

Ranking Member Richard Burr

## Burr Opening Statement at Veterans' Committee Hearing on Disability Compensation in the 21st Century

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for calling this hearing. Also, welcome to the witnesses who are joining us today. I appreciate you being here to discuss a very important topic – how to modernize veterans' disability compensation, so it better meets the needs of our nation's wounded warriors.

These brave men and women -- who have served and sacrificed on our behalf -- deserve a disability system that meets their needs, and more importantly, a system that helps them achieve full and productive lives. But, in reality, the outdated disability system our nation's veterans currently have may not be able to meet the needs of a 21st century veteran.

As far back as 1956 a commission chaired by General Omar Bradley stressed that (quote) “our philosophy of veterans' benefits must . . . be modernized and the whole structure of traditional veterans' programs brought up to date.” But, no fundamental changes were made then or since, despite a number of reports laying out the system's shortcomings.

Just last Congress, the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission and the Dole-Shalala Commission again stressed the need to update this system. Those commissions outlined many fundamental problems, including the fact that the purpose of disability compensation is (quote) “unduly restrictive . . . and inconsistent with current models of disability.” They also found that the aim of the veterans' disability program should be rehabilitation but that goal was not being met.

Both Commissions recommended updating the VA disability rating schedule to reflect modern medical criteria and current injuries. They recommended compensating veterans for lost quality of life, in addition to lost earnings capacity. And, perhaps more importantly, they stressed the need to emphasize treatment and rehabilitation of injured veterans.

In light of those Commission reports, VA requested a detailed study on how the recommended changes could be made, and today we'll hear about the results of that study. But we'll also discuss a recent report from VA suggesting that even more studies are needed before changes should be made to the disability system.

Although I realize that VA may be reluctant to take on additional challenges at this time, it's understandable that many veterans – including a group in North Carolina that write to me frequently -- have lost patience with five decades of studies that have not been acted on. Our nation's veterans – particularly those now coming back from war with devastating injuries -- deserve better than a system that was outdated before they were even born.

As we now know, their disabilities may affect all aspects of their lives, including community activities, household chores, and time spent with family. They deserve a system that will compensate them for the full impact of their injuries and will give them every opportunity to overcome their disabilities and succeed in civilian life.

If the wounded warriors returning from the current conflicts with life altering injuries are not enough motivation to make these common sense changes, I'm not sure what will be. But I am sure that I don't want veterans 50 years from now to look back and ask why -- in the face of overwhelming evidence that this system is outdated -- we did nothing about it.

Mr. Chairman, I hope to work with you and our colleagues to finally bring veterans' disability compensation into the 21st century, so that veterans will be fairly and fully compensated for their injuries and, more importantly, given every opportunity to lead full, productive lives.

I thank the Chair.

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