

1 JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF  
2 THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

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4 WEDNESDAY, MARCH 7, 2018

5 United States Senate,  
6 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
7 House of Representatives,  
8 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
9 Washington, D.C.

10 The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:03 a.m.,  
11 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny  
12 Isakson and Hon. David P. Roe, Chairmen of the Committees,  
13 presiding.

14 Senators Present: Senators Isakson, Boozman, Heller,  
15 Cassidy, Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Tester, Murray, Brown,  
16 and Manchin.

17 Representatives Present: Representatives Roe, Coffman,  
18 Wenstrup, Poliquin, Arrington, Bergman, Walz, Takano,  
19 Kuster, O'Rourke, and Correa.

20 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ROE

21 Chairman Roe. Good morning. The joint hearing will  
22 come to order. It is an honor and a privilege for me to be  
23 here with Chairman Isakson, Ranking Members Tester and Walz,  
24 the so-called four corners, and other members. I welcome  
25 you all today for a joint hearing of the House and Senate

1 Veterans' Affairs Committees to receive the legislative  
2 presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United  
3 States, VFW.

4 Thank you for all your brave and honorable service to  
5 our Nation and service that continues through your work with  
6 the VFW and your attendance here in Washington, and welcome  
7 to all the guests that are here. And so many of you  
8 traveled so far to be here with us today.

9 I want to extend a special welcome to Commander in  
10 Chief Keith Harman and his wife, Mary Lou, so welcome,  
11 Commander. Thank you, sir, for your service.

12 [Applause.]

13 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Commander Harman. It shows  
14 your good judgment to be in the U.S. Army, as I was, so  
15 congratulations on that--

16 Chairman Isakson. I am standing with you on that.

17 Chairman Roe. And during the Vietnam War and your  
18 leadership at the VFW and for being here today to share your  
19 thoughts with us.

20 I also want to welcome VFW Auxiliary National President  
21 Dee Guillory. Dee, if you would stand, thank you.

22 [Applause.]

23 Chairman Roe. And thank you for being here and all the  
24 great work that the Auxiliary does for our veterans and  
25 their families.

1 I would also like to recognize the VFW members from my  
2 home State of Tennessee who are here in attendance today,  
3 especially State Commander Mike Scott; past National  
4 Commander, Mr. John Fergus; Mr. Darryl McPherson, Mr. Eddie  
5 Bray, and Mr. Fred See. If you guys will stand? Thank you.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Roe. I am grateful not only to have you here  
8 this morning but also to work with the VFW and Auxiliary and  
9 the work you do across the country every day and service to  
10 our veterans and their families.

11 Commander my top priority for this year will be to  
12 continue to work with my colleagues in the Congress, you,  
13 and other veterans services organizations to continue our  
14 work to make necessary improvements within the VA. While we  
15 have much to be proud of through our achievements over the  
16 last year, we still have a lot of work ahead of us.

17 I will also continue to meet our constitutional  
18 responsibilities to provide rigorous oversight and shine  
19 light on instances where the Department falls short of what  
20 our veterans deserve.

21 As Chairman, I will continue to foster an agenda  
22 focused on problem solving and results, bringing together  
23 stakeholders like yourselves and policymakers to build a  
24 better future for our country's veterans. We share a common  
25 mission to improve services and benefits for our veterans,

1 and everyone in this room has priorities and ideas we  
2 believe will help us provide the care and benefits our  
3 Nation's veterans have earned.

4 One of the Committee's continuing priorities is  
5 consolidation in strengthening VA care in the community,  
6 ensuring we are increasing veterans' options for care while  
7 simultaneously investing in a stronger VA.

8 We will also continue our work on improving both the  
9 quality and equity in the VA caregiver program, and I am  
10 currently working on legislation to make these improvements  
11 and expand the program. And as you know, this effort was  
12 yesterday's focus on a joint roundtable discussion. It was  
13 a great hearing we had yesterday.

14 I appreciate VFW's continued input, and I am sure we  
15 will be able to address these important issues very soon.

16 Another means of investment in VA is our effort to  
17 establish an Asset and Infrastructure Review process to help  
18 the Department modernize and realign its medical facility  
19 footprint across the Nation. The average VA building is  
20 almost my age, which is pretty old, and I was telling  
21 someone the other day, "You know you are getting old,  
22 Commander, when the next dog you buy has a longer life  
23 expectancy than you do."

24 [Laughter.]

25 Chairman Roe. So aligning VA's physical infrastructure

1 to better serve veterans where they live is crucial in  
2 ensuring the future success of the VA's health care system.  
3 The disability claims process is yet another area where  
4 VFW's leadership is critical. We know that while the  
5 backlog of claims has been reduced, this has come at the  
6 expense of other claims.

7 In November 2017, VA submitted its comprehensive plan  
8 outlining its progress and its timeline for implementing the  
9 new law that this Congress passed. Last week, we received  
10 VA's first update to the comprehensive plan. We need to  
11 ensure that VA stays focused and on track to implement the  
12 law so that veterans can have their claims adjudicated in a  
13 timely manner instead of waiting around for years.

14 Last but certainly not least, my Committee will  
15 continue to focus on implementation of other legislation  
16 that was signed into law of this Congress to greatly expand  
17 the post 9/11 GI Bill and provide the Secretary the tools he  
18 needs to hold VA employees accountable.

19 I am proud to have led these efforts and to get those  
20 two bills signed into law, and I am also committed in  
21 ensuring these laws are properly implemented by VA in a way  
22 that will best serve veterans and taxpayers alike, and we  
23 look forward to continuing our mission with your help.

24 I am confident that working together, the nearly 1.7  
25 million members of the VFW and your Auxiliaries, there is no

1 challenge we cannot meet on behalf of our veterans.

2 I also want to thank you for taking time to come to  
3 Washington to share your views, and I look forward to  
4 Commander Harman's testimony.

5 Before I yield to Chairman Isakson, I want to  
6 congratulate my colleague, Mr. Bost, today for his 38th  
7 wedding anniversary. He has not showed up yet. Thirty-  
8 eight years is no small feat, and knowing him, it is no  
9 small feat.

10 [Laughter.]

11 Chairman Roe. I hope that you and Tracy enjoy another  
12 38 years.

13 I will now yield to Chairman Isakson for his opening  
14 comments.

15 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

16 Chairman Isakson. Well, Chairman Roe, thank you very  
17 much for your leadership and for the introduction, and to  
18 everyone at the VFW, welcome. We are so delighted to have  
19 you. To the Auxiliary, thanks for what you do on behalf of  
20 the VFW and the American people. Commander, welcome. We  
21 are glad that you are here today and appreciate your  
22 bringing Mr. Brown around. Senator Brown is an outstanding  
23 member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the Senate and  
24 a good friend of mine. We are glad to welcome him to the  
25 Committee today.

1           We could not have gotten to where we have gotten in the  
2 last year and a half without the VFW and the various  
3 veterans service organizations.

4           I had a call last night from the President of the  
5 United States to thank me, to tell you, the Committee, how  
6 much he appreciates the emphasis on veterans' improvement  
7 and reforming the VA and encouraged us to finish our job on  
8 care in the community and choice to see to it we have a 100  
9 percent batting average in the first 2 years of his first  
10 administration.

11          I appreciate that call very much and gave the credit  
12 where it was due: first, to the VSOs for their united  
13 support, every one of them; second, to the Committees in  
14 both House and Senate for their work; and third, to the  
15 American people who appreciate the veterans who give us all  
16 that we have today and fought for it and defended it for us.  
17 And we are grateful to them

18          To that end, I also know we have a number of Georgians  
19 in the audience from the VFW. Would the Georgia VFW folks  
20 stand for just a minute or wave? There you go.

21          [Applause.]

22          Chairman Isakson. Thank you so much for what you do in  
23 Georgia and what you do in the country for our veterans and  
24 for the Veterans Administration.

25          Secondly, we are where we are today, which is 10 of the

1 11 goals we set up a year and a half ago to pass, and we  
2 have passed, in large measure because of the VSOs and  
3 because of the Committees, but also because of David  
4 Shulkin. And I want to just publicly acknowledge the great  
5 help that the Veterans Secretary, the Secretary of Veterans  
6 Administration, has been to the Committee. What a breath of  
7 fresh air he has been to us in Congress, how much I enjoyed  
8 working with him in the past and how much I look forward to  
9 working with him in the future, because hand in hand, arm in  
10 arm, with the strong support from the President, with a  
11 great Secretary of the Veterans Administration, and the  
12 Cabinet, and with two good Committees who are committed to  
13 supporting the Veterans Administration, there is nothing we  
14 cannot do that we need to do. And we are going to get that  
15 done.

16 I am not going to touch on all the things that Chairman  
17 Roe did except to say that we finally got an appeals  
18 modernization bill through that is working in the early  
19 stages. It is reducing the wait times on appeals, and that  
20 is a good thing. We got the new GI Bill that has been done.  
21 The accountability is actually taking place now, and we are  
22 seeing the results of accountability by a better performance  
23 and us having the right people in the right job and getting  
24 the wrong people in the wrong job out, and that has been  
25 very important to do. And your support for that has been



1 very important.

2 We have more to do on choice and more to do on care in  
3 the community, and I am committed to finishing that, and  
4 hopefully, we will finish it in the weeks ahead of this  
5 particular session.

6 But to all of you who have served this country, you  
7 serve it today representing the VFW as a veterans service  
8 organization, thank you for your service to your country.  
9 Thank you for being with us today.

10 Chairman Roe, thank you for your service in the House,  
11 and to all the members of the Committee, thank you for  
12 supporting everything we are doing.

13 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Chairman Isakson, and I will  
14 now yield to Ranking Member Walz, who was late yesterday,  
15 where a 2-inch Minnesota snow kept him from getting back, so  
16 I will yield to him.

17 [Laughter.]

18 OPENING STATEMENT BY MR. WALZ

19 Mr. Walz. I have lost all street credibility now as a  
20 proud northerner.

21 But, Commander, welcome. To all of you, welcome, and I  
22 wish you could see this site from up here. I oftentimes say  
23 this is one of the best days in Congress. I know that is a  
24 pretty low bar, but it truly is.

25 [Laughter.]

