

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Patty Murray
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing: "Washington's Veterans - Helping the Newest Generation Transition Home"
April 4, 2012

"Good morning to all of you. I would like to officially call this hearing of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to order.

"Before I begin, I want to thank First Gentleman Mike Gregoire, or as most of you know him, First Mike, for leading the Pledge of Allegiance and for all the work he has done on behalf of servicemembers and veterans in Washington state.

"I also want to thank the Metro Parks Tacoma Board of Commissioners, and Executive Director Jack Wilson, as well as the STAR Center and the Metro Parks Tacoma staff, for hosting this event. Shon Sylvia and his staff have done a tremendous job to host this hearing today, so thank you.

"Today's hearing is the first major event ever held at the STAR Center, which isn't scheduled to officially open until next month.

"As everyone here can see, this 75 acre SERA Campus is a national model of how to leverage resources to best serve the diverse needs of this region. By combining the facilities of Gray Middle School, the Boys & Girls Club's Topping Hope Center and the STAR Center, the campus is able to provide a one stop shop for a multitude of important services.

"I am impressed with how this public parks and recreation agency has taken the lead and established a partnership with Joint Base Lewis McCord and the U.S. Olympic Committee to offer resources to the Warrior Transition Battalion at JBLM.

"I'm particularly proud to note that this campus is home to the Tacoma Titans Wheelchair Basketball team that just finished 18th in the nation during the National Championships just last week. The team included civilians, veterans and injured active-duty soldiers from the Warrior Transition Battalion at JBLM. I want to recognize and congratulate the Tacoma Titans here today for their tremendous season.

"This program, among others you will hear about today, are the types of solutions our communities are using to help the newest generation of veterans transition home and these partnerships will grow because of you here today.

"So thank you again for hosting this event and for encouraging our military families and veterans to feel welcome here.

"I also want to thank some of our dedicated elected officials who have joined us today as part of the larger community effort to support the transition of our servicemembers and veterans. Pierce County Executive Pat McCarthy, Tacoma Mayor Marilyn Strickland, and Lakewood Mayor

Doug Richardson, thank you so much for all you do every day. I also want to recognize the state legislators who are with us today.

“And no veteran event would complete without the presence of the tireless veterans advocate John Lee, Director of your Washington State Departments of Veterans Affairs, and his incredibly hardworking team.

“I also want to thank the members of South Sound Military Communities Partnership who are here today, under the leadership of Dan Penrose, they are great partners of mine in fighting for the needs of this community.

“We have a number of staff members who are here representing the offices of Senator Cantwell, Congressman Dicks, Congressman Smith and Governor Gregoire.

“From Senator Cantwell’s office, Mike English, Sam Mack and Tommy Bauer are here.

“Congressman Dicks’ office is represented today by Jami Burgess, Clark Mather and Joe Dacca.

“Roel Van Der Lugt is here from Congressman Adam Smith’s office, as is Veronica Marohn from Governor Gregoire’s office.

“I also want to take a minute and thank the many business and community leaders in and around Joint Base Lewis McChord, some of whom are in the room today, for their efforts to help servicemembers, veterans and their families here in the community.

“Finally, I want to welcome everyone in the audience who took time out of their busy schedules to be here today - thank you for coming to discuss these important issues.

“As Chairman of the Senate Veteran's Affairs Committee, I am holding this hearing here in the backyard of one of our nation’s most important military bases to better understand how we as a nation are helping to ease the difficult transition home for our servicemembers.

“Today’s hearing is focused on the unique opportunities and challenges that the South Sound and Washington state continue to face as thousands of veterans return to the region.

“In particular, today’s hearing will focus on: improving mental health care, employment opportunities, and community outreach for returning veterans.

“To be clear - Today’s hearing isn’t the result of any single incident. Nor is it in any way meant to cast doubt on any of the caring and selfless individuals that serve our servicemembers and veterans. In fact it is very much the opposite. It is an opportunity for all of us to step back to look across the range of challenges we have.

“And to examine whether we as the federal and state government, or the military, or the VA, or the local community - understand the difficult transition our servicemembers face in returning home and are doing everything we can to aide them. My hope is that this hearing will be not only a reminder that we face a number of difficult problems, But also that we have so many more resources and dedicated individuals to confront them.

