

JOINT HEARING ON LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATIONS BY
AMVETS,
THE MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART, GOLD STAR
WIVES
OF AMERICA, THE FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION, THE
RETIRED
ENLISTED ASSOCIATION, THE MILITARY OFFICERS
ASSOCIATION
OF AMERICA, AND THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
STATE DIRECTORS OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

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THURSDAY, APRIL 3, 2008

United States

Senate,

United States House of

Representatives,

Committees on Veterans'

Affairs,

Washington,

D.C.

The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:40

a.m.,

in Room 216, Hart Senate Office Building, Hon. Daniel K. Akaka, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Akaka, Webb, Burr, Graham, and Representatives Filner, Hall, Walz, Buyer, and Boozman.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN AKAKA

Chairman Akaka. This hearing will come to order.

Aloha and welcome to all of you this morning to our

fourth

joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans'

Committees

in this session.

All of the organizations testifying before us today have proud traditions of working on behalf of those who

have

served in our armed forces and their survivors. I

applaud

each of you for all that you do and continue to do for

our

country and for our veterans and for your organizations.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am unwavering in my belief that veterans and survivors should receive the highest quality benefits and

services. For me this is not negotiable. We must, in this time of war, equip the VA with the resources necessary to carry out its missions now and into the future.

Veterans' benefits and services are a cost of war and must be understood and funded as such.

Caring for our troops when they return home is a moral

responsibility. Fighting a seamless transition from military to civil life for the newest generation of veterans

is vital. It is also part of our responsibility to provide

veterans with the best health care and rehabilitation available. We must also ensure the timely and accurate compensation of veterans for their injuries including the invisible wounds of war.

I am proud of the wounded warrior provisions we enacted

last year as part of the National Defense Authorization Act.

In particular, we know that invisible wounds may take time to manifest.

A provision I offered expands VA's health care eligibility for returning veterans from two to five years.

In addition, I am proud that my legislation on traumatic

brain injury was also recently signed into law. VA has a responsibility to be at the forefront of TBI research and treatment.

As someone who knows firsthand the value of the G.I. Bill benefits, we must make sure that the value of educational assistance benefits for veterans keep pace

with the rising costs of higher education.

Adjudication of disability claims remains an issue. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly

and without needless delay. We will continue to review veterans' disabilities compensation and the claims adjudication process this session.

Assisting veterans' families is an essential part of

the successful reintegration of new veterans into their communities. Family members are often the primary care givers for injured veterans. VA has taken steps to reach out to these families in recent years but more needs to

be

done.

be

Finally, there are some major bills that have yet to be considered by the full Senate. I am working to reach an agreement to debate these bills and I hope that there

will

be action to complete these bills in the near future.

you

In closing, I again thank each of the veterans' and survivors' organizations for being here today. I thank

who

for your dedication to this Nation's veterans and those

survive them. So I look forward to your presentations today.

House

Now, I would like to call on the Chairman of the Committee, Mr. Filner, for his statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FILNER

you,

Chairman Filner. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank Senator, for your leadership on veterans' affairs.

for

We welcome all of you to Washington. We thank you

Akaka

your advocacy on behalf of our veterans. I know it is important that you are here; and as you know, Senator

budget.

and I, we instituted these joint hearings so, in fact, we can hear you during our processes of legislation and

of

We, in fact, are in the middle of a budget process right now for the next fiscal year. You know that we had unprecedented increases in last year's, or the current year's actually, budget. We were able to add \$13 billion

That

new money for health care for our Nation's veterans.

is over a 30 percent increase, unprecedented.

know I

Many of you know, who have been to past hearings

wave around this Independent Budget, which is the budget that is devised by veterans for veterans.

I am proud to say that, since we became chairs, Mr. Akaka, both fiscal years' budgets will meet, in fact, exceed, the Independent Budget recommendations. So we are very proud of that.

Our oversight responsibilities, of course, lead us to our obligation to make sure that money is spent wisely, and we need you and your memberships who are on the front lines every single day to make sure we know what is going on.

Mr. Akaka, I think, mentioned some of the priorities we have after the budget is passed. We are going to, I hope this year, pass a G.I. Bill for the 21st Century.

The G.I. Bill, as you know, made the middle class of America after the Second World War. But after that bill expired, the succeeding bills, while important, did not reach the comprehensiveness of the first G.I. Bill.

We want to do that. We wanted to pay the full cost of college. We wanted it to be flexible so different length of time courses can be taken. We want to make sure the living expenses meet the real needs of our families today.

In addition, the housing loan program which was so much an important part of that original G.I. Bill has fallen out of date significantly. We have to increase the values of the loans that are made. We have to increase the terms of the refinancing.

In today's crisis, for example, the limit of a VA refinanced loan is about \$188,000. That is irrelevant to the current crisis, and the fees are so high that people just could not use it anyway. So we want to deal with that.

In addition, we want to make sure that the Reserve and

Guard units who do so much of the fighting in Iraq today
can participate for their full benefits for the length of
service that they have.

In addition, and I know Mr. Akaka mentioned this,
the disability claims backlog is just a crime. In the
world's

most technically advanced Nation, we have over a 600,000
claim backlog. I mean that is unacceptable.

We have put in the budget hundreds and hundreds,
maybe thousands, of new claim adjusters but they will not be
trained for several years to meet that situation.

I hope we can break through this bureaucratic morass
with a plan that would basically accept claims if they

are helped with, if they are put together with the help of a
certified veterans' service officer and pay those claims
when they come in, subject to audit, similar to if you

are involved of paying your taxes, which I should remind you

are due in a couple of weeks. If you have a refund coming,

you will get it in three or four weeks. And that is from an
agency that 15 years ago or so was completely
dysfunctional.

So if they can do that, get the money out subject to
audit, certainly the VA can do it also. We have too many
people waiting for too long.

And all the agent orange claims from Vietnam which
so many have struggled with for decades, I think we should
just grant them and move on. We owe that to the Vietnam vets
who

really did not get the kind of honor and recognition and
support and love of the Nation that they deserved.

And if we do not do the right thing by the new
veterans, by the way, we are going to end up with the
same

problems of homelessness and suicide that we unfortunately

have gone through with our Vietnam vets.

agent Let us honor them with, at least recognize these

orange claims which have caused so much difficulty.

So, Mr. Chairman, I am looking forward to the coming months. I am glad that you and your members from so many organizations are with us today.

forward We look forward to your testimony but we look

also to working with you to pass items that are not hand-outs. It is not something you should be begging for.

This is part of the contract that we made with our servicemen and women. When they became veterans, we are supposed to fulfill that contract and I know Senator

Akaka

and I have pledged to do that.

Thank you.

Filner. Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Chairman

Member Now, I would like to call on the Senate Ranking

and good friend and hard-working senator, Senator Burr.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

Senator Burr. Aloha, Mr. Chairman, and I thank Chairman Filner and Ranking Members Buyer.

will We have a distinguished list of organizations who

these be presenting their testimony today. The members of

organizations truly understand the meaning of the word "sacrifice". Within their ranks are those who have sacrificed themselves personally and those who have sacrificed through the injury or lose of loved ones.

in Defending this country comes at a cost. Some of you

this room paid that cost. Rose Lee, your organization represents those spouses who made the ultimate sacrifice, and for that I thank you.

just I think it should, Mr. Chairman, if I may, let me

welcome those numbers from North Carolina who are here.

I

always like to highlight my North Carolinians that play a major role in the past and in the future defense of this country.

I think it should go without saying that the focus of this hearing should be about what our witnesses have to say and not what we have to say. So I will keep my remarks very brief.

Mr. Chairman, although VA has a world class health care organization, a comprehensive vocational rehabilitation and employment program and a disability compensation program, VA does not use those resources collectively to improve the lives of this country's veterans.

Despite the mental health services available from VA,

the number of veterans with service-connected PTSD has been growing and more troubling. Their disability ratings show they are progressively getting worse, not better.

In my view, we simply cannot let this trend continue.

But finding the solution may require us to depart from the

status quo and try new approaches that focus on treatment and wellness, what I think are the staples of the health care system.

I look forward to working with the organizations that are here today to help us to try move in the right direction for our veterans and our future veterans.

Another area where I think there is significant room for improvement is the disability compensation system.

All

too often the system requires injured veterans to endure
a lengthy, duplicative and bureaucratic process at both the
Department of Defense and VA to get their disability
benefits.

For more than five decades, experts have been
telling us that we need to update, simplify and modernize the
system. Similar recommendations were made just last year
by the Dole/Shalala Commission and the Veterans' Disability
Benefits Commission.