1           Mr. Walz. It truly is, and I often think of two  
2 things. I think of what would happen if you were not here,  
3 if you had not taken the time and the effort to be engaged  
4 the way you are, and then I think the loss would be--is that  
5 I always view when you are here as being the conscience of  
6 America. And it always seems like that expression, "Through  
7 your commander and through the will of the people," it is  
8 very clear.

9           And I also want to say a thank-you to these folks up  
10 here. As you heard the list--and the Chairman is right--  
11 that does not happen by chance, and it does not happen in  
12 Congress by chance. It is very, very difficult to do the  
13 things that were listed there, but we did it in partnership.

14           And there was a little story in the New York Times last  
15 summer that said if you want to know how Congress is  
16 supposed to work, look at the VA Committee, and I attest to  
17 that because of the partnership that we have developed with  
18 you and because of the leadership of the folks sitting up  
19 here wanting to get this right for America.

20           So, Commander, I know you know you have an awesome  
21 responsibility, but if you see what I see, you have got an  
22 awful lot of folks got your back, back there, and they got  
23 the backs of America's veterans.

24           I want to point out a couple things. First of all, the  
25 Minnesotans who are now ashamed of me for getting snowed in,

1 in St. Cloud, I want to thank you for being here.

2 [Laughter.]

3 Mr. Walz. And I usually make a joke about winter, but  
4 after missing a flight, those are out the door.

5 I would also like to note yesterday, and something that  
6 the VFW is helping lead on, I think is very important. Ms.  
7 Christina Keaton, who is originally a Minnesotan, is here as  
8 a member of the Women's Advisory Committee today, and I  
9 think that is a really important thing that you are doing  
10 and that we are pushing forward on that, so welcome.

11 And also, something that VFW has been doing with SVA,  
12 we have nine fellows here today. They come from college  
13 campuses around the country to learn, involved in veterans'  
14 advocacy. I would like those fellows, if they are here, to  
15 stand up, if they could.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Walz. That is what the future looks like, and your  
18 commitment to getting them here and getting them engaged and  
19 for each of you for taking the time, it really does matter.

20 I always get asked, when people ask me--you guys can  
21 sit if you want to, but they ask, "Is Congress like 'House  
22 of Cards'?" and I say, "No. It is like 'Forrest Gump.'  
23 Stuff just happens. I do not know why it happens. It just  
24 does."

25 [Laughter.]

1           Mr. Walz. It truly is about who is here and who is  
2 advocating, and those pieces of legislation were advocated  
3 by you. We worked together to get them done. We are  
4 improving the quality of life for all American veterans, but  
5 what we also know is this is paramount to national security  
6 to showing that we will care for those who are willing to  
7 serve this Nation. And I am just proud to be a part of it.

8           So thank you all for being here, and I yield back.

9           Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

10          I will now yield to the Ranking Member Tester for his  
11 opening comments.

12                           OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

13          Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14          I want to welcome Commander Harman, and I also want to  
15 welcome Senator Brown. You have got a good man to your  
16 left, Commander Harmon, and it is good to have him on this  
17 Committee and good to have him introducing you.

18          I just want to start by--and Bob Wallace has probably  
19 heard this story before, but some of you may not. When I  
20 was growing up in the '60s, my school bus driver was a  
21 member of the VFW, and in the late '60s, he asked me to be  
22 the VFW bugler that played Taps at funerals. And it was an  
23 incredibly high honor, and it is one of the highlights of my  
24 life as I look back. And to be able to play and give the  
25 highest honor to the folks who have served this country has

1 been something that sticks with me, and occasionally, I  
2 still do it when they need a trumpeter because I think a  
3 live bugle is really important at funerals.

4       And I just want to tell you that would not have  
5 happened without a member of your group who, by the way, is  
6 still alive today. He is in his 90s now and still trucking  
7 along, World War II vet, and it would not have happened  
8 without the VFW. So I just want to say thank you from a  
9 personal standpoint.

10       We have got a few Montana folks. I hope they are here  
11 today. I met with them yesterday. They said they were  
12 going to be here today.

13       Chuck Carroll, the State commander, would you stand and  
14 have your crew stand from Montana.

15       [Applause.]

16       Senator Tester. That is good, good to have you guys  
17 here.

18       Look, we have talked about what we have been able to  
19 get done over the last 15 months, and it has been very, very  
20 significant. It would not have been done without you.

21       The input that the VSOs have given, the VFW in  
22 particular, has been critically important as we move forward  
23 making the VA all it can be.

24       We have our challenges, and I can tell you that we do  
25 not have enough medical professionals within the VA. We

1 need to really focus on making sure that the VA does the job  
2 and hires the folks we need to take care of you and your  
3 comrades. It is critically important.

4 We also need to make sure that women veterans are taken  
5 care of. This is the highest, the fastest-growing group of  
6 veterans in the country, and the VA needs to accommodate the  
7 needs that are out there because it is critically important.

8 Other than that, I can assure you of one thing for  
9 sure, and that is the folks at this dais, whether they be in  
10 the House or the Senate, are going to continue to work very,  
11 very hard, taking our cues from you, making sure we are  
12 doing right by the folks who protect this country and serve  
13 in our military.

14 Thank you all for being here, and I look forward to  
15 this hearing.

16 Thank you, Commander Harman.

17 I yield.

18 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

19 I now recognize Bob Wallace. If you will introduce the  
20 panelists with us today, Bob.

21 Mr. Wallace. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the  
22 Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

23 I am honored to have the privilege of introducing the  
24 national officers of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and our  
25 Auxiliary.

1 Mr. Chairman, please allow me to ask those to be  
2 introduced to please remain standing, and I wish to request  
3 the audience to hold their applause until all have been  
4 introduced.

5 National President of our Auxiliary, Dee Guillory from  
6 Virginia and her husband, Mark.

7 Senior Vice President of our Auxiliary, Sandi Kriebel  
8 of Maryland.

9 Junior Vice President Peggy Haake from Hawaii.

10 National Auxiliary Secretary-Treasurer Jan Passmore  
11 from Michigan.

12 Commander in Chief's wife, Mary Lou Harman from Ohio.

13 Senior Vice Commander in Chief's wife, Mary Lawrence  
14 from New Mexico.

15 Auxiliary Legislative Ambassador Carmelita Jones from  
16 Idaho.

17 Senior Vice Commander in Chief Vincent "BJ" Lawrence  
18 from New Mexico.

19 Junior Vice Commander in Chief William J. "Doc" Schmitz  
20 from New York.

21 Adjutant General Brian Duffy from Kentucky.

22 Quartermaster General Debra Anderson from Missouri.

23 Judge Advocate General Dana Hussey from New Hampshire.

24 Surgeon General Patrick "Doc" Higgins from Pacific  
25 Areas.

1 National Chaplain, Reverend James Gray from Georgia.

2 National Chief of Staff Roger Frye from Ohio.

3 Inspector General Bill Backes from Wisconsin.

4 Chairman of the National Legislative Committee, Richard  
5 Morrison from Nebraska.

6 Director of the National Legislative Service, Carlos  
7 Fuentes from Maryland.

8 Director of National Veterans Service, Ryan Galluci  
9 from Maryland.

10 I would also like to recognize again the VFW-SVA  
11 fellows, the Women Veterans Committee, and our past  
12 Commanders in Chiefs who are in attendance with us today.

13 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Roe. Bob, thank you.

16 And it is now my privilege and honor to yield to  
17 Senator Brown, who has the honor of introducing the National  
18 Commander in Chief Keith Harman.

19 Senator, you are recognized.

20 Senator Brown. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 It is an honor to welcome Keith Harman, and I will  
22 introduce him in a moment.

23 I want to thank Chairman, thank Chairman Isakson.

24 Thanks very much, my longtime friend, Senator Tester, for  
25 your leadership on the Veterans Committee, and the way that



1 you and Johnny Isakson work so well. As Ranking Member Walz  
2 said, the Veterans Committee is different from really any  
3 other committee in the Senate and the House. We work  
4 together. I was saying to Commander Harman, we do these  
5 joint hearings. No other committees do House-Senate  
6 hearings like this, and the bipartisan cooperation where  
7 Senator Tester and Senator Isakson set the tone really  
8 matters to all of us.

9 It is my pleasure to introduce Keith Harman, Commander  
10 in Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a native of  
11 Delphos, Ohio, close to the Indiana border.

12 Commander Harman was generous enough earlier this year  
13 or late last year to testify at a hearing of the Senate  
14 Veterans Committee held in Columbus, Ohio, last year.  
15 Senator Isakson and Senator Tester and their staffs  
16 particularly were so helpful in allowing us to do that field  
17 hearing where Commander in Chief Harman testified.

18 We heard directly from veterans about the difficulties  
19 they face transitioning from active duty to civilian life.

20 Joining us today, too, Mr. Chairman, if I could, our  
21 VFW State Commander, Robert Giannone Sr.; Vice Commander  
22 David Root; Women Veterans Advisory Committee member Kari  
23 Pfeifer; National Council member Chuck Keller; and National  
24 Legislative Committee Vice Chair and longtime friend of  
25 mine, Larry Moore. We met earlier. I appreciate the work

1 they do.

2 Commander Harman served a combat tour as a Huey crew  
3 chief and door gunner. Like so many other veterans, his  
4 service to his community and his country did not end when he  
5 returned home. Commander Harman served as a union  
6 representative while he worked at Fruehauf Trailer  
7 Corporation, where he worked to improve the conditions of  
8 his brothers and sisters in the union to ensure they had a  
9 better life.

10 Then in 1991, he became a veterans service officer in  
11 Van Wert County, Ohio. Not all States are lucky enough to  
12 have veterans service officers in each of their--in Ohio, 88  
13 counties, but each of their counties. Ohio is honored to  
14 have that, and Commander Harman was so important there.

15 He called that profession at the Veterans Service  
16 Commission in Van Wert County his calling. He served  
17 veterans in that role for 20 years.

18 Since 1983, Commander Harman has been a strong advocate  
19 for his fellow veterans through the VFW, first from his Post  
20 3035 in Delphos, Ohio, later through his role as Ohio  
21 Department Commander, now as Commander in Chief.

22 It is no surprise that he has led the VFW under the  
23 motto "Service, not self," since that is how Keith Harman  
24 has lived his life. He has been married 50 years to Mary  
25 Lou, and like so many of the men and women behind me, so

1 many in this room, his family has a long history of service.  
2 His grandfather served in World War I. His father and his  
3 aunt served in World War II, and he served in Vietnam.

