

**Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr**  
**February 28, 2013**

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and congratulations on your new role as Chairman of this Committee. Good morning, Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Michaud. Thank you for convening this joint hearing to hear the legislative agendas of those organizations that serve our nation's military personnel, veterans, survivors and dependents.

I would like to welcome all of our witnesses and the members of your organizations who are here today. The testimony you will provide today will be valuable as the Committees analyze VA's fiscal year 2014 budget request, when it is finally submitted.

As you know, in past years, Congress has made VA a priority, providing for budget and personnel increases, to ensure access to care for veterans. However, for many veterans, this has not led to better outcomes, particularly those facing difficulty accessing timely mental health care or facing a growing backlog of disability claims and decisions that too often are incorrect.

During today's hearing and in the coming months, I look forward to hearing your organizations honest assessments of current veterans' programs to help us better understand what is working and where shortfalls exist. This is more important than ever, considering the current fiscal climate we are facing. We need to ensure that the limited pool of taxpayer dollars is spent to better serve our veterans.

In that regard, I want to briefly highlight a few areas of concern. One is the disability claims backlog. In recent years, Congress has provided funding to allow VA to hire thousands of additional claims processors and to develop new technologies. Even with these and other new initiatives, veterans still face large backlogs, long delays, and frequent errors when trying to access disability benefits.

A tremendous amount of time and money has been spent trying to modernize VA to effectively deliver benefits and services to veterans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To that avail, there has been little benefit to veterans. In fact, a report by the Inspector General's office recently found that, in the regional offices using the Veterans Benefits Management System – or VBMS, it actually took longer to complete certain phases of the claims process. In these sites, claims processors have had to switch between VBMS and the legacy systems, potentially adding to the delays and the frustration of processors. Moving forward, we must ensure that VA has a realistic plan to begin providing veterans, their families, and their survivors with timely and accurate decisions. If VA is not on track to do that, we cannot wait any longer for VA to correct its course.

In addition, I am disappointed by VA and DoD's recent decision to change strategies regarding the development of an integrated Electronic Health Record. As I understand it, VA and DoD will continue to operate separate electronic medical records while developing a way

to exchange data in real time. I am troubled by the lack of transparency in the decision process, and there are many questions that remain unanswered.

Finally, as many of you know, during last Congress we held several hearings regarding mental health services provided by VA. During those hearings, we learned about serious problems veterans face while accessing VA mental health services. Ensuring veterans have access to needed mental health services will continue to be a top priority for me.

Again, I would like to thank all of our witnesses for your presence today, and thank the Chairmen for the opportunity this hearing presents, for the Committees to hear from you and your membership about the issues veterans are currently facing.

I thank the Chair and yield back.