Like past reports, those distinguished commissions
recommended that we get rid of the overlapping, confusing
roles of VA and DOD in the disability rating process,
completely update the VA disability rating schedule,
and compensate our veterans for any loss of quality of life
place more emphasis on treatment and rehabilitation of
injured veterans.

I think it is clear that the disability system has
needed these changes for a long time. So I do not want
to just add these reports to the shelves with all the others
just to collect dust.

It is time we take action to improve this system for
the Nation's veterans. My goal would be to create a
system that is more straightforward and up-to-date, that does
not distinguish between combat and noncombat injuries and
that would be open to veterans of all generations.

If we are willing to change this system, we can
ensure better benefits and more importantly improved outcomes
for veterans who have been injured in service to this
country.

Mr. Chairman, before I turn the mike back, I want to
changes acknowledge that some may be reluctant to make the
to a system that has been in place for so long. But in
my

view, a fear of change should not stop us from moving forward.

cannot
Abraham Lincoln often quoted, and I quote, "You
escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it
today."

issue
It is time that we take action and address this
today. Let us accept our responsibility and advance the

disability system to reflect a modern society, changing
economy, new attitudes toward disability and new
expectations of today's veterans.

of
I look forward to working with my colleagues and the
organizations that are here today to accomplish the types

changes that our veterans need, expect and deserve.

I thank the chair.

our
Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burr,
Senate Ranking Member.

Member,
Now, I would like to call on the House Ranking
Representative Buyer.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. BUYER

like
Mr. Buyer. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would just

to comment on a few things that I have heard on some
issues.

for
The word "equity" has been used so let me touch on that
a moment.

Caucus
Many of you know, when Sunny Montgomery retired in
1994, Paul McHale and I created the Guard and Reserve

took
in the House. Then when Paul retired, then Gene Taylor

over. But we had been designing every year the Guard and
Reserve equipment account budgets.

between
And when we went into this latest conflict with Iraq
and Afghanistan, again to highlight the inequities

when
the contributions of the Guard and Reserve components

duty they go on active duty and serve alongside their active

counterparts highlighted some inequities with regard to benefits.

easy So trying to work this G.I. Bill equity out, it is

Committee, to talk about. It is very challenging on jurisdictional matters between us and the House Armed Services

VA and DOD as bill payers.

But just because it is hard and it is difficult does not mean we are not going to continue to work hard and to make this one happen. So I just wanted to tell you about the mechanics of that one.

the, The other equity issue that I think has been sitting around for a while that we need to really address are

time, Rose, I look at you. I have known you for a very long

the my dear, and I think we really need to address some of

inequity issues in the DIC program.

Ms. Lee. Thank you so much.

just Mr. Buyer. The other is on the disability claims processing. I do not endorse this idea at all that we

that ought to pay everything and then audit later. I think

is very foolish on our part.

is What we need to do this clean up the system. That

an the hard and challenging part. When Admiral Cooper gives

these exam of the individuals who are actually adjudicating

think claims, only 27 percent can pass the exam. Do not you

we have got a problem?

one, And I on Friday and I know Mr. Hall, with all his deepest, earnest and sincerity, wants to go after this

and I shared with my good friend on Friday I am going to
go up to visit a company in Philadelphia that also they do
claims processing in the private sector and they have a
98 percent success rate of which much is automation and they
also have some very, very good claims processors.

So I want to go up. I want to examine exactly what
they are doing and how they are doing it well with regard
to disability claims processing in the private sector.

The other comment I would like to make is that for
my good friend, Richard Burr, with regard to the disability
compensation system, another one of the highlights we had
recognized a few years back, almost three or four years

ago, when I met with Duncan Hunter at the time, was
modernization of the disability system.

That is another one that you say, well, that is an
easy one to talk about. Now, how are we going to perfect it?
It is very challenging. So we said, well, we are going to
get the best minds and heroes together, and that is when we
formed the Disability Commission.

Then on top of that we have the exposures of what
had occurred in the subacute care at Walter Reed. It has
always been the greatest challenge of our health system whether
it is in the private sector or in VA or in the military
health

delivery system, subacute care. It is that point where
there is a handoff, and there also has to be some
personal responsibility, i.e., rehabilitation.

So as I look at many of you out there that are in
the Purple Heart you know exactly what I am talking about
with

rehab. Much of it, yes, you have to have that care giver and that is, in fact, what we covered. But Senator Akaka was talking about the wounded warrior. Those are the provisions that I wrote into that bill to make sure they have those individual care givers.

But that subacute care exposed some difficulties and challenges that the family members were having with regard to transition. So when Secretary Shalala and former Senator

Dole got together, I mean I think they gave us a great starting point.

So what Mr. Burr and I are attempting to do, he has a

bill and I have got one. His, I think, is called the Wounded Warrior Act. Mine is called the Noble Warrior Act.

They are separate but there are a few differences. Both bills are based off the Dole/Shalala and Veterans' Disability Commission's recommendations. We tried to

take the best of both with some of our own ideas.

We establish a new military disability retirement system. We eliminate duplicative exams and disability determinations. We simplify the process for wounded

warriors whose only concern should be, I believe, the rehabilitative therapy and recovery.

Those deemed unfit for service would automatically be eligible for health and dental coverage under TRICARE.

They would also be extended commissary and exchange and other base privileges such as access to recreational and

fitness centers, should receive a lifetime annuity based on rank

and years of service, and the annuity would not be offset against VA compensation so it completely solves the long-standing concurrent receipt issues.

The bill would also direct the VA to conduct a study on

modernizing its disability compensation system and developing a new rating schedule that reflects loss of

earnings capacity and the loss of quality of life. The bill would also direct the VA to conduct a study on transition payments and whether such benefits would help the disabled veterans integrate back into society that they helped defend.

I think this is an issue that we are going to have some disagreements. We are going to have some agreements. My theory on this one is, even though this is really comprehensive, Mr. Chairman, whenever we can put points on the board, we ought to make that effort. If it requires some kind of incremental movement on a few things, we ought to do what we can and proceed. If it is too much to do at

once, I respect the judgments of the chair but we should act when we can act and let us not push this off into future generations.

With that, I yield back to the chair.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Representative Buyer.

I would like at this time to introduce our panelists and we will begin with John Brown. He is AMVETS National Commander. We will then move down the table in order, each keeping your testimony to five minutes. Your prepared remarks will, of course, be made part of hearing record.

After Mr. Brown, we will have Henry Cook, who was a National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. Then we will have Rene Campos, the Deputy Director of Government Relations with The Military Officers Association of America.

Rose Lee, who is the chair of the Government Relations Committee of Gold Star Wives will follow. Joe Barnes, the

National Executive Director of the Fleet Reserve Association. Then Patrick Corbett from the Retired Enlisted

Association.

Finally we have John Scocos, who is the President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans' Affairs

Mr. Brown, will you please begin.

STATEMENT OF JOHN P. BROWN, III, National
Commander, AMVETS

Mr. Brown. Chairman Akaka, Chairman Filner, Ranking
Member Burr, Ranking Member Buyer and members of the

House

and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees.

of

On behalf of AMVETS, AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary, Sons

AMVETS and our other subsidiaries, thank you for
providing

me the time to present AMVETS legislative goals for 2008.

First, I would like to recognize AMVETS Ladies
Auxiliary First Vice President, Ms. Charlene Kee from the
great State of Florida. Our National Sons AMVETS

Commander,

of

Mr. Jay Williams II from Ohio. They are important parts
of our AMVETS family and I am pleased to have them with us
today. But most important I would like to introduce my
wife, Retired Senior Master Sergeant Jan Brown, United
States Air Force.

to

Before I present my legislative agenda, I would like
to address to you on a concern that is great to me.

has

In April of 2007, Major Karl D. Hoerig, a dedicated
Iraqi war pilot, was brutally murdered. Accused in the
murder of Mr. Hoerig is his wife, Claudette. The case

Brazil,

has been stalled in a light of Mrs. Hoerig returning to

the

her native country. I request that each of you support

can

Department of Justice in extraditing Mrs. Hoerig so she

stand trial for the crime she is accused of and allow the

family of an American hero to have some closure on this
tragic event.

As we start the budget cycle for fiscal year 2009, I am encouraged to see that both the House and the Senate realize the need to adequately fund VA and we applaud the Senate Veterans' Committee's timely passage of its budget proposal.

But just as important as sufficient funding is timely and predictable funding. It is unacceptable to use military construction and VA appropriations as a political tool to achieve other goals.

AMVETS will not sit by quietly for months while the appropriations bill can go to conference and be passed into law before the end of the fiscal year.

AMVETS primary mission is to support American veterans and the women and men of our armed forces. If we silently wait while Congress keeps our veterans and service members needs at bay, we have failed in our mission.