4 On behalf of the 800,000 veterans in my State, many of  
5 them members of this organization, many of them in other  
6 veterans service organizations, it is my pleasure to  
7 introduce Commander Harman for his insightful testimony.

8 Welcome.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Harman. Thank you.

11 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator Brown. Thank you for  
12 the introduction.

13 And, Commander, you are now recognized for your  
14 testimony.

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1           STATEMENT OF KEITH HARMAN, NATIONAL COMMANDER IN  
2           CHIEF, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS; ACCOMPANIED BY  
3           RYAN GALLUCCI, NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE DIRECTOR;  
4           BOB WALLACE, WASHINGTON OFFICE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR;  
5           CARLOS FUENTES, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE  
6           DIRECTOR; AND RICHARD MORRISON, NATIONAL  
7           LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN

8           Mr. Harman. Thank you, and thank you again, Senator  
9 Brown, for that kind introduction.

10          Chairmen Isakson and Roe, Ranking Members Tester and  
11 Walz, it is my honor to represent the 1.7 million members of  
12 the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and its  
13 ladies' Auxiliary.

14          As national commander, I have had the privilege of  
15 visiting VFW posts across the nation who continue to serve  
16 as the pillars of their communities and listen to their  
17 veterans discuss the struggles of obtaining timely care and  
18 benefits.

19          I have also traveled the world and heard our troops  
20 stationed abroad discuss how the actions or inactions of  
21 Congress impact their moral ability to fight America's  
22 enemies.

23          I visited VA medical centers who do not have enough  
24 staff to provide veterans the timely care that they deserve  
25 because they cannot stretch the dollars far enough, and they

1 wish that they had additional funding to hire more doctors  
2 and expand the capabilities to serve more veterans.

3 I have also seen firsthand how sequestration has caused  
4 our brave men and women in uniform to doubt whether they  
5 would be ready to deploy into harm's way because they lacked  
6 the necessary training. Sequestration has also led to the  
7 erosion of quality-of-life programs that ensure that they  
8 keep their heads in the fight instead of wondering whether  
9 their families back home will have the support programs that  
10 they need.

11 We are a nation at war. This is why I have made ending  
12 sequestration my number one priority goal.

13 [Applause.]

14 Mr. Harman. While the VFW is pleased Congress recently  
15 passed the bipartisan budget agreement to alleviate its  
16 impact on our military and veterans, you have merely delayed  
17 sequestration by 2 years.

18 The good news is the bipartisan budget agreement  
19 created a super committee to reform the dysfunctional and  
20 cumbersome budget process, which endangers the national  
21 security and fails America's veterans.

22 Our servicemembers, veterans, and their families are  
23 counting on you to repeal sequestration once and for all.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Harman. Another issue that directly impacts the

1 well-being of VFW members and the lack of timely access to  
2 care that they have earned, over the past 4 years, VFW has  
3 assisted hundreds of veterans who face delays in receiving  
4 their health care through the VA and has surveyed more than  
5 30,000 veterans on their preference, opinions, and  
6 experiences navigating both the VA and private-sector health  
7 care systems.

8       Results from our most recent survey, which was launched  
9 a week ago and has already received 8,000 responses, show  
10 that 80 percent of our VFW members use the VA care. Nearly  
11 60 percent of them choose to stay with VA when given the  
12 option to use private care, and VA doctors understand their  
13 service-connected conditions better than private care  
14 doctors.

15       While 64 percent of our members report noticing  
16 improvements or say that their VA medical facilities do not  
17 need to improve, they do report that the VA must improve  
18 access, customer service, and eliminate inconsistencies.

19       The VFW thanks these Committees for making necessary  
20 changes to the Choice program that the VFW has proposed.  
21 You have provided access to care for veterans. You have  
22 improved access to care for veterans.

23       However, the Choice program is only a stop gap and must  
24 be replaced with a permanent and improved community care  
25 system, which would ensure veterans receive timely access to

1 high-quality and veteran-centric care, consolidate VA's  
2 different community care programs into one easy-to-  
3 understand-and-administer program and consolidate funding  
4 under one account.

5 To be clear, any bill to improve how veterans access  
6 private-sector care must also correct problems at VA medical  
7 facilities.

8 [Applause.]

9 Mr. Harman. This is why the VFW calls on Congress to  
10 pass the Caring for our Veterans Act, which would ensure  
11 veterans have timely access to high-quality care and  
12 tailored to their unique needs.

13 The VFW thanks Senators Isakson and Tester for their  
14 leadership in crafting a bill that is aligned with the views  
15 of our Nation's veterans and incorporates the input of  
16 committee members and VA, and we know that that has not been  
17 busy.

18 The VFW also strongly supports the full expansion of  
19 caregiver benefits to veterans of all eras.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Harman. As a multigenerational organization with  
22 roots tracing back to the Spanish-American War and members  
23 from every war and contingency operation through Iraq,  
24 Afghanistan, and Syria, the VFW believes it is disgraceful  
25 that Congress has failed to properly recognize the

1 sacrifices of those who have put their lives on hold for  
2 their pre-9/11 veterans. Congress can correct the inequity  
3 with passage of the Caring for Veterans Act.

4 The VFW also supports many common-sense proposals  
5 included in the President's Budget Request, such as closing  
6 the loopholes that allows flight schools to charge  
7 exorbitant fees for flight training, authorizing VA doctors  
8 to practice medicine across State lines, inscribing  
9 veterans' headstones to honor their spouses and dependent  
10 children.

11 However, the VFW condemns efforts to nickel and dime  
12 veterans by reducing their annual cost-of-living  
13 adjustments, which are already too low.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Harman. Veterans cannot be required to give up one  
16 benefit for another or forego their benefits to expand  
17 programs for other veterans.

18 [Applause.]

19 Mr. Harman. The VFW supports Secretary Shulkin's  
20 decision to adopt the same electronic health care records as  
21 DoD to ensure truly integrated care as servicemembers  
22 transition from the military health care system to the VA  
23 care.

24 However, the VFW does not support VA's proposal to fund  
25 EHR modernization at the expense of health care veterans



1 have earned. Congress must ensure VA is appropriated the  
2 funds it needs for this important initiative.

3 Over the past 2 years, the VFW members around the world  
4 have taken an active role in addressing the serious issue  
5 among our Nation's veterans being suicide. The VFW posts  
6 have hosted nearly 300 community service events to de-  
7 stigmatize mental health by teaching our local communities  
8 how to identify mental distress and what local resources are  
9 available to those struggling to cope.

10 The VFW and our partners will continue our outreach  
11 efforts to make sure veterans know where to turn when they  
12 need help.

13 We are also committed to assisting VA, DoD, and DHS in  
14 meeting the President's challenge of reducing the rate of  
15 suicide among our recently discharged veterans. We ask that  
16 Congress give VA the authorities and resources it needs to  
17 meet the demands on its mental health care services.

18 To meet the needs of the fastest-growing population  
19 within the veterans community, Congress must ensure women  
20 veterans have access to health care professionals and  
21 services that properly recognize their service to our  
22 Nation--gender-specific services, including expanded post-  
23 natal care, peer-to-peer services to empower women veterans  
24 to support their fellow veterans overcome mental health  
25 crises and homelessness.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Harman. For more than 118 years, the VFW has led  
3 the charge to improve and protect veterans' benefits and  
4 compensation. In recent months, the VFW has heard  
5 grumblings that VA disability compensation does not  
6 encourage wellness or that veterans abuse the system.

7 Those claims are flat out false, and the VFW will fight  
8 this narrative as we have done since our inception.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Harman. We thank these Committees for your  
11 continued commitment to veterans and for passing bills to  
12 improve their benefits, such as the Appeals Modernization  
13 Act, which has started to offer the veterans the opportunity  
14 to receive faster decisions in a non-adversarial manner.

15 The VFW is glad VA is working side by side with VSOs to  
16 properly implement the Appeals Modernization Act. Together,  
17 we will make sure veterans no longer wait 3 to 5 years for  
18 an appeal.

19 While we thank you for the progress made, you still  
20 have a long to-do list. The VFW has long argued that  
21 military retired pay and VA service-connected disability  
22 compensation are fundamentally different benefits and  
23 granted for different reasons.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Harman. We again call on Congress to enact full

1 concurrent receipts.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Harman. VFW members have been exposed to toxins  
4 during every war. These toxins have long-lasting impacts on  
5 their health and the well-being of their descendants. This  
6 is why the VFW urges Congress to properly recognize Blue  
7 Water Navy veterans who suffer from Agent Orange-related  
8 health conditions, ensure veterans that served in Thailand  
9 and along the Korean DMZ receive the benefits they deserve,  
10 fix how VA rates Gulf War illness claims, improve the burn  
11 pit registry, and commission an independent research on Fort  
12 McClellan open burn pits, Gulf War illness, and infertility  
13 among women veterans who have deployed to the Gulf War.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Harman. While America's sacred promise to recover  
16 fallen Americans from long-ago battlefields is not under the  
17 jurisdiction of these Committees, I must emphasize the  
18 importance of the POW/MIA Full Accounting Mission. I have  
19 seen the hard work and dedication the defense POW/MIA  
20 Accounting Agency has for our fallen heroes, and Congress  
21 must provide DPAA the resources it needs to reunite our  
22 heroes with their loved ones, including budget carryover  
23 attorney to ensure DPAA continues the recovery missions  
24 during a Government shutdown.

25 In closing, I would be remiss if I did not mention the

1 Forever GI Bill, which has made significant improvements to  
2 education benefits for veterans and their families and gives  
3 them a lifetime to use those benefits.

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Harman. The Forever GI bill was also a template on  
6 how Congress can come together to pass bipartisan and  
7 comprehensive legislation to improve the lives of those who  
8 have worn our Nation's uniform. We hope Congress can do the  
9 same to enact budget reform that ends sequestration, improve  
10 access to high-quality health care, eliminate suicides,  
11 improve benefits, ease the military from civilian  
12 transition, and end homelessness for veterans.

13 The VFW stands ready to assist whenever and wherever  
14 possible and hold you accountable, if need be, because every  
15 day is Veterans Day, and no one does more for veterans than  
16 the veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Harman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I look  
19 forward to your questions.

20 [The prepared statement of Mr. Harman follows:]

21

22

23

24

25

1 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Commander. I appreciate your  
2 testimony.

