to be digging in hard to find solutions to these problems. So watch out.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Johnson.* I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* Mr. Stutzman.

Mr. *Stutzman.* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing today.

I tell you sitting here as a new congressman and looking out at the scene from up here, what an inspiration. And all I can say is thank you. What a privilege to sit here and to

have this dialogue.

And I would just like to say, Commander Tyson, thank you for your service to our country both in uniform and in retirement for what you do for the DAV.

My district is in northeast Indiana. And I just heard the bells ring, so I will not take long here, Mr. Chairman. But we have about 51,000 veterans in the northeastern part of the State of Indiana.

I do not know if anybody is here from Indiana, but if you are, would you stand up. I know Indiana is a--there we go back in the back. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir, for your service.

[Applause.]

Mr. *Stutzman.* We are very proud of the servicemen and servicewomen that we have in Indiana and proud to serve as the subcommittee chairman for the Committee on Economic Opportunity. And I know that is one of the challenges that we have today in especially a very struggling economy.

And, Commander, I guess during my tenure here, I want to focus on the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Service and work with VR&E to provide the support disabled veterans

need to successfully complete rehabilitation plans tailored to their individual needs.

My question would be this. You know, while we are holding an Oversight hearing on Thursday, would there be any specific suggestions, any ideas that you would have in particular that we could use for that committee and ways that would not only address unemployment, if that is a particular issue, ways that we can address to reduce the unemployment rate amongst veterans, and improve the performance of the State Grant Program?

Mr. *Violante.* Congressman, you know, one of the things is voc rehab is a very important program, particularly for our members. One of the problems that we see there is, and they changed the name years ago to put employment in there, and we do not see an emphasis on the employment aspects of it.

They will put someone into training. They may find them a job, but there is no follow-up to ensure that the individual is still working at that job or still, you know, making sufficient money from working.

So there needs to be some follow-up in voc rehab. There

needs to be some strong focus on the VETS Program and what is going on out there with LVERs and DVOPs and ensuring that the states are using them properly to find disabled veterans employment.

Mr. *Stutzman.* Okay. Thank you.

And, you know, as a small business owner and realizing the economic times that we are in, I think that it is our obligation as Congress to make sure that we are focusing on that. And I can assure you that that is something that I would be interested in making sure that we make those opportunities available as much as possible.

So thank you again to all of you for your service and thank you for being here today. It has been very inspirational.

Thank you, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The *Chairman.* Thank you.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Mr. Filner.

Mr. *Filner.* Mr. Chairman, I have a solution to all these IT problems. I move that we authorize Tyler Coke a sum of \$1 million and by the time he is 13--how old are you now?

Mr. *Coke.* Thirteen.

Mr. *Filner.* Thirteen. By the time he is 16, these young guys can solve this transition without any problem whatsoever.

Do you accept my motion?

The *Chairman.* There you go spending money again.

Mr. *Filner.* What?

The *Chairman.* I said there you go spending money again.

Mr. *Filner.* But it will save the \$487 million that they are doing, you know.

The *Chairman.* Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for attending this hearing today. We certainly appreciate the opportunity to visit with each and every one of you.

We have had votes called and I apologize. We are going to have to call it here. However, I think it probably would be appropriate also that we remember Frank Buckles who just passed away, our last doughboy.

[Applause.]

The *Chairman.* Commander, unless you have any further

comments, this hearing--you have got your finger on the button.

Mr. *Tyson.* I just want to say thank you and what an honor it has been to testify on behalf of 1.5 million members of our DAV and auxiliary.

And as I told him earlier, I have to say from one senior NCO to another, Command Sergeant Major, thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My final comment.

The *Chairman.* Thank you, sir.

This hearing is adjourned.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 3:45 p.m., the committees were adjourned.]