RICHARD BURR, RANKING MEMBER COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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Oversight Hearing on Information Technology
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Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you, Chairman Akaka, for holding this very important hearing. I am very pleased that my first hearing, in my new role as Ranking Member, is to look into such an important and far reaching topic as VA Information Technology. I look forward to working with you on this issue Mr. Chairman. I look forward to hearing from our panelists today and hope to learn more about the current state of Information Technology affairs at the VA.

The topic of Information Technology covers a wide variety of different issues, all of which are important and all of which have the ability to positively or negatively impact a veteran's quality of life. From electronic health and benefits records, to the electronic infrastructure that enhance VA services, to protecting our veterans' personal information; IT is the driving factor in accomplishing all of these things.

The May 3, 2006 theft of the computer external hard drive from a VA employee's home resulted in the compromise of over 26 million veterans' personal information. It drew national attention to the VA and highlighted problems with its Information Technology policies, procedures, and structure.

The theft initiated a strong reaction from Congress and last December, we passed the VA Information Security Enhancement Act of 2006. Among many of the mandated improvements to the VA IT system; we assigned responsibilities to hold specific individuals accountable, we created prompt Congressional reporting requirements, and we provided for recruitment and retention of individuals skilled in Information Technology.

The theft also expedited a complete restructuring of the VA's Information Technology organization so that VA headquarters could have more IT oversight over all of its facilities throughout the country. The event served as a catalyst for a complete review of security systems and procedures and raised congressional interest in, and scrutiny of, the IT program.

The result of all of this is that VA has undertaken a massive effort to restructure their IT program. VA's efforts to create consistency and enhance security within a formerly decentralized IT program, has resulted in a new and centralized IT architecture.

Individual hospital directors used to have control over their own IT staff and programs. This resulted in inconsistent technologies within VA and little or no oversight from the VA main office. This new restructuring of VA IT is meant to consolidate efforts in the areas of policy, planning, purchasing, and training. However, no decision comes without consequences and I have some concerns as to whether this centralization will result in an IT system that is too slow

to respond to local needs. That being said, I look forward to learning more about the current state of these efforts, the successes, and the challenges that have yet to be addressed.

I also hope to hear more about VA's progress with DoD/VA's efforts to create an interoperable, interchangeable health records system. I hope to learn where we stand in the area of VA/DoD data sharing and standardization. What have we accomplished and what is left to do? Someone who has served this country should not have to compromise their health just because VA and DoD can't get health information from each other.

With all of this in mind, we convene today to learn more about the current status of the newly centralized IT management system, current improvements in IT security, the state of IT infrastructure, and the progress made in VA and DoD data sharing.

I would like to thank everyone for being here today. I look forward to hearing from our panelists and anticipate an informative and engaging discussion.