AMVETS has been using our national symposium on the needs of young veterans, a report that all of you have had in your office for quite some time, as a guide for which we set many of our legislative goals and objectives.

The overlying theme of the report is seamless transition. Therefore, AMVETS has been actively engaged in promoting legislation that will improve the vocational rehabilitation, employment of our disabled veterans, provide

a single separation physical that is performed by the VA, update the rating schedule and improve transition assistance.

Included in the area of seamless transition is providing educational benefits for those who have served. Education is a top priority for AMVETS.

We have entered into scholarship programs with a

DeVry

University, the University of Phoenix and Kaplan
University that will provide \$3 million in scholarships that are not
only for the veterans but in some cases for the family
members as well.

In addition to these new scholarships, AMVETS has
been working closely with Dr. John Schupp, a chemistry
professor from the Cleveland State University. Dr. Schupp has
developed the Supportive Education for Returning Veterans
(SERV) program. This program provides assistance for
pre-enrollment and graduation for veterans. Dr. Schupp
is assisting veterans in making sure they are receiving the
full benefits of their G.I. Bill and he is providing a
support network for the veterans as they readjust to not
only the civilian life but to campus life. We are
fortunate to have Dr. Schupp with us today also.

AMVETS encourages swift passage of Senate Bill 2677,
The SERV Act, which will provide grant money to
universities to establish programs on campuses to serve and support

veterans, provided a one-stop shop for questions
concerning education, disability benefits and providing a location
for camaraderie that was present while in the military and
can continue through their academic years.

With the support of volunteer organizations such as
AMVETS, this legislation will undoubtedly improve the
success rate of our veterans.

Before we can expect our veterans to succeed, we
must provide them with a G.I. Bill that will give them the
financial freedom to attend college. Senate Bill 22
fulfills the promise of the great educational benefits
that we made to our enlistees.

We should not look at this bill as a cost we must
absorb. We must look at what it will cost if we do not
educate the women and men who so bravely protected our

rights and freedoms.

In addition, if a veteran is eligible for G.I. Bill benefits as well as Chapter 31 entitlements, the G.I.

Bill

benefit should be transferred to a veterans spouse.

Most importantly we must ensure timely and accessible

health care for our veterans.

Currently there is a 700,000 claims backlog in the VA

including those in the appeals process. There is no area where we can point the finger of blame nor is there a

single

quick fix to this mounting problem.

We must step back, look at the claims process from the

time the claim is filed to the time it is discharged.

From

there we will see what can be done at each of these steps

to

improve the accuracy, the timeliness of the process.

AMVETS looks forward to working with the members of these Committees and their staff to provide a wide focus

of

solutions to the problem.

I have only spoken to the topics that AMVETS feels are

critical as we move further into 2008. My written testimony

will provide further insight to all AMVETS legislative goals.

I want again to thank each of you for your service to

our Nation and our veterans and I look forward to working closely with you throughout the year.

Also I would like to personally invite each of you and

your staff to my congressional reception that will be

held

tonight at the Russell Senate Office Building, Room 385

from

5 p.m. to 8 p.m. where we will present Senator Patty

Murray

of Washington State the AMVETS Silver Helmet Award for
her dedication service to our Nation's veterans.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I am
happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Brown follows:]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Brown.
Mr. Cook.

STATEMENT OF HENRY J. COOK, III, NATIONAL
COMMANDER, MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART
Mr. Cook. Chairmen Akaka and Filner, Ranking

Members

Burr and Buyer, members of the Committees, ladies and
gentlemen, I am Henry Cook, the National Commander of the
Military Order of the Purple Heart.

It is my honor to be here today. I am here
representing those veterans who are distinguished from
members of other veterans' service organizations in that
each member has shed blood on this Nation's battlefields.
For their sacrifices they were awarded the Purple Heart
Medal.

Each of you and your staff can always count on our
support on issues that are good for our serving military

and

America's veterans.

I am accompanied today by Senior Vice Commander Jeff
Roy, National Adjutant Joe Palagyi, National Legislative
Director Hershel Gober and the Military Order of Purple
Service Foundation Executive Director Richard Esau.

In an effort to be as concise as possible during my
verbal testimony, I request that my entire written
testimony

be entered into the record.

I would like to begin by thanking the Committees for
their efforts on behalf of veterans and their families
since

last year's hearing. Your Committees were successful in

securing the largest annual increase in the Department of
Veterans' Affairs budget in their history. Thank you.

To settle for anything less would have been a betrayal

of America's contract with members of our armed forces.

Our position on VA medical care is that while the VA's fiscal year 2008 budget was increased, the VA did not receive their appropriations until January 2008 rather than October of 2007. This is the 13th year out of the past 14 years that the VA has experienced a delay in receiving appropriations. We hope something can be done about that.

Our order has supported assured, adequate funding, and legislation was introduced in both Houses of Congress but has not moved forward.

Together with the other veterans service organizations, we believe that perhaps advance funding is the approach that should be taken. Under this scenario, Congress would retain the ability to set discretionary funding levels but a "baseline" for veterans medical care would become the basis for the veterans' health care funding.

We are on record already as supporting the fiscal year 2009 Independent Budget. We are happy to see it here today.

We continue our opposition to increases in the pharmaceutical co-payments and the VA health care enrollment fees. Veterans have already paid their fees by their service. These are earned entitlements, earned by the blank

check written by all veterans when they took their oath of enlistment.

We are also opposed to any proposed increases in the TRICARE program.

On concurrent receipt, our Order believes it is time

for Congress to do the right thing and authorize
concurrent receipt at full military retirement and VA compensation
for all eligible military retirees. We support all
legislation, such as the Retired Pay Restoration Act, that would
accomplish this.

On SBP and DIC, we believe that if military service
caused a retired member's death, then dependents' and
indemnity compensation should be added to the survivor
benefit plan that the retiree paid for, not substituted
for it.

Our support of those currently serving in uniform.
We are in total support of any and all legislation that
recognizes the unwavering and dedicated support of
America's men and women serving in uniform in the ongoing
conflicts.

We, as a Nation, should do no less.

Here are three things that we can and should do.
One, insist that they have the best equipment, personnel and
training available to accomplish their worldwide
missions.

Two, insist that when they return home, that they
are provided with the best medical care available.

Three, insist that the benefits they have earned by
their service are provided to them and that they are
treated with respect and dignity.

This war, like none other, has placed a tremendous
requirement on the Guard and the Reserves. Their need
must also be met by your Committees. It is your duty.

The men and women in today's military are placing
their bodies between us and those who do us harm. It is our
duty to support them. You can do no less.

Our organization supports Senator Webb's legislation, S. 22, that would institute a World War II version of the G.I. Bill for education.

History has shown that the World War II G.I. Bill was one of the most effective, economically enhancing pieces of legislation in our Nation's history. This is more than another earned benefit. It is an investment in our future.

The Military Order of Purple Heart charter and amendment. We have requested that our charter be amended by Congress for acceptance into the Order of the male spouses of the female recipients of the Purple Heart.

When our organization was chartered by Congress, there were few female recipients of the Purple Heart. That has changed today. Under the current charter, we cannot accept male spouses as members. And believe me, they do not want to belong to the ladies auxiliary.

H.R. 1119 passed the House and is pending in the Senate, Calendar Number 447. We ask that you vote this legislation out so that we may accommodate these spouses. This is at no cost to the government.

The Forever Purple Heart Stamp. The U.S. Postal Service first issued a Purple Heart Stamp in 2003 at 37 cents. They later re-issued it on two occasions when rates were increased. We have been informed that it will be re-issued in May 2008 as a 42-cent stamp. We greatly appreciate the post office re-issuing the stamp, but we believe that it should become a forever stamp.

As stated by one of our past National Commanders, the Forever American Flag Stamp is a symbol of our freedom. The Purple Heart Stamp is the symbol of the cost of that freedom.

The Purple Heart Medal is the oldest medal of our

country and the first medal in history to be awarded to military personnel without regard to rank. We urge all members of these Committees to request that your leadership

pass H.R. 2303 and Senate 1390.

Our position on beneficiary travel. The current rate

for beneficiary travel has been increased for VA patients from 11 cents a mile to 28 and a half cents per mile. We believe this is still too low. In addition, we are

opposed to the deductibles. We believe that VA patients who are

eligible for beneficiary travel should receive the same rates as government employees receive for travel by privately-owned vehicles without any deductibles.

On the Dole-Shalala Veterans Disability Payments Commission report, we view the report as a positive step

in ensuring the needs of men and women returning from the current conflicts. We believe that two issues must be addressed.