“It’s a hearing I’m holding because while I believe that many of the events here at JBLM have tested so many that are with us today. I also know that when this community comes together it has the strength to overcome just about any test.

“Now, this is an official United States Senate hearing, and as such, we have to follow the same procedures that are used at hearings in Washington, D.C. That means that testimony is limited to the invited witnesses. There are strict time limits, which these timing lights in front of me will indicate, and we are recording the hearing to create a formal record of today's proceedings.

“Unfortunately, this means we will not be allowed to take questions or comments from this audience, but I want to ensure everyone that is here today, you will have an opportunity to share your views. We do have a comment form that you can fill out. We also have a sign-up sheet so you can get updates from me on many of the critical issues that our veterans face.

“So with that, let me explain how today's hearing is going to work. Today we're going to hear from three panels of witnesses.

“The first panel that is before you now consists of veterans, and I, again, want to extend a very special thank you to each of them for their courage to come here and to speak out publically about some very personal issues. These witnesses are providing voices to so many others who cannot be with us today, and for that, I thank you all very much.

“The second panel will consist of community leaders who are working to improve the transition home for those returning to Washington state. These passionate advocates and business leaders are joining us to give us a sense of what’s working to help smooth our veterans return home and what we still need to work on.

“Finally, our third panel is going to consist of senior VA and DoD officials, who will discuss their efforts at the national level, as well as local initiatives that may be worth replicating in other parts of the country.

“Despite the quality of our witnesses and the many topics that they will discuss during their testimony, I know that there are more challenges we won't have time to talk about today. So if you do have a concern that we don't cover, I want you to write it down and give it to my staff members who are here.

“When I call on our first panel, each witness will have up to five minutes to present their testimony, and then I will ask you all questions. Of course, as you know, your full written statement will be entered into the Committee record, and when we're done with our witnesses on the first panel, I will then call on our second panel and our third panel.

“I do know that we have a lot of veterans in our audience today, and I want to take this time to thank each and every one of you for your service to our country. If you need any help from the VA, I want you to know we have representatives here on site who can help you file a claim. You can meet with officials from the VA regional office, the VA Hospital, the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs and several Veterans Service Organizations in the hall outside of this room. If you do need help with an existing claim, members of my staff are here and they can help you resolve a claim with the VA.

“Because of federal privacy rules, we will need a signed letter giving us permission to investigate your case before we can do anything else, so I invite anyone who is here with a claim, if you need help, please find one of our staff members who will be more than eager to help you.

“Now that I have gone through the formalities, let me speak to the topic at hand.

“Today, we stand at a cross roads our nation has stood at before. We are at the end of a conflict that was bruising, but one that also reaffirmed the courage and strength of our service members. We have arrived at a point where we as a nation have to come together to really examine what every single one of us can, and has, been doing to aid those who were asked to make the sacrifices. It’s a moment that in the past we as a nation have risen to the challenge to meet – such as in the era that built the greatest generation. And one where we as a nation have fallen flat on our face – as in the aftermath of Vietnam where far too many veterans slipped through the cracks. But it’s those moments that must inform our work today. I can certainly say that they guide my own efforts as Chairman of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. And that’s because those key moments played such an important role in my own life.

“As many of you may know, my father was a World War II veteran who was one of the first to storm the beaches of Okinawa. I can remember as a little kid the admiration folks in my little town of Bothell, Washington had for his service. The way he was treated – not just by neighbors and community members – but also by the federal government – that provided him with a GI bill.

“But my experience with those returning from war was much different decades later when as a college senior I volunteered at the psychiatric ward of the Seattle VA at a time when veterans were coming home with the invisible wounds of war which they didn’t yet call PTSD. I can remember the faces of the veterans, many of whom were even younger than me, who were being told they were shell shocked.

“I can also remember – like many of you – the lack of answers during that period. The feeling that we were not a nation firmly at the back of those who had served. The feeling that as a nation we were quickly turning the page on that war - and those who fought it. Those moments have taught us. And one of the most important things they have taught us is how critically important it is for us to partner with the common purpose of supporting our servicemembers and our veterans.