3 Because we have a large panel today, I am going to  
4 limit to 3 minutes, and I am going to stick to that 3-minute  
5 time limit. And if we need a second round, then we can  
6 stick around for a second round.

7 I will now yield to Senator Isakson.

8 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and out of  
9 respect for that request, I will be even shorter than that  
10 because I have already had some minutes to talk. And I  
11 appreciate that time.

12 But let me say this. My friend from Maine just  
13 whispered in my ear, "I want a guy like Commander Harman in  
14 my foxhole next time I am in combat."

15 [Applause.]

16 Chairman Isakson. Your testimony is eloquent, focused,  
17 and challenging, and your leadership to help support us and  
18 what we have tried to do in the past year has helped us get  
19 to where we are. With your help in the future and your  
20 continued enthusiasm, we will get where you want to go in  
21 the future.

22 Mr. Harman. I will be happy to assist you.

23 Chairman Isakson. Thank you for your service.

24 [Applause.]

25 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you,

1 Chairman.

2 I will now yield to Ranking Member Walz.

3 Mr. Walz. I am going to yield my time to the gentleman  
4 from Texas, Mr. O'Rourke.

5 Mr. O'Rourke. Thank you. Thank you both.

6 Do we have any Texans? Can you all rattle your spurs  
7 or make some noise?

8 [Applause.]

9 Mr. O'Rourke. Thank you all for being here.

10 My Chairman on the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee,  
11 Jodey Arrington, and I hosted a no-expense-spared donut  
12 breakfast for our Texans yesterday. Grateful to everyone  
13 who came out and for the conversation that we were able to  
14 have, and the reminder that you gave us that we need to  
15 continue in a bipartisan way forward on all the critical  
16 issues that Commander Harman just raised, you really lit a  
17 fire under us and continue to be our inspiration and our  
18 guide on the work that we have before this Committee, so I  
19 thank you for that.

20 Commander, I wonder if you would address just one of  
21 the many important issues that you raised, and that is  
22 veteran suicide. At a time that the VA estimates--the  
23 conservative number is 20 veterans today will take their own  
24 lives; 14 of those 20 will have been unable or were  
25 unwilling to go to a VA to see a therapist or a psychologist

1 or a psychiatrist. And the rate of suicide amongst those  
2 veterans who have a bad paper discharge, other than  
3 honorable discharge, is twice as high as the general  
4 veterans population.

5       What is your guidance for this Committee going forward  
6 to make sure that we significantly reduce the rate of  
7 veteran suicide?

8       And I will just add in closing, while I have a chance  
9 to listen to you, that I am grateful for President Trump's  
10 nomination of David Shulkin and the service of the Secretary  
11 who has made reducing veteran suicide his number one  
12 clinical priority.

13       So I want to get your advice and guidance on how we  
14 expand upon that.

15       Mr. Harman. We need to find out those veterans who  
16 commit suicide that do not use VA health care. We need to  
17 know whether those individuals are receiving mental health  
18 care on the outside from private practice.

19       We as an organization have partnered with giving our  
20 PatientsLikeMe, Walgreen's, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation,  
21 and we have encouraged our VFW posts around the world to  
22 open their doors to their communities, invite the community  
23 members in, bring mental health providers in, to make people  
24 aware of the five signs of mental health conditions.

25       Many veterans will not come, but families will, and

1 they are affected equally as well. So we encourage that,  
2 and we just need to find more information about those  
3 veterans who are committing suicide that are not using VA.

4 Mr. O'Rourke. Well, we look forward to continuing to  
5 work with you on this and grateful for all of your  
6 leadership on this issue so far. So thank you, Mr.  
7 Commander.

8 I yield back to the Chairman.

9 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

10 Senator Tester, you are recognized.

11 Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 I will yield to the person who fights for the caregiver  
13 legislation more than anybody else in the United States  
14 Senate, Patty Murray.

15 Senator Murray. Thank you. Thank you very much, and  
16 let me just thank all of you for being here today and for  
17 the VFW's continued support for the caregivers program and  
18 our efforts to expand the benefit to pre-9/11 caregivers.

19 Although they are not yet eligible for this program,  
20 many of your members are currently receiving caregiver  
21 services from a close friend or a loved one, and while the  
22 need of each veteran varies significantly, a RAND  
23 Corporation study on pre-9/11 caregivers found that only 39  
24 percent of caregivers live in the veteran's home while  
25 providing caregiver services to their veteran.



1           And in addition to that, more than one-third of all  
2 pre-9/11 caregivers are the children of the veteran and  
3 often have a family of their own.

4           So we cannot overlook the sacrifices of family  
5 caregivers who are serving our veterans merely because they  
6 do not live under the same roof as the veteran.

7           Do you believe that a caregiver should be required to  
8 reside with the veteran in order to be eligible for the  
9 benefits of this program?

10          Mr. Harman. Well, it would certainly make it more  
11 feasible for them to be living in the home in which the  
12 veteran is receiving the care.

13          Do you want to follow up, Carlos?

14          Mr. Fuentes. Thank you, Chief.

15          It certainly does make it easier, but it should not be  
16 a requirement by law. It can be done. It does not have to  
17 be in the same home as long as they are providing care and  
18 that we can assure that they are doing so and it is  
19 assisting the veteran. It does not matter if they live at  
20 the home.

21          Senator Murray. Especially if it is a child with a  
22 family of their own who does all of the work that has to  
23 care for their family as well.

24          As you know, the VA has recently supported increasing  
25 the number of activities of daily living, known as ADLs,

1 required to be eligible for the caregivers program, but as  
2 the current program recognizes, veterans with an inability  
3 to perform even one ADL still have significant caregiving  
4 needs.

5       The members of your organization and their caregivers  
6 know that firsthand, and they can attest to the emotional,  
7 mental, physical, and financial burdens of caring often over  
8 the span of decades for one ADL veteran. Can you discuss or  
9 someone on your panel discuss the difficulty of providing  
10 care for someone with an inability to perform even one ADL?

11       Mr. Harman. Go ahead.

12       Mr. Fuentes. Thank you, Chief.

13       Again, this is a matter of ensuring that a doctor is  
14 able to determine whether a veteran needs caregiving  
15 assistance, and eligibility should be based on that, whether  
16 they need assistance and how labor-intensive that care is  
17 required to be, not necessarily whether you meet one or two  
18 or three. It is based on whether that doctor believes that  
19 this veteran needs the support of a caregiver.

20       Senator Murray. So arbitrarily setting a number of  
21 ADLs may not and will not reflect the actual needs of that  
22 veteran?

23       Mr. Fuentes. Correct, ma'am.

24       Senator Murray. Thank you.

25       Chairman Roe. I thank the gentlelady for yielding, and

1 for a correction of the record, Mr. O'Rourke, who is a good  
2 friend, there would not be a Texas if it were not for  
3 Tennessee. I want to point that out.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Chairman Roe. And we are now ready for a 3-minute  
6 public service announcement from Maine from Mr. Poliquin.  
7 Go right ahead.

8 [Laughter.]

9 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10 You know, Mr. Chairman, we get picked on all the time  
11 in the great State of Maine. We are a small State, but,  
12 sir, we are a great State.

13 And as a result of that, I would like to ask Steve San  
14 Pedro, Andre Dumas, Ben Williams, and Chris Armstrong--are  
15 they here today from the great State of Maine? If you are,  
16 please stand up and be recognized.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Poliquin. Now, some, Mr. Chairman, might believe  
19 that the reason these nice fellows came down is because  
20 tonight we are receiving 18 inches of snow. I can tell you  
21 that is not the case, but they may be here for another  
22 couple days as a result of this.

23 And I know that Commander Farris and his wife, Nellie,  
24 are not feeling well today. We were in the office with them  
25 yesterday, sir, but they are not here today. But we wish

1 them well.

2 Mr. Chairman, the State of Maine has the second highest  
3 percent of our population that are veterans. We love our  
4 veterans in the State of Maine. I represent the rural part  
5 of Maine. Some folks say, "Well, Bruce, is not that  
6 redundant?" I say, "No. We have a couple towns that are  
7 above 25- or 30,000." I represent about 400 towns in the  
8 rural part of our State, and let me tell you, we love our  
9 veterans.

10 I am very concerned, Commander, and I would love to  
11 have you comment on this or one of your associates. How do  
12 we deal with access to rural care or care, rather, for our  
13 veterans that live in rural areas?

14 Now, I am a big supporter of the Choice program. It  
15 got its start with the ARCH program in Aroostook County that  
16 Senator Collins was very instrumental in working on, and in  
17 no way--and I want to make this very clear to everybody that  
18 is here today. In no way do I advocate--and I am sure the  
19 folks on the Committee advocate in any way replacing the VA.  
20 This is to augment the VA. This is not to privatize the  
21 VA; it is to augment the VA.

22 And the reason for that, Commander, is we may have  
23 someone that lives up in Fort Kent, Maine, and tonight when  
24 the wind is going to be blowing sideways and they are not  
25 feeling well and they have got a 5-hour drive to Togus down

1 in Augusta, it might not make sense for them to make the  
2 trip. So I think it is great if they are able to get their  
3 health care closer to home. That is what I am focused on  
4 and represent our rural veterans in Maine and throughout the  
5 country.

6 Do you think there is anything I am missing, Commander,  
7 with respect to this issue? And in your opinion, what is  
8 the most important issue facing our veterans that live in  
9 rural America?

10 Mr. Harman. The travel distance to a VA medical  
11 facility, and I think one of the ways they could improve  
12 that is to increase the telehealth care.

13 A veteran can take a picture if he has a rash or  
14 whatever. He can take a picture of it and send it to the VA  
15 through the telehealth program. Some physician or nursing  
16 staff can take a look at that and can prescribe something.  
17 They ought to be able to do it through Skype or something at  
18 their computer at their home.

19 Mr. Poliquin. Any of the other fellows on the  
20 Committee want to weigh in on this?

21 Mr. Fuentes?

22 Mr. Fuentes. I would be happy to. Thank you for the  
23 question, and the VFW is supportive of ARCH. It was great  
24 to see that it was incorporated into the Choice program and  
25 certainly want to make sure that rural veterans are able to

1 access care. If it is not through telehealth or being able  
2 to access VA medical facilities, getting care close to home.  
3 It is key.