First, no current benefit or service for today's veterans must be diminished.

Secondly, there should be no distinction between combat

and non-combat related disabilities or where the disability

occurred. Our organization does not support a two-tiered system.

We fully support the Commission's recommendation to establish a single medical examination with a clear delineation of the responsibilities of the Department of Defense and the VA.

We are also in support of the resolution concerning desecration of the U.S. flag.

We also support as other legislative issues, H.R. 343

and H.R. 1223, which would amend the IRS code to allow a refundable credit or waive premiums of military retirees

for premiums paid for coverage under Medicare Part B.

Chairmen Akaka and Filner, members of the Committees,

once again, thank you for the this opportunity.
This concludes my testimony and I am prepared to

take

your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Cook follows:]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Cook.
Rene Campos.

STATEMENT OF RENE CAMPOS, DEPUTY DIRECTOR,
GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, MILITARY OFFICERS
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Ms. Campos. On behalf of the 370,000 members of the
Military Officers Association of America, we thank you,
Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, Chairman Filner,
Ranking Member Buyer and Committee members for the
opportunity to share our legislative priorities for

fiscal

year 2009.

health

My remarks will address three areas. First is
care.

priority

MOAA thanks both Committees for requesting an
additional \$2.5 billion above the Administration's fiscal
year 2009 budget request, for your opposition in imposing
usage fees and increases in drug co-pays for lower
veterans.

Even with the additional resources, there are
significant challenges ahead and let us be clear. The
progress made in health care would not have been
accomplished if Congress had not been unrelenting in its
oversight of the system.

MOAA

The global war on terror has produced a number of
challenges our Nation was not fully prepared to meet.

fiscal

believes it is imperative that we fully fund long-term
health care. We urged Congress to sign into law the

year 2009 VA appropriations before October 1st.

A second area of concern is wounded warrior transition assistance. We are very grateful for the work of the Dole/Shalala Commission, the Veterans Disability Benefits Commission and Congress' efforts in passing the 2008

Defense

Authorization Wounded Warrior Act.

The heart wrenching accounts of veterans and families

lost forgotten or frustrated with the red tape of the VA system continues to be reported in the news and here in Congress, a reminder that our work is not done.

The DOD/VA interagency office established in law last

year provides the basic framework for improvement. We strongly recommend that the Committees continue to work

with

the Armed Services Committees in upgrading the scope and responsibility of this joint office.

Seamless transition simply cannot be someone's part-time job. It requires a federal office staffed with full-time DOD service and VA employees working toward a common mission, that is, to centralize all seamless transition functions and initiatives under one roof. We cannot leave seamless transition to chance.

The VA and DOD may not continue their aggressive efforts towards reform. In fact, our experience with past

Administration changes has us concerned that some of the top-down initiatives pushed by current leaders may wither

when they depart, not for any ill intent but simply because

of the leadership and supervisory turnover.

MOAA strongly endorses Chairman Akaka's S. 2162, a bill

to allow the VA to provide mental health services and counseling and establish a pilot transition assistance program for veterans and family members. When you

support

the family, you support the veteran.

MOAA also strongly recommends authorizing compensation

for family member care givers of severely injured. These

care givers receive per diem when their service member is on active duty but lose it when entering the VA.

And finally, MOAA wants to express their strong support for Senator Webb's new G.I. Bill for the 21st Century. S.

S. 22 will help attract more high quality recruits to the military and support veterans reintegration to the civilian work force.

S. 22 raises the G.I. Bill rates to match real cost of education. It allows Reservists to earn as they serve on multiple active duty tours. It provides housing supplement and it creates an innovative partnership with independent colleges for our student veterans.

We urge early action on S. 22.

Again, thank you and I look forward to taking your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Campos follows:]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Ms. Campos. Now, we will hear from Rose Lee.

GOVERNMENT STATEMENT OF ROSE ELIZABETH LEE, CHAIR,
AMERICA, RELATIONS COMMITTEE, GOLD STAR WIVES OF
INC.

Filner, Ms. Lee. Thank you.
Mr. Chairmen, Senator Akaka and Representative

Ranking Members Senator Burr, Representative Buyer, and Members of both the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to you on behalf of Gold Star Wives to present our legislative agenda.

My name is Rose Lee, Chair of the Gold Star Wives Government Relations. The Gold Star Wives of American is a

of congressionally chartered service organization comprised
while surviving spouses of military service members who died
on active duty or as a result of a service-connected
disability. We recently have added a few widowers to our
organization.

We especially wish to thank Senator Akaka for
introducing S. 2617, the Cost of Living Adjustment for
2009 for the dependency and indemnity compensation. Every
little bit helps.

Representative Henry Brown has been a long time
champion of the elimination of the offset of the DOD
Survivors Benefit Program (SBP) by the VA's Dependency
and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). We appreciate his
persistence

during several sessions of Congress. His bill, H.R.
1589, has almost 100 co-sponsors. Your Committees can help to
end this offset by repealing Section 5304 and any other
section of Title 38 that may require the widow to waive the
dollar-for-dollar portion of SBP in order to collect DIC
payments from the VA.

The Committee on Veterans' Affairs took the first
step to eliminate the SBP/DIC offset in H.R. 2297, Section
101, The Veterans Benefits Act of 2003 for a specific group of
SBP/DIC widows over which you have had jurisdiction.
Representative Brown was the Chairman of the Subcommittee
on Benefits. The Committee, under his guidance, tried to
get the "camel's nose under the tent" for the SBP/DIC widows
by reinstating DIC to remarried widows without offset of
other federal programs.

DOD did not implement the provision, instead recouping SBP payments from our widows as they applied for their newly reinstated benefit of DIC. A few SBP/DIC remarried widows were forced to file a complaint this past year.

The court case, Sharp, et al, vs. United States, was heard in the U.S. Court of Federal Claims on January 30th, 2008. Three Gold Star wives members, remarried and over age 57, are the plaintiffs in the law suit and are asking for full restoration of the SBP benefit without the DIC offset.

At the hearing on the motion, the judge took the decision regarding the interpretation of Public Law 108-183, Section 101, under advisement and will render a decision at a later date.

We wish to thank Representative Gus Bilirakis for introducing H.R. 704 that provides for reducing the age from 57 to age 55 to remarry and retain their VA survivor benefits. The current law permits surviving spouses who remarry after reaching age 57 to retain their VA survivor benefits. Other federal agencies use age 55. We seek equity with them.

Mr. Buyer, thank you.

Given the current federal court case, we request Representative Bilirakis consider amending his legislation to follow the language of H.R. 2297, Section 101, which would eliminate the SBP offset to DIC for remarried widows at age 55.

We respectfully request that Congress review the DIC program to assure that all veterans survivors are covered adequately and have equity with other federal and military survivor benefits.

We seek to raise DIC payments to 55 percent of the current 100 percent VA disability compensation rate for

100

veterans. Current DIC is only about 43 percent of the percent of the disabled veterans compensation paid by the VA.

Surviving spouses of federal workers have their monthly annuity set at 55 percent of the Federal Civil Service retirement annuity. We simply seek equity.

We also seek to provide a dental insurance plan and a vision care plan to beneficiaries of CHAMPVA. There would be little or no cost to the Federal government for either dental or a vision plan because participants pay monthly insurance premiums.

We also seek legislation to remove the mandated requirement in Title 38, Section 1781, to purchase Medicare Part B for the disabled CHAMPVA beneficiary under age 65.

Surviving spouses who are on active duty should be able to use the education benefit derived from her deceased husband while still serving on active duty. Currently, the active duty widow must resign from the military in order to use the educational benefit under Chapter 35.

Finally, Gold Star Wives supports the creation of an office for the survivors with VA and DOD to assure improved policy oversight and development for delivery of benefit information and benefits to survivors.

Most institutions view survivors as veterans' dependents or families but survivors have unique and separate needs and different benefits than veterans and families.

In conclusion, we want neither our widows nor their children to be forgotten. We ask you again to show the spirit of this Nation by not forgetting these widows and children whose numbers unfortunately grow daily.

I thank you for opening up this opportunity to hear us

once again and allow for further awareness of issues
facing survivors daily.

Thank you again.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Lee follows:]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Ms. Lee.
We will hear now from Joseph Barnes.
Mr. Barnes.

STATEMENT OF JOSEPH L. BARNES, NATIONAL
EXECUTIVE

DIRECTOR, FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION
Mr. Barnes. Distinguished Chairmen, Ranking
Members,

the Members of both Committees, thank you for this
opportunity to present FRA's legislative goals.

My name is Joe Barnes. I am the National Executive
Director and I am representing Lawrence Boudreaux, FRA's
National President, who is unable to be here today.