“As many of you here know, approximately 6,000 soldiers transition out of the Army from JBLM each year – and each one of them faces a job market that is uncertain and highly-competitive. It’s a problem that they face along with nearly 13 million other Americans.....but for our veterans many of the barriers to employment are unique. That’s because for those who have worn our nation’s uniform - and particularly for those young veterans who have spent the last decade being shuttled back and forth to war zones half a world away:

“The road home isn’t always smooth. The red tape is often long. And the transition from the battlefield to the work place is never easy. Too often our veterans are being left behind by their peers who didn’t make the same sacrifices for their nation at a critical time in their lives. Too often they don’t realize the skills they possess and their value in the workplace. And too often

they are discouraged by a job market that is unfamiliar to them after their service. But as all those who know the character and experiences of our veterans in this region understand, this shouldn't be the case.

“Our veterans have the leadership ability, discipline, and technical skills to not only find work, but to excel in the technical industries our state leads the way in.

“Despite this, too many of them continue to struggle in this tough economy. But I don't think it has to be this way.

“I was proud that the President signed my VOW to Hire Heroes legislation into law late last year. Thanks to this we've been able to take a real, concrete step toward putting our veterans to work. But it's only that— a first step.

“The next step is building the partnerships with businesses across the country to hire our nation's heroes. Companies like Microsoft, Weyerhaeuser, General Plastics, Martinac Shipyards—and so many others are already stepping up to the plate. But we can all keep working to tackle this problem.

“I look forward to the witnesses on our second panel discussing how their efforts here in the South Sound and throughout Washington state are not only making a difference in putting our veterans back to work, but leading the nation as well.

“The other critical challenge that we face in the transition of thousands of veterans home to this region – and one that goes hand-in-hand with employment - is ensuring timely access to top quality mental health care. I know that we have all read with concern the headlines over the past few years about individual service members coming home, experiencing great difficulties in readjusting, and ultimately doing harm to themselves, their families, or their futures.

“But I also know that in this region – we read those stories knowing that they are not reflective of the overwhelming majority of servicemembers who - without much notice - make the Puget Sound one of the best places in the country to live and raise a family.

“Not every veteran will be affected by these invisible wounds. But when a servicemember or a veteran has the courage to stand up and ask for help, VA and DoD must be there: every – single – time. They must be there with not only timely access to care, but also the right type of care.

“Challenges like PTSD or depression are natural responses to some of the most stressful events a person can experience. And we will do everything possible to ensure that those affected by these illnesses— can get help, can get better, and can get back to their lives.

“More recently, we have read about the Army's record of improperly diagnosing psychological health injuries at JBLM. Over the past several weeks, I have had numerous meetings with senior military officials – both in Washington state and Washington, DC – and I have made clear that our soldiers deserve to have their mental health care needs properly diagnosed and treated, not forsaken by doctors or administrators that take the military's bottom line into account when making their decisions.

“Our servicemembers and their families also deserve far more than the frustration and confusion that comes from being diagnosed and treated with one mental health condition, only to have that diagnosis taken away or changed.

“I have also made clear that beyond their current efforts to re-evaluate servicemembers who may have been misdiagnosed at Madigan, the Army needs to bring uniformity and accountability to its efforts to identify those who are struggling with PTSD and other behavioral health problems nationwide.

“Like the military leaders who will be testifying today, I’m committed to working to improve care - not only here in Washington state - but in communities all across the country. I know that while there have been a host of headline-grabbing stories recently at JBLM, ignoring the fact that many of these problems exist nationwide would only serve to sweep the many big challenges the military faces under the rug.

“As we continue to work to make the necessary changes, it is important to remember that while there will always be particular challenges our military must address, the overwhelming majority of those who have served our nation, and those who have cared for them, have performed magnificently under stresses that few of us know.

“At the end of the day, the only way that we will be able to ease the difficult transition home for these young men and women is by working together: with private and public partnerships, with investments in unique new programs, with unified encouragement to seek mental health care and overcome stigmas. And very importantly, with a plan to get these veterans back to work.

“Our servicemembers and veterans through a decade of war have done everything we have asked of them. While they don’t ask much in return, we owe them a tremendous amount. Today is an important opportunity to examine and improve our efforts to deliver for them. I look forward to the testimony from each of our witnesses, and at this time would like to welcome the first panel.”

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