4 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you all very much for giving us  
5 our freedom and our country. We are indebted and grateful  
6 to you. Thank you very much.

7 [Applause.]

8 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Mr. Poliquin.

9 Dr. Colonel Wenstrup, you are recognized.

10 Dr. Wenstrup. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

11 Thank you all for being here.

12 I am a proud life member. When I returned from Iraq  
13 and I got to Fort McCoy, they were right there in the PX. I  
14 said, "Oh, that is right. I guess I am eligible now to be a  
15 member of the VFW," so I joined right away.

16 [Applause.]

17 Dr. Wenstrup. And as an Ohioan, I am very pleased to  
18 see Ohio so well represented within the VFW in many  
19 capacities, and I would like to see all the Ohioans stand up  
20 and be recognized. And I want to welcome you to D.C. Thank  
21 you all.

22 [Applause.]

23 Dr. Wenstrup. So on the issue of health care, as I  
24 chair the Health Subcommittee on the VA, I also serve on the  
25 Armed Services Committee on the Personnel Committee, and I

1 just want you to know there is a couple of things. We have  
2 had a lot of doctors involved with the VA in the last couple  
3 of terms, and our focus is that there is access to care.  
4 That is the primary goal.

5       There is a physician shortage. There is caregiver  
6 shortages all across the country, and so we are very much  
7 challenged. But I can tell you across the board in these  
8 committees, we are determined to do everything we can to  
9 have our veterans have access to care and get care,  
10 hopefully within the walls of the VA, but if not, we want  
11 care to be the priority.

12       And also, we want to make sure that decisions that are  
13 being made as far as health care can be made between the  
14 doctor and the patient.

15       Mr. Harman. Absolutely.

16       Dr. Wenstrup. That is a priority because that is who  
17 should have the say-so. So we deal with some of that.

18       But also being on Armed Services as well, I want to  
19 assure you how much we are working on in every capacity  
20 trying to make sure that when you wear this uniform--all of  
21 you wore the uniform before you joined the VFW. You had  
22 that role. We want to make sure that there is a smooth  
23 transition in every capacity going from uniform to being a  
24 veteran, not only with your health care, but your quality of  
25 life.

1           And so those are the issues we are working on, and we  
2 appreciate your support and standing with us as we make  
3 these movements towards a better quality of life and access  
4 to care for our veterans from day one, from the day they are  
5 recruited, until the day they pass on.

6           And I want to thank you all for your service here  
7 today.

8           Mr. Harman. Thank you.

9           [Applause.]

10          Chairman Roe. Mr. Takano, you are recognized.

11          Mr. Takano. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12          I just want to know if there are any Californians in  
13 the room today.

14          Hey.

15          [Applause.]

16          Mr. Takano. Well, welcome, welcome.

17          Let me just say, Mr. Chairman, thank you, Commander  
18 Harman, for your testimony this morning and all the  
19 important work the VFW does for advocating and supporting  
20 veterans. I always value the VFW's work to survey its  
21 members and help us understand their preferences and what is  
22 or is not working with the VA. Your survey, our Care Survey  
23 2018, found that 87 percent of veterans who use VA care  
24 would recommend it to their fellow veterans, and I want you  
25 to know this Member hears you loud and clear. You fought



1 for the United States of America, not Blue Cross Blue  
2 Shield. You fought for the red, white, and blue, and we  
3 need to preserve the traditional coordinated role of the VA  
4 for care and not privatize the VA.

5 Mr. Harman. Absolutely.

6 Mr. Takano. So thank you.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Takano. And as far as a critical need that we need  
9 filled is we need to expand the number of graduate medical  
10 education slots. That is a key part of why the 30,000  
11 positions that are unfilled at the VA are not filled. We do  
12 not have enough personnel, and I think that is a top  
13 priority.

14 Now, I think it is a mistake also to try and change the  
15 subject and to pick on Federal employee unions. I have  
16 participated in passing a compromise bill on accountability.  
17 We have seen action taken against employees who are not  
18 accountable, but there has been an attempt to, I think,  
19 villainize Federal official time. And I just want to  
20 clarify something. Federal law prohibits the use of  
21 official time to conduct internal union business. Instead,  
22 it is used to ensure workplace safety, develop employee  
23 training, and improve workplace processes and working  
24 conditions. These in turn help improve the care and service  
25 we provide to veterans.

1           Eliminating or restricting official time will not solve  
2 the workforce challenges at the VA. We should be looking at  
3 how the VA recruits and retains employees, strengthens HR.  
4 HR is one of the weak links in the VA and its ability to  
5 fulfill those slots.

6           We should be investing in graduate medical education--  
7 medical residences is another way to say it--and some of the  
8 other policies that are proven to help improve the  
9 workplace.

10          And I want you to remember that roughly one-third of  
11 all VA employees are veterans themselves, and they deserve  
12 safe workplaces, fair working conditions, and they want  
13 training to help them do their jobs more effectively.

14          It is easy to misrepresent official time as wasteful  
15 and harmful to veterans, but in reality, it also is for the  
16 benefit of our veterans who work at the VA. And they  
17 deserve fairness just like any other employees, so thank  
18 you.

19          Mr. Harman. Thank you.

20          [Applause.]

21          Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

22          I will now yield to my good friend, Senator Boozman  
23 from Arkansas.

24          Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.

25          Thank you all for being here. We appreciate you,

1 Commander, and very much appreciate the team that you have  
2 here working so very hard for veterans and do a great job.

3 I want to give a big shout-out to those of you from  
4 Arkansas. You might stand up, so we can--

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Boozman. Thank you. We do appreciate you all.

7 We had a great meeting yesterday, and like the rest of  
8 the crew here, you do a great job of really making, in my  
9 case, the Arkansas delegation aware of what is going on at  
10 home. Nobody knows better than the grassroots, as you all  
11 are visiting with your buddies, as to where their problems  
12 are. The problems in Maine, the problems in Arkansas, the  
13 problems in California are somewhat different because of  
14 geography, but again, thank you so much for doing that.

15 One of the things they focused on yesterday was  
16 sequestration. I appreciate you bringing that up right at  
17 the top of the list. That is something that we are working  
18 hard to get rectified. It is certainly no way to run a  
19 government, and we need to do a much better job of that.

20 I would like to ask you very quickly for any ideas.  
21 One of the things that we are grappling with so, so very  
22 hard is veteran suicide. We are spending a tremendous  
23 amount of money on it. We can be proud of that, but sadly,  
24 the numbers have stayed the same. They are not going down.  
25 They are staying the same, maybe increasing a little bit.

1           So I would like to ask you. In your experience, you  
2 mentioned, Commander, telemedicine. That is actually  
3 working somewhat in this, and again, anything that you can  
4 do to bring people together is a good thing.

5           I would like for you to tell me a little bit about what  
6 you feel like some of the programs that are doing a good  
7 job, some perhaps that are not, and then also if you can  
8 think about some of the metrics that we need to put in place  
9 to actually start measuring these things, measuring the  
10 programs, where we need to spend additional money, where we  
11 need to spend perhaps no money or not as much money in  
12 programs that are not working.

13           Bob?

14           Mr. Wallace. I think the program that we put together  
15 a year ago and have worked on for the past 2 years now is  
16 what needs to happen.

17           We have committed to do everything we can to de-  
18 stigmatize the fact that somebody needs help. Post-  
19 traumatic stress disorder, if you have it, we have got to  
20 reach out to and got to get you care. We have partnered  
21 with some of the best organizations there are, mental health  
22 through Give an Hour where they bring in clinicians.  
23 Walgreens will bring in clinicians. The VA is a partner of  
24 ours, the Elizabeth Dole Foundation for caregivers, and we  
25 have community service programs going on where we bring the

1 community in and do something good for the community and at  
2 the same time have a conversation about mental health.

3 I think that Government cannot do it all. It has to be  
4 all of us together talking to people. You and I know open-  
5 heart surgery was not something anybody talked about years  
6 ago.

7 Senator Boozman. Sure.

8 Mr. Wallace. But now today, we talk about it. Same  
9 thing with cancer and other things. We have got to get that  
10 conversation going, more open about mental health, and I  
11 think that it has to take organizations like ours out there  
12 in the community.

13 The Government has great programs with the clinicians  
14 and so forth, but they cannot do it all. It has to be at  
15 the local grassroots level, and that is what we are trying  
16 to do.

17 Senator Boozman. I appreciate that, and I think you  
18 make a great point. Government has got the want to, but  
19 organizations like yourself have the heart.

20 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

22 And I have had the privilege of visiting both VA  
23 hospitals in Arkansas, and I appreciate the invite for  
24 having me there.

25 I will now yield to Mr. Correa from California.

1 Mr. Correa. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

2 First of all, I want to thank all of your service, all  
3 of you here for service for a great country.

4 And, Commander, if I can, I just want to say I am from  
5 the State of California, home to the greatest number of  
6 veterans in this great Union.

7 Our Californians, again, a round of applause, please,  
8 for them.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Correa. And to all of you here, especially my  
11 California delegation, I just want to let you know that I  
12 work for you, and I am here to listen, and I am here to  
13 learn from you.

14 Back home, meet with a lot of my veterans, and a lot of  
15 them talk to me about their invisible scars that they bring  
16 back from serving our country, and a lot of them have  
17 recently been telling me that they do not want opioids.  
18 They do not want those drugs in their bodies, and they  
19 prefer medical cannabis.

20 And, Mr. Commander and all of you here, I would like to  
21 know what is your opinion on this issue.

22 Mr. Harman. I think there is a lot of talk about  
23 additional treatment programs for post-traumatic stress, and  
24 I think that there needs to be a lot more research done in  
25 that aspect, especially with medical cannabis.

1 I know in my own State of Ohio, we have been--there is  
2 a facility in the northwest part of Ohio that does--they  
3 kind of specialize in hyperbaric chamber treatments, and my  
4 VFW department has paid for four or five individuals to go  
5 up there. There has been a combination of TBI, PTSD, and  
6 they have gone through these treatment programs with a  
7 considerable amount of success. So there are other things  
8 that we need to be looking at and exploring and doing  
9 research to see how feasible it is to do other treatment  
10 programs.