A top FRA priority is ensuring that wounded troops,
their families and survivors of those killed in action,
are
cared for by a grateful Nation.

The enactment of the Wounded Warrior Assistance
Legislation is a major achievement toward achieving this
objective and toward ensuring that DOD and the Department
of
Veterans' Affairs improve the process of working together
to
ensure access standards and a true seamless transaction
for
wounded personnel.

In conjunction with this legislation, the
Association
asks the Committees to monitor and ensure implementation
of
the various aspects of the legislation including
continuing
support for the wounded warrior resource center and the
joint transition office and to make certain that VA works
with DOD to establish a standard rating system for
service
members disabilities and ensure the implementation of a

joint electronic health record and the development of a

comprehensive policy regarding traumatic brain injuries, post traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions.

Iraq The Administration's 2009 VA budget request is more than 5 percent above this year's budget. However, the Department predicts it will treat 330,000 veterans from and Afghanistan in 2009. This is a 14 percent increase above this year's estimates.

and During a time of war, it is important to anticipate allocate appropriate resources to support significant numbers of new patients and FRA supports the Independent Budget recommendation of \$3.2 billion more for VA health care.

enrollment FRA again opposes the proposed health care fees for Priority Group 7 and 8 veterans and thanks you for your continuing opposition to this plan.

these There are approximately 1.3 million veterans in groups and FRA believes they have earned health care benefits based on their service to the Nation.

in The budget request also includes nearly \$40 million urges reductions for medical and prosthetic research and FRA a restoration of adequate funding for this important and highly effective program.

more The number of disability claims increased 29 percent last year and this number is expected to increase even

due to the ongoing war.

last The backlog of disability claims exceeded 400,000 year and unfortunately there has been no change in this backlog despite the authorization of additional resources to address this.

In addition to other shortcomings, double digit

inflation is dramatically diminishing the value of the
MGIB and benefits are well below the cost of education in a
four-year public college or university.
The President is also calling for authorization to
expand transfer authority to military family members and
legislation has been introduced in the House and Senate
addressing this issue. Yet no funding was included in
the budget request for this initiative.

FRA supports the total force MGIB reform to include
increased funding to improve benefits and other needed
enhancements which are addressed in various legislative
proposals.

However, VEAP era personnel should have an
opportunity to enroll in the MGIB, an issue that is especially
important to career senior enlisted personnel.

FRA continues its advocacy for VA Medicare
subvention, full concurrent receipt of military retired pay and
veterans disability compensation, increasing the monthly stipend
for SBC widows receiving DIC and reform of the Uniform
Services

Former Spouses Protection Act. Other issues are also
addressed in our statement.

Distinguished Chairmen, in closing, allow me to
again express a sincere appreciation of the association's
membership for all that you and the members of both the
House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees and your
outstanding staffs do for our Nation's veterans.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Barnes follows.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Barnes.
And now we will hear from Mr. Corbett.
Mr. Corbett.

STATEMENT OF PATRICK CORBETT, NATIONAL
PRESIDENT,

THE RETIRED ENLISTED ASSOCIATION

Mr. Corbett. Chairmen Akaka and Filner, Ranking
Members Burr, Buyer and distinguished Members of both
Committees, it is an honor once again to represent the
members of The Retired Enlisted Association before a
joint
session of your Committee.

I am the president of an organization made up of men
and women who dedicated a career to serve of our Nation
in
all its military branches' enlisted ranks or who are
doing
so today.

We all share the duty to provide for the needs of
the
brave men and women in harm's way today and those valiant
veterans who have protected us in earlier times.

I would ask that my full written statement be made
part
of the record. In these few minutes I would like to
focus
on just a few areas of concern.

First, I must once again focus on the growing delays
in
the adjudication of veterans' disability claims. It is
hardly surprising that filings are growing during war
time.
Last year the VA received 838,141 disability claims. The
VA
projects there will be over 854,000 claims this year and
870,000 in fiscal year 2009.

Although we know that the VA has been trying to
shorten
the time it takes to process a claim, it has not yet

succeeded. The average processing time is now six
months.

Six months is a very long time to wait for returning
veterans while they are trying to restart their lives and
it
is a long time to wait for an older veteran whose
disabilities are growing more severe by the day.

We are hopeful that the VA's plan to hire 3,000 more

claims processors by end of this year will eventually improve the situation and we are grateful to Congress for appropriating the money for these new hires, but we worry that even 3,000 new adjudicators will not be enough, not while a quarter of the compensation claims last year included at least eight disability claims.

It takes a long time to properly train claims adjudicators. After they are properly trained, they need to be properly supervised and properly updated about changes in the VA program.

The system must not only be fast, it must be fair and accurate. You are all well aware that the system needs to be structured so that the decisions and ratings will be consistent throughout the country. If decisions vary to VISN, people will not be treated fairly and they will see that they have not been treated fairly. The old adage is true. Justice is not merely to be done, it must be seen to be done.

That is why TREA asks you to keep a careful watch

over the VA's continuing attempts to improve the system. To

make this improvement and reach our other goals of improving health care, restructuring and improving the educational benefits, correcting and improving the programs for survivors and more, we will, of course, need sufficient and reliable funding.

TREA is grateful for the growth of funding for the VA health care that you have all overseen over these last several years.

We must particularly mention the \$5.5 billion added in emergency supplemental funding, but we all know that the VA

needs on-time funding. Something they can count on so
that they make and carry out long-term planning.

We are also very grateful that you have once again
decided that it would be unfair and unwise to include the
funding, the repeatedly proposed annual usage fees for
drugs and increased drug co-pays for veterans enrolled in
Priority 7 and 8.

We know that we are asking for substantial funding
increases, but the programs you create and oversee should
be seen as an appropriated cost of war. This is true for
both the present wars and the wars we fought in the past.
This is our Nation's obligation to those who have and will
continue to protect us. TREA is confident that the
members of both your Committees will continue to protect them.

Again, on behalf of myself and The Retired Enlisted
Association, we thank you for your time and interest and
I will be happy to try answer any questions you may have.
[The prepared statement of Mr. Corbett follows:]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Corbett.
Now, we will hear from John Scocos.

STATEMENT OF JOHN A. SCOCOS, PRESIDENT,
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF VETERANS
AFFAIRS

Mr. Scocos. Chairmen Akaka and Filner, Ranking
Members

Burr and Buyer, and members of the Senate and House
Committees on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for holding
today's joint hearing and having us here today.

I am John Scocos, President of the National
Association

of State Directors of Veterans' Affairs and Secretary of
the Wisconsin Department of Veterans' Affairs.

NASDVA's history dates to World War II, sharing and
developing best practices in state veterans' programs and
communicating regarding key Federal and state veterans'
issues.

As expressed in the National Governors'
Association's position on veterans' issues, our governors in NASDVA
believe that Federal benefits and services should be
equally available to all veterans, regardless of where they
reside, and that the Federal and state governments must
collaborate to achieve this goal nationally.

Today, I will highlight some of NASDVA's key issues
of concern.

In 1944, the original G.I. Bill provided for the
full cost of higher education plus a living allowance for our
greatest generation of World War II veterans. Today's
newest greatest generation deserves nothing less than the
same.

While the original G.I. Bill has been allowed to
erode since that time, a number of states provide full or
partial veterans' tuition assistance to make up for the lack of
adequate Federal G.I. Bill education benefits, and we
have seen in the news of private foundation efforts to also
provide stop gap assistance. However, individual state
taxpayers and charitable donors should not have to make
up for the difference between the cost of an education and
the amount of Federal G.I. Bill benefits provided to our
newest greatest generation of veterans.

In February NASDVA heard from the Student Veterans
of

America about the economic and social benefits of and the pressing need for a revitalized G.I. Bill. NASDVA is calling for a G.I. Bill for the 21st Century, with education

benefits that include full tuition, books, and fees paid at

a public or private institution of higher learning, plus a monthly living stipend.

NASDVA's members further resolve to call for eliminating any pre-payment made by military service members, expanding the G.I. Bill eligibility for Reserve and

National Guard veterans at a level equal to the active component, and allowing for unused benefits to be used by the veteran's family members.

State DVAs are not provided Federal funding for

outreach or assistance to 24.5 million veterans we serve.

NASDVA has repeatedly called for the creation of a Federal grant program to provide outreach to veterans regarding available benefits, programs, and services. We continue to support Senate Bill 1314, the Veterans' Outreach

Improvement Act authored by Senator Russ Feingold.

The national commitment to honoring our Nation's veterans in their final resting place has been enhanced by

the VA State Cemetery Grant Program in 38 states, two territories, including 69 operational state veterans' cemeteries and five currently under construction that

have

received Federal VA funding.

