

Senator Jon Tester

Opening Statement of Senator Jon Tester
SVAC Hearing on Benefits Through the Department of Labor
June 13, 2007

Mr. Chairman, this is a very important hearing. Thank you for putting this together today.

The veterans' employment and training programs have so much promise, but we do not help ourselves if we allow the good intentions of these programs to be undone by not adequately preparing for the number of veterans who are using them.

As I understand it, the president's budget for FY 2008 would have:

- Put a freeze on funding for the National Veterans' Training Institute, which provides specialized training and professional skills development to federal and state veterans' service providers' staff;
- Increase by less than 1% the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program, which provides grants to operate employment programs to reach out to homeless veterans and help them become employed;
- And cut funding for the Veterans Workforce Investment Program, which provides competitive grants for training programs and employment opportunities for veterans in high-skill occupations.

I know that funding is tight all over. Believe me, one of the reasons I came to Congress is to get after some of the wasteful spending that goes on around here. But we're talking about our veterans. There's a moral responsibility there, I think, to make sure that after someone serves our nation that they have the chance to get the training they need to make a life for themselves in the civilian world.

And I have to tell you, this is especially critical in rural areas where we need every possible resource to create jobs and maintain a highly-skilled workforce. And folks who have served in the United States military have good skills. We just need to make sure that civilian employers understand that, and our folks leaving the service know how to talk about those skills in a way that's attractive to prospective employers.

I also hope we'll hear a little about what kinds of follow-up the VA and the Labor Department do when it comes to getting the word out on these training programs. This is especially important for the National Guard folks.

We all know that when a soldier or a Marine comes back from deployment they won't be giving full attention to someone talking about their benefits. The soldier's mind is on his family - as it should be, quite frankly.

But as we've seen with mental health issues and with disability benefits, that can really complicate things down the road. So I'd like to know what you all are doing to follow up with folks after they hear about their job training opportunities when they first get home.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and I thank you all for being here today.