11 Mr. Correa. Mr. Commander, I think I hear your  
12 marching orders. Yes, sir.

13 Mr. Harman. Thank you.

14 Mr. Correa. I yield, Mr. Chair.

15 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

16 And also, Mr. Correa, thank you for your service in  
17 California as the lead on the Senate side of the VA in  
18 California, a very experienced member of our group.

19 I will now yield to Senator Tester, Ranking.

20 Senator Tester. Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 I was hoping that the Congressman from Maine would  
22 stick around because I need to set the record straight.  
23 According to the American Enterprise Institute of November  
24 6th, 2017, the top three states per capita for veterans were  
25 Alaska, number one; Montana, number two. And Maine was

1 somewhere down the list.

2 [Laughter.]

3 Senator Tester. At any rate, Commander Harman, thank  
4 you again for being here today.

5 We have got a bill called Caring for Our Veterans, you  
6 are very familiar with, and you have been a great supporter  
7 of it. And we thank you for it.

8 You talked in your opening statement about the fact  
9 that we need to fix choice, but we also need to invest  
10 within the VA to make sure the VA can meet the needs of our  
11 veterans.

12 Can you talk about that investment and where we should  
13 be focusing on as far as building the VA?

14 Mr. Harman. I think as our surveys have indicated, our  
15 veterans, they prefer using the VA's health care system.  
16 However, with that being said, we also know that the VA  
17 cannot provide all the services that are needed. So with  
18 regard to that, you are going to have to use private sector,  
19 but it has to be up to the veteran and/or his primary care  
20 physician to determine whether that care is received by the  
21 VA or outsourced to the private practice.

22 It has to be that way. VA knows how to treat service-  
23 connected conditions for whatever illness that individual  
24 happens to have, but it needs to be between that veteran and  
25 his primary care physician to determine where that care is



1 received.

2 Senator Tester. Well, thank you, Commander.

3 I would just add to that very quickly, and then I will  
4 yield, the fact that I do not know what it is like in other  
5 places of the country, but I think it is the same, where in  
6 our great State of Montana, where we have a lot of veterans--  
7 -and it is rural--our VA does not have enough docs, period,  
8 whether it is general practitioners or whether it is folks  
9 that are psychiatrists or psychologists. And I really hope  
10 that the VA really gets aggressive.

11 We have given them the tools over the last 15 months to  
12 be able to recruit and retain these folks, and they really  
13 need to step it up in a big, big way. Our veterans are  
14 counting on it.

15 Thank you for being here. Thank you for the VFW. God  
16 bless you all.

17 Mr. Harman. Thank you, Senator.

18 [Applause.]

19 Chairman Roe. Senator Tillis, you are recognized.

20 Senator Tillis. Thank you all for being here.

21 You have always got to do the bragging part before you  
22 get started here. I heard the gentleman from Montana talk  
23 about the per capita numbers in Montana, and a buddy of  
24 mine, Dan Sullivan from Alaska reminds me he has got the  
25 highest per capita, and I remind him I have got more

1 veterans than they got people.

2 [Laughter.]

3 Senator Tillis. Ten percent of our State, about a  
4 million people are veterans, and I would actually like to  
5 ask here in the audience, if you are from North Carolina or  
6 you spent any quality time in North Carolina at Fort Bragg  
7 or Camp Lejeune or anywhere else, just raise your hand or  
8 stand if you are able.

9 [Applause.]

10 Senator Tillis. I love North Carolina for a variety of  
11 reasons, but on the veterans issue, it is a great place to  
12 understand both sides of the issues on providing care.  
13 Fifty percent of our population is in urban areas. Fifty  
14 percent of our population is in rural areas. What we have  
15 got to recognize is, number one, the bedrock of the VA  
16 health system are brick-and-mortar presences where veterans  
17 can be provided care.

18 I have staff in my State that are tasked with going out  
19 to places where veterans congregate to try and create case  
20 work, and one of those places are VA centers to where you  
21 can help them get through the care they are getting but try  
22 and cut back the paperwork and the red tape that they have  
23 to go through to get the quality of care that they need.  
24 But I think we all agree that we are going to have a good  
25 brick-and-mortar presence that we need to make even better.

1 We are going to have non-VA care--that is a critical part of  
2 it--in consultation with the primary care physician, and in  
3 cases where the best service is out in the community, we  
4 have got to figure out how to get that veteran in  
5 consultation with their doctor of the choice. At the end of  
6 the day, it is providing care to people who have served our  
7 Nation.

8       So we want to continue to work with you on that, and I  
9 believe that we are making progress. We have a lot more.

10       Senator Tester is gone. I also wanted to personally  
11 thank him for the work he has done. He and I have been  
12 meeting with the head of the VA almost monthly for the last  
13 2 years, going into 3 years now, trying to track the day-to-  
14 day changes they are making, and we are always looking for  
15 your insight on how to do that better. And there are things  
16 that we made progress on, and we have to make more.

17       The Camp Lejeune contaminated water, the presumptive  
18 decisions down there to provide veterans care is very  
19 important.

20       Burn pits is another thing that I have spent time on  
21 with Senator Klobuchar.

22       I think that we have got to figure out how we can let  
23 the benefit of the doubt go to the veteran when we believe  
24 that they need the care, and we need your help on that.

25       [Applause.]

1           Senator Tillis. And finally, I never miss an  
2 opportunity to speak with veterans to tell you that we know  
3 there are a lot more veterans out there that need help, and  
4 we have got to figure out how to get to them, whether it is  
5 a veteran with bad paper. He may have had traumatic brain  
6 injury, some sort of service-connected challenge that  
7 resulted in bad paper, and now, right now to the veterans or  
8 to the VA's credit, they are providing emergency mental  
9 health treatment. But there is so much more that we need to  
10 do.

11           So you all help me while we are trying to fix the  
12 problem with the VA. Try and help me reach out to those  
13 veterans in North Carolina, those million and the millions  
14 across the country, to give them the care they deserve.

15           Thank you.

16           Mr. Harman. Thank you.

17           [Applause.]

18           Chairman Roe. Ms. Kuster, you are recognized.

19           Ms. Kuster. Thank you very much, Dr. Roe, and great to  
20 be here.

21           I am going to brag very briefly on the great State of  
22 New Hampshire, first in the Nation and the presidential  
23 primary, and thank you to my New Hampshire vets for being  
24 with me. And I am proudly wearing my No Sequestration  
25 button on your behalf.

1 [Applause.]

2 Ms. Kuster. Thanks for a great visit yesterday.

3 So I am just going to dive right in because I only have  
4 3 minutes.

5 I am with you on the no sequestration.

6 I want to talk about the choice. I have had a lot of  
7 conversations these 2 weeks with the veterans that are  
8 coming in from New Hampshire and obviously meeting all the  
9 time with our vets at home about how we find this balance,  
10 this fulcrum of community care where we do not inadvertently  
11 slide into privatization and lose the support going forward  
12 of Congress and the taxpayers to help our veterans and give  
13 you everything you need. So that is my focus.

14 In New Hampshire, I have got a rural district, but we  
15 have some wonderful agencies that I would really like to  
16 team up with, and I think this could help all over the  
17 country. And those are our federally qualified health  
18 centers, FQHCs, that exist in underserved areas, many in  
19 rural parts of the country, and these facilities are  
20 required to see everyone, regardless of ability to pay, and  
21 required to provide mental health, as you discussed, and  
22 substance use counseling. We are sadly number one, now  
23 number two or three in the Nation for deaths from the opioid  
24 epidemic, number one for deaths from fentanyl, the synthetic  
25 opioid. So this is crucial for us, and our veterans are

1 being treated in these. And I would love to have you take a  
2 look at our legislation that would open up to work  
3 collaboratively for the VA to be able to serve veterans'  
4 needs locally, regionally in these FQHCs as an extension of  
5 the network.

6 And I would be happy to--Kevin Diamond from my team and  
7 I would be happy to work with all of you.

8 Dr. Roe had some kind words for my bill the other day,  
9 so I am very excited about the possibility of working  
10 together in a bipartisan way.

11 I am going to move on because my time is short. I will  
12 not put you on the spot. We will have further conversations  
13 about that FQHC.

14 The last thing I wanted to get to is the issue of  
15 prosthetics, and we in New Hampshire are the home of  
16 something called the LUKE arm, and I do not know if you have  
17 heard about it, but it is really an incredible advancement  
18 for prosthetics that can literally reach down and pick up a  
19 grape, and it can reach overhead, which has not happened to  
20 date.

21 And we would love to put together a pilot for  
22 prosthetics and advanced prosthetics, and again, I would  
23 love to work with you on that.

24 So 9 seconds, if you have anything to add.

25 [Laughter.]

1 Mr. Harman. We would be happy to work with you on both  
2 of those.

3 Ms. Kuster. Delightful. Thank you. I look forward to  
4 it. Thanks for your time.

5 [Applause.]

6 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Commander, for the brevity of  
7 your answer, okay?

8 [Laughter.]

9 Chairman Roe. Mr. Arrington, you are recognized.

10 Mr. Arrington. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I might  
11 get my Texas credentials revoked if I did not say give it up  
12 once again for the great State of Texas and our veterans  
13 from the Lone Star State.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Arrington. All right. We got that out of the way.  
16 Love you guys.

17 Chairman, I want to thank you and Ranking Member Walz  
18 for your leadership. As a new Member, I came to Washington,  
19 D.C., not just to change the course of this country for the  
20 good people that I represent in West Texas, but the culture  
21 of this country and the culture of Washington, really. It  
22 is broken. You know it. We all know it. But where it is  
23 not broken, the last bastion of bipartisan achievement is  
24 coming from this Committee. Twenty-five bills have passed  
25 the House, 12 have become law, because we work together in a

1 constructive way. We check our partisanship at the door,  
2 and we put America first. Now, I know you guys--

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Arrington. This is just my observation, but as the  
5 Chairman of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee--and I am  
6 grateful for that leadership opportunity to serve you guys.  
7 Thank you for your service. Thank you, Commander, for your  
8 leadership and service.

9 But it seems like every issue, whether it is the  
10 appeals process or it is health care related or it is home  
11 modification for our disabled veterans, you name it, at the  
12 heart of the issue is a broken culture, a failed system, an  
13 big bureaucracy that is failing our veterans. That is the  
14 heart of this.