We appreciate the states that are provided grants for

100 percent of the costs for constructing or expanding a qualifying state veterans' cemetery. However, we

recommend

overall funding for the program to be at least \$50 million

annually to help alleviate the projected backlog totaling \$170 million.

The current burial plot allowance of \$300 for burial is

inadequate to cover the full costs of burials, cemetery

only
of
paid

operations, long-term cemetery maintenance, offsetting a small portion of the cost of a veteran's burial. None of the costs for the burial of a veteran's spouse. The vast majority of these costs, as well as operating expenses, perpetual maintenance of the cemeteries and graves, are

from the states' scarce resources, including my state of Wisconsin. We believe it should be increased to \$1000 to offset these costs and also should apply for veterans in interments in private cemeteries.

home
47

There are currently 24,000 state veterans' nursing beds and more than 6,000 veterans domiciliary beds and nearly 300 hospital beds in 131 state veterans' homes in states and Puerto Rico.

the

We recommend funding of at least \$165 million to be appropriated to keep the existing backlog of projects in state extended care facility construction grant program.

a
the
of

We also recommend the state veterans' homes be paid more equitable per diem rate representing 50 percent of states' average costs and we recommend the states be incorporated into long-term strategic plans that maximize the role the state veterans' homes to minimize the costs of long-term care for our Nation's veterans.

the
to

The over representation of our Nation's veterans in broader homeless population remains an issue of great concern. We commend Congress and the VA for commitment to these veterans through the Federal programs for homeless veterans.

National

We would also like to publicly recognize the Coalition for Homeless Veterans for their critically important policy development and technical assistance

efforts.

VA
full
for
NASDVA has called for careful Federal review of the advisory committee on homeless veterans' findings and a implementation of its recommendations including funding permanent housing for veterans unable to obtain permanent housing on their own.

We recommend prompt redesign of the loan guarantee program for homeless veterans' multi-family housing as a grant to providers of such housing.

and
Veterans'
Affairs during the grant making or grant award period for awards in the state of the VA Homeless Provider Grant and Per Diem.
NASDVA strongly recommends that the VA communicate closely coordinated with each State Department of

state
the
DVA's are performing desperately needed outreach and the assistance services that are almost entirely unfunded by Federal government.

by
the Federal government.
The Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program Specialists, DVOPS, and Local Veterans' Employment Representatives, LVERs, are among the few direct veteran services funded

judge
Service
Members and Veterans' Transition Assistance, and NASDVA
However, nearly a decade ago, the deposition was to be inefficient by a Congressional Commission on

employment
health
care information, the USERRA assistance and referrals to other Federal, state and local veterans' services.
agrees. We recommend that LVERs and DVOPS be used to provide all veterans with not just employment, re-

actions
We sincerely hope that the future congressional

will preserve authorization and appropriations for these important functions. We believe it is awkward and inefficient for veterans' employment services to be managed

in a separate and stand-alone manner and apart from the mainstream of other veterans' service delivery.

Seventeen years later, 25 percent of our veterans in the 1991 Persian Gulf War remain seriously ill with chronic multi-symptom illness. No effective treatments currently exist.

As a state-level best practice, Wisconsin enacted legislation that created an annual Gulf War Illnesses Recognition Day. Our annual conference helps highlight the

plight of those who continue to suffer from Gulf War illness providing a forum for information on what is currently known.

NASDVA calls on Congress, DOD, the VA to carefully review the findings and fully implement the recommendations

of the VA Research Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans'

Illnesses which include restoring the DOD Gulf War Illness

Research funding to its previous levels of \$30 million as currently proposed by Senator Sanders.

The DOD congressionally directed Medical Research Program has developed an innovative program to identify treatments and diagnostic tests to improve the health of these ill veterans whom we owe nothing less. Yet it only exists through the action of Congress, it must be renewed annually, and it is tragically under-funded.

NASDVA supports the findings that research on Gulf War veterans' illness has important implications for current and future military deployments and for homeland security,

and the health of the Gulf War veterans must be carefully monitored to determine if the service is associated with excess rates of specific diseases, disease specific deaths,

and overall mortality.

the
Women veterans are our fastest growing segment of
veterans' population with approximately 255,000 of the
Nation's 1.7 million women veterans using VA health care
services which will continue to increase.

must
To meet the special needs of women veterans, there
be an effective women veterans' program at every VA
medical
center, a women veterans' liaison at every VA community
based outpatient clinic, and a women veterans'
coordinator
at every VA regional office.

NASDVA supports full mandatory funding for the VA

health care. NASDVA encourages VA and DOD to continue to
collaborate on seamless integration of electronic health
records. We recommend integration with state veterans'
homes and we recognize the immediate need for full
electronic records needed for processing VA benefits
including PTSD claims.

We recognize the challenge that there are currently
no
objective diagnostic tests like MRIs and CT scans that
can
definitely diagnose mild TBI and we support the efforts
in
that area.

We agree that the VA should screen for mild to
moderate
traumatic brain injury and provide assistance to improve
the
lives of veterans who are affected.

We support the qualified veterans' mortgage bond
provisions contained in H.R. 3997, the Heroes Earnings
Assistance and Relief Tax Act.

Federal
resources to current and former military service members
as
demonstrated by the creation of the National Guard Bureau
of
Transition Assistance Advisors. However, NASDVA's
members

have reacted with great concern that this program was developed and implemented without the consultation or communication with the state DVA's or CVSO's which have broadened responsibilities defined in state law.

While it is of critical importance that the Federal

government commits resource to state and local level veterans' outreach in assistance services, the initial lack of coordination in individual missions in the states which ranged from ill-defined, overwhelming and encompassing, resulted in confusing communications and relations between Federal, state, and local agencies and entities responsible for the delivery of veterans' benefits.

Chairman Akaka. Mr. Scocos, will you please summarize your statement.

Mr. Scocos. In conclusion, my testimony has the remainder of our issues, sir.

Thank you for your allowing us to speak today. I look forward to any questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Scocos follows:]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Scocos. As Chairman, I will reserve my questions and be the last to ask.

And now, we will ask Chairman Filner for his questions.

Chairman Filner. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to

thank the panel for your advocacy for your membership and all veterans. There is a remarkable unanimity in your testimony, I think.

If we did, Mr. Chairman, the G.I. Bill and the disability claims processing mandatory funding and a slogan called no-offsets, we probably will take 90 percent of what we heard today and so I recommend that we try to do that.

Let me just say two things that will help you help us a little as we try to implement the issues that you have talked about today.

Number one, people will always throw back the cost. I think it is a moral commitment of our Nation to do these things. It is part of the cost of war. It is part of our contract that we made with you.

But in reality the money is so small relative to what we as a Nation can afford. If the G.I. Bill, the first sort of estimates would be about \$2 billion a year. Now, that sounds rather high. Most of your net worth is not that high.

But we have a \$3 trillion budget. \$2 billion out of that does not sound so unreasonable. Our VA budget is almost \$100 billion. It does not sound unreasonable relative to that. And for the war in Iraq, we are spending a billion dollars every two days. So relative to the war, the warrior that we are asking for is not unreasonable and we should not be defensive about the costs. It is simply part of the obligations we have as a Nation.

Secondly, it is important that you are here today, but when you go home, there is very important work to do in talking to your elected representatives.

Ten or twenty years ago, 80 percent of the Congress were veterans. Today it is barely 20 percent. That does not mean to say that the non-veterans, of which I am one, are evil or against you. They simply do not understand all of the issues. There are barely 100 congressmen, I think, that are veterans.

So you need to educate them. You need to make sure they know what you are dealing with and just tell your story

and it is important that you do it back at home so they
see your face and they know you are constituents.

You have to educate people whose personal experience
do simply is not as it was in the past and understand, who
not know what a DD-214 is, for example, and you just have
help got to explain it and explain it and I think that will
on this committee, many of us, most of us who are informed

these issues.

So please, you have to keep lobbying, as they say,
all the time. You have to visit your Congress people, your
Senators, and that will help us meet the very reasonable
proposals that you have given us today.

Thank you, so much.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Chairman
Filner.

And now I will call on our Ranking Member, Senator
Burr.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ms. Campos, one of the legislative proposals that
you highlighted was S. 22, which would create an entirely new
VA education program. But in your testimony you recommended
think that the Veterans' Affairs Committees de-conflict, I
with was the word you used, the current education programs
this proposed new education program.

Can you give us a little more specifics about what
you see the need to be to perfect this language?

Ms. Campos. Sir, it is not my area of expertise,
but I do have my colleague here if I may defer to him who works
on the benefit side of that and has worked with your staff
that G.I. Bill.

