

Statement of Ranking Member Richard Blumenthal

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars

March 4, 2015

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to join you, and our colleagues in welcoming the Veterans of Foreign Wars and its Auxiliary.

It is an honor to serve as Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. This is not an honor I take lightly. No obligation is more sacred than the debt we owe our military men and women. Serving veterans has been one of my highest priorities throughout my career, and I am looking forward to working with everyone on these Committees to improve the care and benefits that veterans receive.

I look forward to hearing from you, Commander Stroud, and would like to recognize the VFW and Auxiliary members who are here today from Connecticut. I also want to recognize the National President of the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, Ann Panteleakos, who is from Plainfield, Connecticut. Thank you for traveling to be with us today and for all the important work you do on behalf of veterans, their families, and the families of the fallen in Connecticut.

The VFW traces its root back to the Spanish-American War, when veterans of that conflict founded local organizations to secure benefits for their service. Ever since, the VFW's leadership has been instrumental in the fight to make sure that we as a nation live up to the commitments we have made to our veterans and their families. Today, the VFW provides critical services to veterans and their families, and it provides incredible support to our youth and educators through its numerous scholarship programs, such as the *Voice of Democracy*, and through its tireless advocacy on behalf of all veterans and their families.

The VFW and its membership has been a valuable resource for all of us in Congress, as we continue our efforts to address the many opportunities to improve the care and benefits provided to veterans and their families. In fact, the support of the VFW, and other veterans service organizations allowed this Congress to get off to a great start and see the Clay Hunt SAV Act signed into law just a short time ago. I am proud to have joined with Senator McCain in introducing this measure in the Senate.

This law provides one more opportunity to deliver help – and hope – to heroes who need and deserve it. Every day in the United States, 22 veterans succumb to suicide – losing their personal battle to invisible wounds of war. The Clay Hunt SAV Act is named for a single brave veteran who lost that battle. By improving and modernizing VA suicide prevention programs, it honors every serviceman and woman who has struggled with mental health issues.

I know the crisis of suicide all too well - a friend of mine, Justin Eldridge of southeastern Connecticut - succumbed to suicide. He was deployed in combat to Afghanistan where he braved mortar fire and sniper fire and he returned to his family, his children and his wife - his very young family - suffering from a traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress. As brave as he

had been on the battlefield, he could not win the war at home. He sought mental health care at the Connecticut VA facility. He had gone through a long battle for benefits. I helped him with it. But there was a gap in the continuity of his medical care. He slipped through the cracks and eventually took his life.

As I have noted in the past, this bill is a down-payment. It is not the end of solutions to this problem. It is a worthwhile measure that takes limited, targeted steps. I plan to use my role on this Committee to ensure VA makes every effort to address mental health issues in the coming year. Access to timely mental health care is but one of the many challenges facing veterans and their families. There are many others I intend to focus on as Ranking Member.

The number of veterans is growing dramatically, as our nation winds down recent wars and our armed forces down size. We need to do as much as we can to make it easier for servicemembers to access earned benefits and health care as they transition out of the military and beyond. Whether we are: ensuring VA is properly implementing provisions of the Access law Congress passed last fall as it continues to drive down the unacceptably long wait times; pressing VA and DOD to improve its ability to share information including medical records; providing proper care and benefits to those who suffer from the results of toxic exposures; or working to end veteran underemployment and homelessness, it is clear that work remains to honor the sacrifice of the brave men and women who serve this country.

The VFW continues to shine a light on challenges women veterans face when accessing VA care and benefits. Thank you for your continued commitment to this issue. We must ensure that we honor the service of women veterans by making the VA system more responsive to their unique needs.

The VFW has also taken the lead to make sure veterans understand the new VA Choice Program by running a help line and creating a new website where veterans can learn about the program. And in an effort to hold the VA accountable, the VFW launched two surveys on the VA's implementation of the Choice Program.

I also want to thank you for the VFW's continued emphasis on the need to conduct more research on the health effects of toxic exposure on the descendants of servicemembers who were exposed to these substances during military service. Senator Moran and I plan to reintroduce the *Toxic Exposure Research Act* in the near future. Thank you for your leadership on this issue and your support.

Now, let me very briefly pivot to the budget. Another way our Committee honors veterans is by carefully reviewing the President's budget request for VA. Last Thursday, the Committee held a hearing on the VA's budget request. Your presence and testimony here today provide us with a stark reminder that veterans' issues are about much more than just numbers on a piece of paper.

The budget is but one piece of how we as a nation honor the service and sacrifice of the men and women - as well as their families - who have worn the uniform and answered the call to serve. I look forward to working with the VFW and all of the VSO groups to ensure the funding levels

requested and policies proposed in the President's budget reflect the very real needs of the men and women who have served this country.

Commander Stroud, again welcome to you, your leadership team, and the VFW and Auxiliary members who have joined us today from across the country. I look forward to hearing your testimony and to collaborating with every Member of these Committees to keep faith with veterans of all wars and eras, and make sure that we leave no veteran behind.