15 Now, we have done some good things to empower the VA  
16 leadership to change that culture for you guys, but let me  
17 tell you one of my biggest disappointments. It is the  
18 biggest disappointment since I have been on this Committee,  
19 is that the GAO reported in my first hearing that there are  
20 hundreds of VA employees who spend 100 percent of their time  
21 on union activity. The law says that you cannot administer  
22 official time or union activity unless it is reasonable,  
23 necessary, and in the best interest of the public.

24 Now, there is not anybody in West Texas that I have  
25 talked to, veteran or taxpayer, that believes that somebody



1 is spending 100 percent of their time on anything, anything  
2 than the job they were hired to do to serve the veterans is  
3 reasonable, necessary, and in the best interest of the  
4 public. I have got one word for it, "outrageous," and I  
5 cannot get enough help to get this bill out of the House,  
6 out of the Senate, and to the President's desk so we can add  
7 to the accountability reform, add to all these great things  
8 we are doing, and change the culture of the VA and serve you  
9 guys.

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Arrington. Are you with me?

12 [Chorus of yeses.]

13 Mr. Arrington. I need your help, 100 percent. My bill  
14 just says we are not doing away with the unions. There are  
15 good people in unions. There are good people at the VA.  
16 The system is broken. This is part of it.

17 And so my bill simply says if you are giving direct  
18 patient care, no union activity. Everybody else, no more  
19 than 25 percent of your time.

20 So, Commander, I would be happy for you to address this  
21 or anybody on your panel, but I am not stopping. I am not  
22 quitting. I will not give up on this issue. I am coming  
23 for everybody on this until it is fixed.

24 I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

25 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

1           And, Senator Rounds, you are recognized.

2           Senator Rounds. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3           First of all, let me begin. I am from the State of  
4 South Dakota, and I think I have got some members here from  
5 the VFW in South Dakota. Are you here yet, or have you  
6 already taken off?

7           There you are, way in the back. Thanks for being here.  
8 Appreciate it. Thank you for your service.

9           [Applause.]

10          Senator Rounds. I kind of thought maybe I was going to  
11 be the rabble-rouser here today, but somebody beat me to it.  
12 I understand, Mr. Chairman, that the VFW is supportive of  
13 the Caring for our Veterans Act. I happen to think there  
14 are some very, very good items in there that are a long time  
15 in coming with regard to providing additional care for our  
16 veterans.

17          But I have to be honest with you. I have real  
18 concerns. Johnny Isakson from Georgia is absolutely a  
19 fantastic Chairman in the Senate. He has been working  
20 overtime to bring consensus in our group, and the concern  
21 that some of us have expressed--and we have been working on  
22 it even this morning yet--we are concerned about the long-  
23 term longevity of choice, and I want to share why.

24          I come from South Dakota. We are one of the five rural  
25 States in America. We have got a whole lot of people that

1 live more than 40 miles away from a VA facility. The reason  
2 why choice is there in the first place is because veterans  
3 came and said they were not getting the service that they  
4 deserved from the institution of the VA.

5 Choice has been very, very expensive, but one of the  
6 reasons why choice has been so expensive is because veterans  
7 across this country have voted with their feet. Those who  
8 have waited more than 30 days to get into a VA facility went  
9 someplace else where they could maybe get some service.

10 People that live more than 40 miles away, they wanted  
11 to opportunity to perhaps take care of some of their medical  
12 needs that perhaps were not VA-related in a community closer  
13 to where they lived.

14 Now, under the proposal that is being discussed right  
15 now and the concern that I have--and I really would like  
16 your thoughts on this because I think you folks have thought  
17 this out a little bit--under the proposal, it would require  
18 the acceptance of both the VA and the individual veteran to  
19 agree to go outside of the VA. That means that the VA has a  
20 veto opportunity if that veteran wants to go and have his  
21 service outside the 40 miles and the VA disagrees.

22 Now, the reason why this change is being proposed is  
23 because of cost. It is not because of improving services  
24 for the veteran.

25 In fairness to Secretary Shulkin, he is working his

1 tail off to make things better, and I think he should have  
2 an opportunity to do so. And I want to work with him.

3 But, Commander Harman, I would love you or a member of  
4 your group to perhaps give your thoughts about whether or  
5 not we need some kind of an assurance that the veteran  
6 really does have a choice in where they get their service or  
7 if we should agree with the VA that they should have that  
8 veto authority over where that veteran gets his service in  
9 the future.

10 Mr. Fuentes. Senator, thank you very much for your  
11 hard work on fighting for veterans of South Dakota, and in  
12 our survey, first and foremost, our members tell us that  
13 they prefer to get their care from VA, and even when given  
14 the option to go outside, 60 percent of them choose to wait  
15 or travel farther for VA.

16 So there is an example from Black Hills that comes to  
17 mind as to what the issue is now, and we need to make sure  
18 that it does not occur again. There was a veteran--and you  
19 know Black Hills was shutting down, so VA said, "Well, to  
20 solve this issue, before we stand up Rapid Falls, you are  
21 going to go to the community." The veteran reported to us  
22 that their private-sector provider was not giving him the  
23 care that he needed, and finally, he was able to get into  
24 Rapid City.

25 Frankly, what we want is veterans to receive the care

1 certainly where they need it, but also veteran-centric care  
2 that is high quality and meets their unique needs. That is  
3 going to be in the private sector and in VA, but we cannot  
4 have a one-sided approach.

5 Senator Rounds. If I could one more?

6 Chairman Roe. Go right ahead.

7 Senator Rounds. So does that mean we cannot have the  
8 one-sided approach where the veteran makes the decision, or  
9 is it that we cannot have the one-sided approach where the  
10 VA makes the decision? Because under this provision, the VA  
11 has the final say on where that veteran gets their health  
12 care. Which is it?

13 Mr. Fuentes. Senator, we do not believe that the VA--  
14 or the veteran's doctor is a bureaucrat, and frankly, the  
15 veteran and their doctor should have the ability to decide  
16 what is medically necessary and what is in the best interest  
17 of the veteran.

18 Frankly, if it makes sense for the veteran to go closer  
19 to home and not travel 200 miles, then that is exactly what  
20 should happen.

21 Senator Rounds. Thank you.

22 [Applause.]

23 Senator Rounds. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

24 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator.

25 Next, I will yield to my good friend--and actually,

1 when we say that here, we usually do not like each other.

2 In this case, I do. He is a good friend, Bill Cassidy from  
3 Louisiana.

4 Senator Cassidy. Thank you, Dr. Roe.

5 First, shout-out to my people from Louisiana. I know I  
6 have some folks. Whoa.

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Cassidy. And I would just like to point out  
9 that Camp Lejeune is named after a fellow who was born in  
10 Louisiana, and John Lejeune went to LSU before he joined--  
11 before he went to the naval, so North Carolina benefits from  
12 us. So what is new?

13 [Laughter.]

14 Senator Cassidy. And I also want to give a shout-out  
15 to my veterans. Louisiana is one of the top three in the  
16 Nation for veterans who serve during wartime, so I want to  
17 thank my fellow Louisianans for answering the call in time  
18 of strife.

19 Thank you for your service. I loved your testimony.  
20 Commander, you are right in line with some legislation that  
21 I will speak to that I am introducing that I think you will  
22 like.

23 I am a physician, Dr. Roe as well, but I am a liver  
24 doctor. My joke yesterday is when I say I am actually a  
25 hepatologist, but when you say hepatology, people think you

1 do either snakes or venereal disease.

2 [Laughter.]

3 Senator Cassidy. But I am a liver doctor, and I have  
4 worked with a lot of people with transplants. And it just  
5 makes sense. The more transplants a transplant center does,  
6 the better your outcomes. The more likely the new organ  
7 survives, the more likely the person lives, the shorter time  
8 they spend in the hospital.

9 We are introducing a bill that if a veteran lives near  
10 a private-sector transplant center that she or he could go  
11 to that nearby transplant center as opposed to being  
12 referred to the VA a thousand miles away.

13 Now, distance does not bother me as much, but if you  
14 look at the VA transplant centers, they do not do as many,  
15 and in some cases, their outcomes are not as good.

16 So if you are in New Orleans and you have a chance to  
17 go to Ochsner, which may do 300 liver transplants a year and  
18 has the best outcomes in the country as opposed to someplace  
19 else in the VA system which does 20 a year and which has  
20 only 70 percent as good outcomes as the New Orleans center,  
21 why would not you go to New Orleans if you live in New  
22 Orleans?

23 And, Commander, you said if the specialty service is  
24 not offered in the VA, that is when choice really comes into  
25 play. I would argue when it is offered but may not be as

1 good, because what we are talking about here are lives. As  
2 a hepatologist who has taken care of transplants, I know the  
3 experience of the center matters, and in this case, it  
4 matters for the person's life.

5 And so I look forward to exploring that with you. We  
6 have heard some preliminary indications that VA might be  
7 opposed, but I do not know why because Secretary Shulkin at  
8 one point said the VA is about the veteran; it is not about  
9 the VA system. And I actually think that is the best,  
10 highest calling of all, because for you, each of you made  
11 the decision that your life is about our country, more so  
12 than even your life.

13 I thank you for that, and I will do my best to continue  
14 the ethic that you inspire us all with.

15 Thank you, and I yield back.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

18 I do not know about Commander Harman, but actually, my  
19 country made that decision for me. I went to the mailbox.

20 [Laughter.]

21 Chairman Roe. Number 27 was my draft number.

22 I will now yield to Lieutenant General Bergman,  
23 Chairman of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee.  
24 General, you are recognized.

25 Mr. Bergman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and first of



1 all, who is here from Michigan?

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Bergman. All right. Yeah, all right.

4 Well, you know, it is important to shout out for a lot  
5 of folks, and as I look at the first two guys right here, I  
6 see some familiar faces. Ryan and Bob, good to see you, as  
7 always. We have known each other for a few years now.

8 But I am proud member, a life member of VFW, have been  
9 since my father--

10 [Applause.]

11 Mr. Bergman. My father and a couple of his buddies--my  
12 dad was born in the Upper Peninsula, but he ended up because  
13 of no work--ended up down in a little farm town south of  
14 Minneapolis, but the point is when they came back from World  
15 War II, like so many places, they started the VFW post in  
16 honor of one of their buddies who had paid the ultimate  
17 sacrifice.

18 So I grew up as a kid--my first sales job was Buddy  
19 Poppies. I had Buddy Poppies in one hand and a can with a  
20 coin slot in the other. This is before the advent of paper  
21 money. That is how old I am.