Senator Burr. Let me ask this if I can. Can we get
together in the next couple of weeks to get a full

will understanding of where you see problems and that way we

not get into the specifics today?

love Ms. Campos. That would be great, sir. We would
to do that.

Senator Burr. Wonderful. I will see that we get something set up.

Institute Mr. Brown, let me pose this one to you. The
of Medicine and the Veterans' Disability Benefits
Commission found that many of the VA's programs and services for
disabled veterans are not adequately coordinated and that

a new, more holistic approach is, in fact, needed.

use Do you have any suggestions for how we can better
these VA services and even services possibly from the
private sector, if necessary, to meet the goal of
restoring veterans with disabilities to the maximum extent
possible?

a Mr. Brown. Mr. Burr, I am taking it that you mean,
when you say holistic, using other than the traditional
forms of medication. I have personally used acupuncture
myself for problems that I have had at a cost to me, not
cost to the government. It has worked.

that If chiropractic care, acupuncture or other forms
have been proven of quality and worked, I see no reason
why we do not authorize in the VA their use.

again To make that young man or that young woman whole
is the goal of the VA; and if it takes special treatment,
as we will call the holistic medication special treatment,

then, yes, it should be used.

all Mr. Burr. The last question I am just going to ask

of you to answer yes or no.

Several of you shared your concerns regarding the timely completion of a VA appropriations bill. Now, last year everybody knew very early on what the amount of the appropriation was going to be, but for some reason the VA appropriation bill was held up and it was almost used as cover for other things.

I am asking yes or no. Will you commit to hold Congress' feet to the fire to make sure that we pass an appropriations bill for the VA that is clean and that we

do

it by October 1?

Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown. Yes, sir. I think you have seen in my testimony that we are tired of the Congress and the

Senate

using the VA appropriations for their own personal gain

in

some areas especially in the construction of VA medical facilities that are desperately needed and military construction.

Senator Burr. Thank you.

Mr. Cook.

Mr. Cook. Absolutely. You know, 13 out of the last

14

years it has been a problem. It is time to end it.

Senator Burr. Ms. Campos.

Ms. Campos. Yes, sir, we do.

Senator Burr. Rose.

Ms. Lee. We must agree.

Senator Burr. Thank you.

Mr. Barnes. Yes, Senator. Definitely.

Senator Burr. Mr. Corbett.

Mr. Corbett. Yes, sir, we totally agree.

Senator Burr. Mr. Scocos.

Mr. Scocos. Yes, sir.

Senator Burr. Thank you. I thank all of you, but

more

importantly I thank those that are behind you who come to support your testimonies today.

Ms. Campos, I look forward to setting up something where we can get together.

Ms. Campos. Yes, sir. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Ranking Member

Burr, and now the questions of Ranking Member Buyer.

Mr. Buyer. I am glad that all of you just testified to

Mr. Burr's questions like you did. But you were pretty silent last fall. When you stop and think about it, you want to look yourself in the mirror, you were pretty

silent last year when that politics was being played on the VA bill.

When he said--I will let that go. If it happens

again

or if you want to correct me, please correct me, but I did

not hear a lot of the noise that you like and enjoyed

making

at times. I did not hear you do it last fall when the VA bill was held up for political purposes.

Mr. Brown. Mr. Buyer, may I comment please?

Mr. Buyer. Sure.

Mr. Brown. I can remember when you were chairman of this Committee and you held up the Independent Budget and you said it was a guesstimate. And then at the end of

the

year, the new appropriation that came out, came out to almost the same amount of money as the emergency

supplement.

So who held it up as political and wanted to be sure that he

had last hurrah. I believe it was you, Mr. Buyer. I am sorry if it offends you, but it is the way I feel.

Mr. Buyer. It does not offend me. It does not

offend

me at all. I am just making the point here that I do

recall

a great deal of silence in the town last year with regard

to

the VA bill being held up for political purposes and the veterans' services organizations being rather silent. So

I

just make that as a point.

The other point I would like to make to you, Mr.

Brown,

is in your opening remarks you used some pretty harsh language about the budgetary process being disturbed that

the VA, that we have to get it from the MILCON budget.

the
Now, I just want you to know that in the years past, VA, in the appropriation process it was the HUD, VA and

were
independent agencies, and what would occur on the floor
a lot of the political games.

to
You would have individual members some of whom would vote against defense budgets or that they were anti-war advocates and what they would do is they would, in order

would
pound their chest, they would go to the floor and they

offer amendments on the floor to take X number of million from something so that they could say, well, I offered amendment to increase the VA spending. That was a
political

game that was going on.

the
More importantly though, the reason I advocated to change, to realign the appropriations process was that I felt it was very important for us to be able to get to

issues of seamless transition in health care that in the appropriation process, Commander Brown, that we had one decision maker. That is extremely important.

in
So now, before when it was Chairman Walsh and now,

extremely
fact, we have Chairman Chenoweth on the House side. I do not know how we do it on the Senate side. It is

care
important that we work with an individual who does the budgetary matters for the military health delivery system and the VA system as we seek to move to seamless integration, not just in our IT and other forms of health care systems, but also on the issues that we wrote in provisions on the Wounded Warrior Act dealing with the

givers. So there is a laundry list of issues that we do.

taking
So your attack on saying, well, my gosh, we are

write
this out of MILCON and how wrong that was. I did not

your adjectives down. There was some pretty harsh language.

Mr. Brown. "It is unacceptable to use military construction and VA appropriations as a tool to achieve other political goals."

Mr. Buyer. What does that mean? What does that mean?

Mr. Brown. By holding up funding, sir, and not passing an appropriation so that the VA can adequately serve our veterans is criminally wrong.

Mr. Buyer. No, no, no. I just wanted to know what that meant. How I interpreted that statement is that you were upset that the MILCON budget was associated with the

VA and the MILPERS budget, and that is not what I meant at all.

Mr. Brown. No, sir, it was not. It is a tool.

Mr. Buyer. No, no, that is fine. I know now that is

not what you meant by that statement.

Rose Lee, I will look into the 11 percent, this differential so when we have how a survivor, how the Federal

civilian employee gets treated versus a military survivor, I

mean, your testimony is about 11 percent and we will look into that.

Ms. Lee. Approximately.

Mr. Buyer. And the challenge, obviously this is

mandatory on the spending side of the aisle. Oh, I just got

handed this. The first year increase alone is \$1.2 billion.

Well, we will have discussions on the Committee. It looks

like a one-year fix alone is \$1.2 billion for that 11 percent increase that you testified to.

We will look at it. We will take it on.

Ms. Lee. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Mr. Buyer. I do not know how long it will take to do

that but it is something that should be done.

With that, I yield back.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Ranking Member Buyer.

Now we will hear questions from Representative Walz. Mr. Walz. Well, thank you, Chairmen, and thank you

to

each of you. On behalf of all of my constituents in southern Minnesota, thank you for your service to our country and thank you for your continued service for fighting this fight that must be fought and I am so appreciative to have each of you here.

group

plan

life

Nation

We are here, and many of us feel very strongly about this and obviously you do. This is a very pragmatic

of people. Warriors are pragmatic. Hope for the best,

for the worst; and that is the way you have lived your

in doing things. And I said we are here because we understand that it is a moral responsibility to this

Nation

are

to deliver on the promises to you. It is what this

stands for. It is at the core of it. It is what people

watching for as an example of how we treat those who are willing to give everything, and there are people in this room who have had members give everything.

have

and

There is also a pragmatic approach to this that we

to keep faith with our veterans to make sure our newest generations of warriors are willing to raise their hand

say they will do what we ask them to do.

to

To keep anything less than that harms our national security. So there is two-fold here of why we are here

do this and I thank you for understanding this for many, many years in providing this fight.

of

when

There is also something that I am glad to hear some

you bring up in here is measure us by our actions. And

I heard the Senator ask you, and I have it written down here, to apologize to Commander Brown for my failings and

the failings of this Committee for not delivering that on time and on the Democratic side of the House.

ask
going
problem
that
went

I think it would be appropriate for each of you to
this Committee to raise their hand and ask if they are
to do everything on their side of the aisle to make sure
that that comes together because that is where the
lies. We are all to blame on this and I can tell you
Chairman Filner, Chet Edwards, myself and Jack Murtha

to the leadership on our side of the House and said, pass that bill on time. It is the right thing to do.

not
of

The President, if there is one thing I have learned about our current President, he is stubborn, and he is
going to back down. And when he said he would veto all those other appropriation bills, there was going to be no leverage in that anyway besides the moral responsibility
delivering it on time.

to

It is not just the timeliness of the VA being able
do it. It is a slap on the face of our veterans that we cannot get it done on time.

