

Chairman Patty Murray

OPENING STATEMENT

Hearing on The President's Budget

March 2, 2011

This morning, the Committee begins work on VA's 2012 budget. Before we begin, I want to first thank Senator Akaka who led this Committee so well over the last four years. As all of us on this Committee know, those four years were filled with many major accomplishments for our nation's veterans. But I would be remiss if I didn't mention one accomplishment that Senator Akaka led the way on that takes on great meaning right now – as the Senate and the House feud over spending for the current fiscal year. Through Senator Akaka's efforts, VA spending for health care is now appropriated a year in advance – protecting it from an imperfect budget process that is so often affected by politics. We are all thankful for Senator Akaka's work – particularly all those who have been given peace of mind that through advance appropriations the VA health care system is on track.

I am so pleased today to begin my work as Chairman of this vital Committee, on behalf of all American veterans. Throughout my life, whether it was watching my father, a purple-heart recipient, raise a family of seven despite being wheelchair bound, or whether it was in college as an intern helping to care for wounded Vietnam veterans even younger than me, or in my 16 years as a member of this committee, I have time and again been awed and astounded by the spirit, determination, and perseverance of our veterans.

I have also gained a keen, personal understanding of the consequences of sending our servicemembers into combat and of the sacred obligation we have to care for those injured in service. With that in mind, I am delighted to take on this tremendous responsibility and look forward to working with all of you in the time to come – on the budget and on all other issues affecting veterans.

At the outset, let me say that on balance, and given that other agencies are facing budget cuts, this VA budget is a very good starting place from which to work. The President has requested an overall increase of \$5.9 billion in discretionary spending over Fiscal Year 2011 levels. While health care spending is in good shape, there are some weaker points in the budget. For example, the proposed cuts in spending for construction and non-recurring maintenance are very troubling.

The budget documents lay out VA's vision for a ten-year construction plan, but what is missing in this budget is detail on how to close the gap between the funding we need to bring facilities up to date and the funding requested of the Congress. I must also call attention to the proposed \$70 million cut for VA research funding. I am worried that such a cut would imperil some critical projects and shove physician researchers out the door.

Topping anyone's list of problems the VA is facing is how disability benefits claims are processed. The claims backlog has gone on too long and addressing it will be a top priority for the Committee and the Congress. As we continue to work on this, some things must be acknowledged: more veterans are filing claims and more are filing increasingly 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 I.T. support – if we are to reach the shared goal of timely, accurate decisions on benefits claims. I expect to hear from VA, in detail, what exactly its plan is to transform this broken system.

I am also concerned that VA may not have adequately addressed the need for sufficient resources for administering GI Bill education benefits. In light of a substantial increase in the workload and in the number of new students, the budget would reduce FTE.

On the positive side, the proposed budget reflects the VA's very real commitment to end homelessness. I am encouraged to see that the Administration has increased funding for homeless programs and am hopeful that we will continue to see significant effort to reduce the number of homeless veterans and prevent those "at risk" from becoming homeless. Likewise, I am pleased that the budget reflects the Administration's continuing effort to ensure that gender-specific care for women is readily available throughout the system.

I would also note that I am as committed today, as I was during my early years on the VA Committee, to the belief that the Government can be fiscally responsible while still fulfilling its commitments to the most deserving among us, including, of course, our nation's veterans. This budget request includes a series of cost-saving initiatives, including better controls on contract health care, better strategies for contracting, and cutting administrative overhead, all of which I will review with an open mind. But we must always remember that like all budgets, the VA budget is a reflection of our values. And that each of those values has a direct impact on the lives of thousands, if not millions of our veterans.

Last week, I sat down with veterans from across my home state and heard from the very men and women whose lives this budget will touch. I heard from a Vietnam veteran with PTSD whose son – a National Guard member – just recently committed suicide after returning from the battlefield with PTSD. I heard from a female Iraq veteran who told me that when she calls the VA she continually gets asked if she's calling for her husband. I heard from veterans about the claims backlog, barriers to employment, access to care, holes in the education benefit, and much, much more.

We have work to do for these veterans, work that begins today, work that begins with this budget. I look forward to working with my colleagues on this Committee, and on the Budget and Appropriations Committees on which I also sit, and of course, Secretary Shinseki, his team, and the leaders from the veterans' community.