

Chairman Patty Murray

Statement of Senator Patty Murray, Chairman  
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Hearing: Seamless Transition – Meeting the Needs of Servicemembers and Veterans  
May 25, 2011

Welcome to today's hearing to examine the ongoing efforts of the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide a truly seamless transition for our servicemembers and veterans.

Last week Deputy Secretary Lynn and Deputy Secretary Gould highlighted the challenges and successes DoD and VA have encountered on the path toward a truly seamless transition.

Today, we will hear directly from some of our nation's wounded warriors who will share their views and first-hand experiences on how DoD and VA can further improve the transition for servicemembers and veterans.

I look forward to hearing from them about what went well but also about how they were negatively impacted by the lack of collaboration between DoD and VA and what they believe can be done to improve the transition for the thousands upon thousands of service members still to come home.

I also look forward to talking with our Department witnesses, who are working to improve this critical transition period to ensure veterans are not falling through the cracks.

I know that VA and DoD have big challenges facing them:

- Service members and veterans continue to take their own lives at an alarming rate,
- Wait times for benefits continue to drag on for an average of a year or far more,
- And the quality of prosthetic care continues to be inconsistent between the Departments.

Now, in some instances DoD and VA have come to the table to make headway on these issues, and they should be commended for that.

But we still have work to do.

In fact, sometimes it's the simplest fixes that for some reason the two Departments can't come together on.

A good example of this is the Limb Extremity Center of Excellence that was mandated to move forward on October 14th, 2008.

This new center was supposed to be a place where best practices could be shared and a registry of these injuries could begin.

But here we are - two and a half years later – and we have not seen any substantial movement toward the creation of this center.

When I asked Secretary Lynn last week what progress had been made he couldn't provide an answer.

This is unacceptable.

### Medical Care

But as our witnesses' testimony today will show, this is unfortunately not the only area where we need better medical collaboration.

We have a lot of work to do to ensure that each Department knows what the other is providing to our service member and veterans.

It was evident from last week's hearing that the sheer number of programs that are in place have resulted in several parallel, but not collaborative, processes.

Last week we also discussed the need for the best amputee care that can be provided as well as the divide between the level of technology at the DoD and the VA.

Beyond the Center of Excellence that I mentioned earlier, I look forward to hearing about the improvements that are being made in this area.

Veterans cannot come home to VA facilities that can't care for the devices that our service members are getting at cutting edge DoD prosthetics facilities.

We must do everything we can to bring all services up to the standard our seriously injured veterans deserve.

I am optimistic that we can do this because I know there are facilities like the new polytrauma and amputee care transition units that are being piloted at the VA Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia.

Not only is this an innovative and critical component of care, but it also is an example of where DoD and VA came together, jointly assessed the problems in the system of care, and responded appropriately.

I would like to see this approach brought to bear on all aspects of transition.

### Mental Health Care

Today, we will also further discuss the efforts to expand and improve mental health care.

We do not need the courts to tell us that much more can and should be done to relieve the invisible wounds of war.

Although some steps have been taken, the stigma against mental health issues continues within the military and VA care is still often too difficult to access.

This has had a tragic impact.

Last month, VA's Suicide Hotline had the most calls ever recorded in a single month -- more than 14,000.

That means that every day last month, more than 400 calls were received.

While it's heartening to know that these calls for help are being answered, it is a sad sign of the desperation and difficulties our veterans face that there are so many in need of a lifeline.

I look forward to speaking with all of our witnesses about this most pressing issue.

Benefits/TAP

But health care is not the only area that needs better collaboration.

Last week, we discussed the delays and dissatisfaction that characterize the joint disability process - the program that was supposed to streamline the way our veterans get their benefits.

Instead, however, what we learned is that veterans are still waiting up to 400 days for word on their benefits and that all too often veterans are committing suicide or turning to drugs and alcohol in the time their lives are put on hold by this process.

Today I would like to hear how we are going to do better.

Way Forward

We must not forget that the commitment we make to our servicemembers, and to their families, when they join the military does not end after they return home.

Whatever condition they arrive in, this nation will provide them with the care and services they need and deserve.

Just a couple days ago, a Marine whose home base is here in the nation's capital -- and with whom a member of my staff served -- was wounded by an IED in southern Afghanistan.

He has lost much of his leg and doctors are struggling to save one of his arms.

During one surgery, one of his lungs collapsed.

This is in addition to serious shrapnel wounds he received.

I want this marine -- and all Marines, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and coast guardsmen -- to have every benefit and every service we have available.

I want him to receive care that is not just excellent but truly the best in the world.

I do not want him, or any service member or veteran who has sustained such injuries, to have to wait months or even years to have a claim adjudicated because we cannot make the bureaucracy efficient.

I do not want him to receive anything less than the best prosthetic limb we can design and ensure that it is perfectly adapted to him.

I want him to receive treatment and support as he copes with this new reality.

Just as important, I want his loved ones to get the support they need, because if we cannot be there for them, they will not be able to be there for him.

I know all of us here share these desires, and the dedication to achieving these goals.

We are almost ten years into these conflicts. It is passed time to get it right.

The system is doing many things well, but there is always more that can be done.

I believe all the Members here, and all of our VA and DoD employees share the commitment to excellence our veterans deserve.

I want to thank all of our panelists for being here today. We look forward to hearing from all of you.