mission
never
other

What if we ask them to go to battle, complete a
and they decide to do it at their own pace? That has
been accepted and should never be accepted from your leadership. But the pressure needed to also be on the
side to ask the President to be somewhat flexible with us and to try and see if there was any type of negotiation. Telling us, no, it is my way or the highway left us very little.

them
again

But you know what? That was our responsibility, convince them and we did not do that. We failed to get
to do that. I will be right back there fighting them

right
and I hope on the other side of the aisle they will be
it
there pushing the President to be reasonable with us on
accept
because the bottom line is the President was going to

this one, but he was going to take it out of the hide of
other appropriations.

have
Now, you know what? That might be politics, but
do
the dignity to say, this is one that we are not going to
that with.

that I
So I do say on that and I give you my commitment
failed
will be there and I will be the first to say when I
hold
and we did fail last year. Our leadership decided to
it and that was wrong and we can fix it again.

change
The bottom line is, we possessed the ability to
ability
the way we deal with our veterans. We possess the
records
to deliver on them. We possess the resources to do that;
billion
and if you do not think so, go back and check voting
testified
for members of this Committee that voted to give \$18
give
in subsidies to the oil companies who two days ago
that they needed that and turned around and would not
this Committee the money needed to deliver.

something
Or who said fees were appropriate. Are fees
first
appropriate for the oil executives? Maybe that is
out
that should be asked. This fee has been paid on the
day you raised your hands and swore to defend the
Constitution. It came out in basic training. It came
in your service and for some it came out with your lives.

That fee has been paid. Do not bring us user fees as a way.

We are fiscally responsible, but this is not the place where

it is going to be balanced.

me So when I hear that, it is very, very difficult for

us, to accept that and I can tell you, there is not a one of

care I have yet to meet a politician yet in my career who does not support veterans in words. It is in deeds that I

hear about. I do not give a damn about the words because we

going it, we hear it, we hear it. Now, at some point we are

to have to deliver.

be Are there decisions to be made? Are there things to reach across the aisle? Are there compromises we need to

made? Yes, there are.

updated But the things you brought to us we all know are the truth. The G.I. Bill must be updated. It must be

to because it is the right thing to do. It must be updated

get new members to join the service. That is a responsibility.

justify How in the world I can justify to you concurrent receipts? Some bureaucrat thought that name up. The veterans' tax, the wounded veterans' tax. How I can

is that, I thought through it in every way possible how this

about fair to say that. People here will talk all the time

to double taxation and the estate tax is unfair because it taxes twice. Then how in goodness sake is it to do that

have veterans. You have to make consistent arguments and we

not done that.

And I will just tell you as quoting to the Independent Budget. Congress makes the budget with inputs from the citizens of this country. The President make suggestions.

There is nothing constitutional that gives him the authority to budget. We make the budget here and my authority does not come from some in-held ideology. It comes from the power vested by 700,000 southern Minnesotans.

And I will tell you with great certainty. Not a one of them in the 15 months I have served in office has told me to shortchange and balance the budget on the backs of veterans, not a single one.

So when I vote, I feel I am reflecting the needs and the values of the constituents of the First District that they want to see us get this done. We can modernize the G.I. Bill. We can cut and make sure that we take away that

concurrent receipt penalty and make sure that we understand the wound was separate from the 20 years of service you did.

There is no 401(k) in the military. You do 15 years. There is nothing there for you. We know that. Getting to 20 years is the payoff of it. So we can do that.

And the other thing is this change of attitude of asking our veterans to come back. Those of who are talking about seamless transition I cannot stress enough how right you are about that.

Mark my words on this and I hope we have the foresight

not to do this. But we have the technology now to verify and to record these concussive blast injuries that our warriors are receiving and we are not doing that and mark my

word, in ten years or less time or more time, our
veterans
VA
and
not
an
and
hospital. They are going to talk about blurred vision
possible memory loss and the research shows that is from
serial concussive blasts and then you know what the VA is
going to ask them. Well, when did that happen? We do
not
an
and
have any record of it. And now all of a sudden we are in
an
agent orange situation where, prove that you were there
and
blown up.

We can do that right now by recording that. These
are
up,
It
does not mean they are not receiving injuries.

emotional
the
they
and
do
So I thank you again. I am sorry to be a bit
on this, but, you know, I am convinced that we may be at
crossroads on this and last year was the first beginning.
Everybody says, they always promise to the veterans and
never deliver and then they give you quotes going back to
the Revolutionary War and they quote General Washington
some of the things we got and then every year we fail to
that.

the
Would it not be interesting if they looked back
historically and decide that during the Iraq war and this
war on terror that this Nation made a decision that no
longer that was going to be the case, and from then on,
idea of not delivering to our veterans would be
unacceptable.

So I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Now, we will hear from
Representative

Boozman.

Mr. Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And I want to thank you for your testimony. It was
very informative, very helpful, and then also I want to
thank you for all that you represent for your membership
that some of who were out in the audience, but most are
at
we
home and, you know, leading very busy lives, but again,
appreciate all that you represent and appreciate the
families.

I was not in the military. My dad did 20 years in
the
dad
the
Air Force and so I know it is very difficult when mom or
is away for extended periods of time, you know, serving
the
country.

I am the Ranking Member on the Economic
Opportunities

Subcommittee and we appreciate your help in the sense
that
and
we are all trying to put veterans to work. We deal with
some really important issues here that affect veterans

affect all of America. Things like illegal immigration,
things like the gas prices and stuff.

But I will tell you, if you do not have a job, if
you
not
cannot support your family, if you are under employed and
not being able to do that, then those problems really do
make much difference.

So we are all working very, very hard to do that. I
appreciate working with Ms. Sandland. We have got a good
crew. We are working together to get those things done,
and
the
as a result we really have been able to achieve some of
things we would like to move in that direction.

We are working hard on the G.I. Bill. The mood of
the

Congress right now is such that I think we have a good chance of again working with each other, working with you all to actually make a real difference and see substantial

change in the not too distant future. I think that is something that we are all committed to doing. So again, like you say, I appreciate you.

And the other thing that is so important is, along with

the unemployment, is making sure that our severely injured

guys, men and women that are coming back, again, getting them in a situation where they can take care of themselves

physically but also take care of them such that they can be

employed and again gainfully support their families.

And the good news is we are probably not doing enough,

but we are doing more than we have ever done before and we

truly are doing a bunch, and as we visit and prod the Veterans' Affairs Bureau, prod the Administration, the good

news is that there is welcomed news and the best I can tell,

like I said, they truly are doing their best.

I would like to yield just for a minute to Mr. Buyer.

Mr. Buyer. Thank you very much.

Commander Brown, you caused me to reflect and thinking

back when I would have said Independent Budget best guesstimate, I did say that.

For you to say that, therefore, that statement was also

political, that statement--let me go back to the context because now I recall exactly when that was said.

It was a hearing that I had called for us to examine the modeling, the budgetary modeling. So all of you had been questioning the modeling, actually we did not use those

words, we were questioning the VA's budgetary process.

So when I used to do the health care budgets on the

of Armed Services Committee, I got into the modeling issues
learned all of the Surgeons General. So I took that lessons
the and held that hearing, Commander Brown, with regard to
of VA health modeling and gotten into the actual mechanics
that it and that is when we had learned about the stale data
then was being used in the model and that is when we exposed
the shortfall.

But just as I examined that modeling, I also then
looked at the modeling that was used in the Independent
Budget, and that modeling, that is what is referred to as
best guesstimate.

So I just want to let you know, I want to keep it in
that context because you took it out of context to take a
swipe at me, and that is fine. This a political town.
It is a political world and I am a big boy. But I just want
to make the record reflect that that is, in fact, what it
was used for.

Mr. Brown. To comment on your political swipes,
sir, I am a member and represent a large number of veterans. I
do not do politics. I do what is best for my fellow
veterans.

Mr. Buyer. That is fine. I just wanted to make
sure the record is very clear why and how that was used
because you had fun with a big smile in taking a big jab at me.
That is quite all right.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.
Chairman Akaka. Well, this has been a great
hearing.

You know that the members of this Committee are very
passionate about veterans; and although I said that I
would

reserve my questions, after hearing from the other
members,

I am going to submit my questions for the record and tell
you that this has been a great hearing.

I want to thank all of you for coming today and for
the

members to be present here to be able to hear you and to
ask

you questions. We look upon your responses as being
valuable to us and will help us to do the right things

for
the veterans of our country.

And so I want to say thank you all again, especially
our witnesses and all those who have come to support them
here at this hearing and then adjourn this hearing.

[Whereupon, at 11:16 a.m., the Committee was
adjourned.]