

**Sen. Sanders' Opening Statement, Hearing on "The State of VA Health Care," 5/15/14**

Thank you all for coming and I want to thank our panelists for what is going to be a very important hearing. The rules will be that I will make some opening remarks, Senator Burr, the ranking member, will make some opening remarks. Members will have three minutes and I will keep people to three minutes because it's going to be a long hearing. We're then going to go to Secretary Shinseki and Under-Secretary Petzel. We have an excellent second panel made up of service organizations, we look forward to hearing from them. We have a very good third panel so it's going to be a long hearing and we're going to get through it. Let me begin by just making a few basic points. Very serious allegations have been made about VA personnel and their doings in Phoenix and in other locations. I take these allegations very seriously as I know every member of this committee does, which is why I have supported an independent investigation by the VA inspector general. As we speak right now, the inspector general's office is in Phoenix doing a thorough examination of the allegations and my hope is that their report to us will be done as soon as possible. And what I have stated and repeat right now is that as soon as that report is done, this committee will hold hearings to see what we learn from that report and how we go forward – as soon as we possible can after their investigation is completed. I think there is no member of this committee how disagrees, and nobody in the United States, that this country has a moral obligation to provide the best quality care possible to those who have put their lives on the line to defend this nation. And I believe that every member of this committee will do everything that we can to get to the truth of these allegations. But if we are going to do our job in a proper and responsible way, we need to get the facts and not rush to judgment. And one of the concerns that I have to be very honest is there has been a little bit of a rush to judgment. What happened in Phoenix? Well the truth is we don't know, but we are going to find out. Now let me say a word about VA health care in general, which is what this hearing is about. What we want to know about VA health care is what is going well and what is not going well, and in terms of what is not going well, how do we improve that? Today, we must understand that when we talk about VA health care, we are talking about the largest integrated health care system in the United States of America. VA has 150 medical centers, has over 800 community-based outreach clinics, and some 300 vet centers. Every year, the VA is serving six and a half million veterans. Today, tomorrow and next week

– every single day, VA serves more than 200,000 veterans every single day. Not what does that mean? Here's my point – if Sen. Burr and I were to run around the country and visit every single medical center, this is what I suspect you would find. You'd find people coming out who'd say, 'I got pretty good health care. I like my doctor. I was treated courteously.' And then we would find people that would say 'You know what, I had a bad experience, I didn't like my doctor.' The point I want to make is that when you are dealing with 200,000 people, if you did better than any other health institution in the world, there would be thousands of people every single day who would say 'I don't like what I'm getting.' And we have to put that all of that in the context of the size of the VA. Does the VA in general provide good quality care to veterans? Simple question. The answer is that some people think that it provides very good quality care. The American Customer Satisfaction Index ranks VA's customer satisfaction among veterans' patients among the best in the country. And if you go and you talk to veterans, generally speaking, they'll tell you in Vermont, not 100 percent, people say 'Yea we get pretty good health care.' Not perfect. Are their problems? Absolutely. And I'm going to talk about those problems. The National Commander of the Disabled American Veterans, and these are folks who are dealing with folks who have service-connected injuries – people who were hurt in war – said this before the committee in February: "Across the nation VA is a model health care provider that has led the way in various areas of biomedical research, specialized services, graduate medical education and training for all health professions, and the use of technology to improve health care. DAV went on to say, "Such quality and expertise on veterans' specific health needs cannot be adequately replicated in the private sector." The Paralyzed Veterans of America today will testify "The simple truth is the VA is the best health care provider for veterans. In fact, VA's specialized services are incomparable resources which often cannot be duplicated in the private sector." Today the President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, representing all 50 states, will tell us "The state of VA health care in our nation is strong." Further, and here's another point that has to be made, and I know that it doesn't fit within a 12 second sound bite, but this is a point that has to be made. There is no question to my mind that VA health care has problems – serious problems. But it is not the case that the rest of health care in America is just wonderful – everybody walks in, gets immediate care, gets great care, at no cost – it's all affordable. That's not the world we live in. And let me give you one example of that – because it is important to put VA health care in context. A Scientific

American article, September 20<sup>th</sup> 2013 – less than a year ago – states, “How many die from medical mistakes in U.S. hospitals? An updated estimate says it could be at least 210,000 patients a year, more than twice the number, in a frequently quoted Institute of Medicine report.” Hospital errors that cause death are now the third leading cause of death in America behind cancer and heart disease. What does that mean? Have deaths been reported through medical errors in the VA? The answer is yes. And every one of those deaths is a shame and something that we have to address – but it’s not just the VA. Third leading cause of death in America are medical errors in hospitals – that’s an issue we have to address. Now having said all of that, trying to put this debate in a context, there is no doubt in my mind that there are serious problems facing VA health care and we have got to do everything that we can to address those problems. Let me just discuss a few. Does the VA have adequate staffing? When we talk about patient wait times – which is a major, major concern in certain parts of the country – and this issue just came up the other day in Phoenix, where a town meeting was held by the American Legion, the issue of wait times came up – is the VA adequately staffed? Do we have enough doctors and nurses in various parts of the country? I don’t know the answer to that, and that I want to find out. Further, is the VA doing a good job in allocating its resources to where the staffing is needed most? There are some places in the United States where VA load is going down, fewer people are coming in, other places where it is increasing – are we allocating resources appropriately? And let’s remember in the midst of all that, we are dealing with 200,000 men and women who have come back from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD and TBI – not easy problems to address. A few years ago, VA changed their wait-time measure to an ambitious 14 days. You call up, you’re going to get in in 14 days. Was that appropriate? Can they accommodate that with the level of staffing that they have? We need to discuss that. And what happens to those facilities that are unable in fact to bring patients in within the 14 day period? Is it possible that in some cases unrealistic expectations have created a situation where some staff is in fact cooking the books? I want to look at that. So with that, I look forward to this hearing, to get at the root of some of the health care problems facing the VA, and with that, I want to give the mic to ranking member Senator Burr.