

Statement of Senator Patty Murray
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing: The Fiscal Year 2016 Budget for Veterans' Programs
February 26, 2015

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing.

A budget is a statement of our values and priorities. And as the daughter of a World War II veteran, I believe making sure our country keeps the promises we've made to our nation's heroes should be at the top of our list of priorities, all of the time. Taking care of our veterans when they come home is a fundamental part of who we are as a nation.

It is part of the cost of going to war. And making sure the VA has the tools and resources it needs to provide care and support our veterans is critical.

I was very pleased to see the President submit a strong budget request for VA this year. In particular I am pleased to see VA requested an increase of \$34 million for gender-specific health care for women veterans.

Also, I continue to hear from veterans about delays in processing certain types of claims in the Seattle Regional Office, so VA's request to hire another 770 employees nationally to help bring down those processing times is very important.

However, the President's budget request also includes areas where we are not investing strongly enough. With the continuing high rates of suicide among veterans, and long wait times, we need to increase funds for mental health care. I am also concerned that the request for the IG is insufficient. Especially at this critical time when so much oversight of VA hospitals is needed, we cannot afford to cut the Office of Inspector General, which has been so vital in making sure veterans get the timely, quality care we expect.

Even with an overall strong budget request, effective management and oversight is critical to the Department providing for our veterans the way we expect.

Mr. Secretary, from your experience in the private sector you know as well as anyone here how difficult it is to change the culture of a large organization. But change is essential. VA has struggled with these types of efforts in the past, so you certainly have your work cut out for you to make sure this time we are successful.

You are asking the right kinds of questions – how to move the Department's focus from the bureaucracy to focus on the veteran's experience – and taking a fresh look at how business services are delivered. Human resources, contracting, I.T., and construction have all been major problems for the Department for many years. I hope you will stay focused on how to bring real reform to those offices.

Mr. Secretary, I am also looking forward to working with you on some important legislation to improve the health care services for our veterans.

I recently introduced S. 469, the Women Veterans and Families Health Services Act, which will expand critical fertility services to injured and ill servicemembers and veterans to help them realize their dreams of having a family when they otherwise might not be able to because of an injury in the line of duty. And I was very pleased to work with Senator Heller to introduce S. 471, the Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act. That bill would greatly improve access to gender-specific care for women veterans, and ensure VA is accounting for the needs of the growing population of women in the construction planning process.

Implementing the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act will also be a critical issue this Congress. The \$5 billion we gave to build and strengthen VA for the long-term is already making a difference. In my home state of Washington, two medical centers have already announced they will hire a total of 324 new medical care staff in the Puget Sound and Portland/Southwest Washington regions.

As for the Choice Program, I understand there are some initial problems implementing the program, and I hope you will act quickly to resolve them. But it's also time to start planning now for what the future of non-VA care will look like.

There are now several different major authorities VA can use to purchase care outside the system. They are often duplicative and inefficient, and they are not consistent with each other. The Choice Program was a temporary, emergency authority. When it expires, VA needs to have a reformed program in place to help veterans access care outside VA in a way that: complements services provided by VA, provides coordinated care with strict quality of care requirements, has consistent processes and eligibility rules, and is cost effective

Finally, I would also like to thank our representatives from the veterans service organizations. Your hard work each year, especially on the Independent Budget, is very important for us as we work to make sure there are adequate resources to provide veterans the benefits and care they have earned.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.