22 [Laughter.]

23 Mr. Bergman. But the point is what you do, what you do  
24 every day not only for the veterans, but in your  
25 communities--and we know one of the challenges that every

1 veteran service organization has, VFW included, is new  
2 members, in getting the newer veterans to get involved.

3       So whatever we can do, whatever I can do personally as  
4 a VFW member to engage and encourage those young vets to get  
5 involved, I am all in.

6       And when speaking about all in, First District of  
7 Michigan is rural, very, very rural, and whatever we are  
8 talking about--but this case, let us just talk about  
9 veterans' health care. If we can get our programs and  
10 health care delivery to work for veterans in the First  
11 District of Michigan, they will work anywhere.

12       I noticed in your statement here, you talk about  
13 telemedicine.

14       Mr. Harman. Yes.

15       Mr. Bergman. Thank you. Thank you for supporting that  
16 because the movement towards telemedicine is about quality  
17 health care, and I think the partnership that you are going  
18 to see between the VA and, shall we say, non-VA medicine to  
19 deliver health care is the way we go future with the VA  
20 being the lead dog in the pack to make sure that the veteran  
21 does not slip through the crack.

22       So I am going to ask just kind of for a consensus if  
23 you agree with my next statement. We have a unique  
24 opportunity here in combining the passion that you have for  
25 telehealth to be one, but veterans' health care. Would you

1 support as a whole a pilot project that it takes VA--let us  
2 say VA facility with a local, maybe community hospital, VA,  
3 not a full-service hospital, local hospital is, that we look  
4 at a pilot project to see where we can--without reinventing  
5 the wheel, provide better health care for veterans just as a  
6 pilot project? Is that something that the VFW do you think  
7 could get behind?

8 Mr. Harman. We could do that. Sure, I think that is  
9 something that we could seriously take a look at.

10 Mr. Bergman. Good. Well, I thank you very much.

11 I yield back. The time goes by quickly when you are  
12 among friends. So thank you very much for your service.

13 Chairman Roe. Thank you, General Bergman. Thank you.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Roe. Now I yield to Sergeant Major Walz.

16 Mr. Walz. Well, thank you, Commander. Thank you for  
17 your testimony, and thank you all for being here.

18 Lieutenant General Bergman said he was just south of  
19 Minneapolis. That is just north of heaven, if you want to  
20 know, same area.

21 [Laughter.]

22 Mr. Walz. But I appreciate your passion. You can see  
23 it up here.

24 We talk about these issues in the context of what is  
25 best to deliver for veterans. You see up here, we have

1 differences, and we have them out. I know the gentleman  
2 from Texas. He and I have been working for the issues. He  
3 is a staunch advocate for our veterans, to get this right,  
4 this issue on official time. I always feel the need to  
5 bring it up.

6       The official time is we have got folks that, yes, they  
7 are working. We have a nurse who is working on official  
8 time, not union dues, not collecting people, not recruiting  
9 people, but implementing policies that are coming down  
10 because VA does not have an HR. So if we have a new  
11 surgical procedure going, these things are coming down from  
12 management, and they are being put through.

13       I make the equivalent for all of you why this is an  
14 issue for me. That I was paid--and your tax dollars trained  
15 me to be a 13 Bravo artilleryman. Well, through attrition  
16 or whatever the heck, I end up being sergeant major. I did  
17 not do artillery as a sergeant major, but I assisted in the  
18 implementation of being able to do so. So if the issue is  
19 that I was hired to be an artilleryman, I did not do that  
20 the last 7 years, firing those shells, and the same thing in  
21 the VA. So there is an issue, and I am not going to--the  
22 gentleman's commitment to getting this right for veterans is  
23 unquestioned. He is trying to get it there, but this issue  
24 is a little bit touchy because it deals with how do we best  
25 deliver care in that system.

1           We certainly want to hold people accountable, but this  
2 issue of these folks who are implementing care, I worry  
3 about. So we have tough issues.

4           Commander, I am going to go back to you, and you  
5 challenged the gentleman and I together to say we are going  
6 to hold you two accountable, we are going to ask you to work  
7 together, we are going to have you find solutions, and I  
8 think that is a noble cause and one that we should try and  
9 get to.

10          I will end with this. When we first did sequestration,  
11 I went back to my home district, and people would ask me  
12 what is sequestration. I would tell them it is Latin for  
13 "dumb as hell," and that satisfied it because they did not  
14 know what it was.

15          [Applause.]

16          Mr. Walz. So whether it is or not, we hear you.

17          I would just leave us all with this, as folks who want  
18 to get this right. It makes no sense to me why we would  
19 freeze a program that is doing something good like national  
20 security or veterans care instead of plussing it up, and it  
21 makes absolutely no sense to me why we would freeze a  
22 program that should be cut and eliminated. And  
23 sequestration maintains the status quo in a way that is  
24 really negative.

25          And so your commitment to fixing this extends far

1 beyond national security and veterans' issues. It goes to  
2 fiscal health, fiscal responsibility, and to be very honest  
3 with you, it forces us to make the hard decisions. If I  
4 vote to spend money, then I should have the courage to say I  
5 voted to spend money or find where that money is coming  
6 from.

7 So, again, thank you all for being here. Understand  
8 that if you are not here, things will not get done right for  
9 veterans, so it is worth traveling here from all over.

10 I yield back.

11 [Applause.]

12 Chairman Roe. Thank the gentleman for yielding.

13 Commander, I want to just take a minute or two to thank  
14 your staff, with Carlos and Bob there. You have a terrific  
15 group of people to work with.

16 Mr. Harman. Yes, we do.

17 Chairman Roe. And I give them a shout-out.

18 I want to go over a couple things. One, I have been  
19 here 9 years, and I am an Army veteran, served in the 2nd  
20 Infantry Division in Korea in the medical corps there with  
21 the 2nd Medical Battalion. Many of you probably have been  
22 where I was stationed, and I never thought I would end up in  
23 the U.S. Congress. I never had any idea. I am just a  
24 country doctor in East Tennessee. That is what I did.

25 When I got here, I was put on the Committee, and we

1 were spending at that time \$93.5 billion in 2009 for all VA  
2 care. That is health care, cemeteries, and benefits. And  
3 today, the President's budget, his ask this year, 10 years  
4 later, is \$198 billion. And that is why the discretionary  
5 part of the budget almost did not change during that time.  
6 So we took that money away from elsewhere, and I think  
7 proudly, you can look at both sides of the aisle and say we  
8 looked at our veterans and said we are going--even though  
9 there is a sequester there, whether you like it or not, that  
10 money went to VA. VA went from 250,000 employees to 373,000  
11 employees today, and I would argue they are not spending  
12 that money as wisely as they should.

13       We look to your help to find out where they are not  
14 spending it so we can. Look at the Denver VA. What a  
15 disaster that was getting that VA hospital built, way over  
16 budget, so we need your help there. When you find things,  
17 ladies and gentlemen out there, please contact our office if  
18 you see things that we can do to help that money be spent  
19 more wisely. That is one thing I wanted to get through.

20       And again, the sequester, I agree. We are going to add  
21 \$80 billion to our military. We lost four times as many  
22 people in training accidents last year as we did combat  
23 missions. That is wrong, and we need to fix that. And this  
24 Congress is doing that.

25       [Applause.]

1 Chairman Roe. We have 36 percent of the care the VA  
2 does today as care outside the VA, and I live in rural  
3 America. We are very blessed where we are to have a strong  
4 VA presence, but like Senator Rounds was saying, where he  
5 lives, maybe not--or Wyoming or other places where people  
6 have to travel, my number one thing that I want to see  
7 happen is I want the veteran to get the best care wherever  
8 it may be.

9 I served as our group provided VA care, clinical care,  
10 off the VA campus. We were all veterans in our group, and  
11 we served the VA in that capacity.

12 So we are going to get this choice bill. I have worked  
13 very hard, and so has Congressman Walz, in the last year to  
14 try to get this choice bill, where veterans help make the  
15 choice, and yet the VA was a very integral part of that  
16 care.

17 Another thing I want to do--and a couple things in the  
18 few seconds I have left--VA has a huge undertaking, and it  
19 has to do with the quality of care we are going to be  
20 providing our people. And that is the implementation of the  
21 electronic health record. That is an enormous undertaking,  
22 and when you mentioned--we are spending \$4.5 billion on  
23 technology to VA today. Eighty percent of that money,  
24 Commander, is to support an aging system. Eighty percent is  
25 just to keep the nuts and bolts on this thing now, and what



1 it would do for me as a clinician out in the community, if I  
2 could access a cloud to where we could get that information  
3 seamlessly about your record from the VA to me and  
4 backwards, that would be so much better in coordinating the  
5 care. And it is going to be a difficult 8--probably 7- or  
6 8-year process, and I think the Secretary is going to kick  
7 that off this year--this week, I mean. He is going to sign.  
8 I think the contract, we will see later in the week.

9 I look forward to working with you. You have been  
10 terrific to work with on any number of issues that we have  
11 dealt with this past year, and I want to thank you for that.

12 And I want to finish by thanking everyone in this room  
13 who came from very long distances to advocate for the men  
14 and women, 1.7 million people you represent, who have  
15 represented this great country.

16 I grew up in a military town, Clarksville, Tennessee,  
17 where the 101st Airborne Division is.

18 [Applause.]

19 Chairman Roe. I know, Sergeant Walz, when I went in  
20 the Army, I thought the sergeants ran the military. That is  
21 what they told me, anyway, when I was a young captain, and  
22 they did. I smartly let them do that.

23 I want to finish by yielding to Congressman Walz and  
24 see if he has any closing comments.

25 Mr. Walz. No, Mr. Chairman.

1 Chairman Roe. He does not.

2 I again thank you all. I cannot thank you enough for  
3 coming here, Commander, and I look forward to this year. We  
4 have got a lot of things on our plate. I look forward to  
5 working with you and the VFW and looking forward to meeting  
6 your membership and finding what your issues are and dealing  
7 with those.

8 And with that, I ask unanimous consent that all members  
9 have 5 legislative days in which to revise and extend their  
10 remarks and add extraneous material.

11 Hearing no objection, so ordered.

12 Hearing is adjourned.

13 [Applause.]

14 [Whereupon, at 11:35 a.m., the joint committees were  
15 adjourned.]

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