

Dennis Hollins, MD Medical Director, Active Duty Rehabilitation Unit US Army Southeast Regional Medical Command (SERMC) and Augusta VA Medical Center and VA Southeast Network (VISN 7)

Statement of
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US Army Southeast Regional Medical Command (SERMC) and
Augusta VA Medical Center and VA Southeast Network (VISN 7)
Before the United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
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Good Morning, Senator Isakson. On behalf of the staff of the Augusta VA Medical Center, I would like to welcome you to our fair city and our facility, and to thank you for your dedication and service to our nation's veterans and service members. Thank you also for allowing me to represent the U.S. Army Southeast Regional Medical Command (SERMC) and VA Southeast Network (VISN 7). It is my pleasure and honor to share with you how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Defense (DoD) work together on the Active Duty Rehabilitation Unit at the Augusta VA Medical Center to provide health care to wounded soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. I would like to request my written statement be submitted for the record.

The Active Duty Rehabilitation Unit (ADRU) at the Augusta VA Medical Center meets the unique intensive medical rehabilitation needs of active duty service members injured in combat or who sustained serious, non-combat injuries during service. Since the program was created three years ago, the Active Duty Unit has provided care to 1,037 service members, 491 of whom were treated as inpatients. Approximately 32 percent of all patients were injured in combat in Operation Enduring Freedom or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF), and about 25 percent of our admissions are for brain injuries. Roughly 16 percent of our admissions will be considered for medical retirement.

Even before OEF and OIF began, the military knew providing care to wounded service members would demand the highest priority. Brigadier General Eric B. Schoomaker, then Commanding General of Eisenhower Army Medical Center, approached Augusta VA officials in August 2003 to determine if a team of medical specialists capable of providing therapeutic support could treat patients at Eisenhower. Augusta VA's leadership proposed a new, active duty inpatient unit in the August VA Medical Center. This unit would provide clinically managed and medically rehabilitative care to active duty service members.

The Active Duty Unit received its first inpatients in February 2004. Leadership obtained necessary rehabilitation equipment, assembled a rehabilitation care team, and oversaw the creation of a 3,400 square foot therapy gymnasium. Representatives from the Southeast Regional Medical Command and VISN 7 signed a Memorandum of Understanding defining roles for the support and growth of the program.

As the Committee members know, most combat injuries from OEF/OIF are the result of explosive blasts. Orthopedic injuries, wound management, and Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) are the most frequent medical problems managed at the Augusta VA Medical Center. The Active Duty Unit also contains a strong post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment program, designed to help patients process their combat experiences. We screen all patients with combat exposure during the admissions process for PTSD and TBI.

The Active Duty Unit maintains the Warrior Ethos for the Sailors, Soldiers, Marines, and Airmen we treat in a variety of ways, from addressing patients by rank to using military terminology. A dedicated military liaison/case manager handles administrative and command and control issues for our patients. This helps our patients and their families feel at home, reducing their stress.

This project is a success because VA and DoD staff communicate openly and directly. Warrior in Transition commanders at Eisenhower attend our weekly team conference meeting here in the Augusta VA Medical Center, and once a week, the unit's medical staff attends the orthopedic surgery rounds at Eisenhower Army Medical Center. This cooperation and integration demonstrate what VA and DoD can do for our wounded service members and veterans when we work together. The pride this nation takes in those who served is evident in the tremendous attention and accolades this unit receives.

Senator Isakson, this concludes my prepared statement. At this time I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have.