

STATEMENT OF WALTER W. WATTS, JR., COMMANDER, VETERANS OF
FOREIGN WARS, STATE OF ALASKA

Mr. Watts. Thank you, Senator Sullivan. My name, for the record, is Walter W. Watts, Jr., and I am the current commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars for the State of Alaska. I will not be speaking as the commander for over 7,000 veterans that are associated with our department, only because I just took office in the middle of July. I have not visited all 23 posts. I am talking from personal experience, first-hand experience, dealing with the Choice program.

Choice, I wish it were a choice, and I will tell you why.

I have been seeing a rheumatologist basically since 1998 when I got out of the Army, retiring as a sergeant major. A former State employee, I worked as a vet rep. My title was disabled vet outreach program specialist. I have had nothing but good service. Before the VA had a rheumatologist down at the Anchorage center, they used to send me down to see Dr. Tan. Dr. Sky was my rheumatologist at the VA center. She is no longer there.

During this entire process, approximately every 3 or maybe 4 months, depending on what the schedule was and how often a rheumatologist needed to see me, they would notify the Integrated Care folks. The Integrated Care folks would contact me and say, "Walter, you are due for your follow-up with

rheumatology." They would say, "What is a good date?" I would give them a good date, that information, and, boom, it worked. Not a hiccup. The only hiccup was if for some reason the phone system did not transfer down to travel to talk to Chet down in travel, so I could get my flight down, that kind of stuff.

Well, in the middle of May, the nurse called me and said, "Walter, we have talked to Integrated Care and they should be calling you." Integrated Care here in Anchorage called me and said, "Hey, we are going to get back with you to schedule an appointment." And I was like, okay. That works. And I said that the only thing is that it needs to be around 10 o'clock in the morning. "And by the way, we are going to try to work with this new rheumatologist you have in Fairbanks." I said I do not have a problem with that.

Well, 3 days went by and I get a phone call, thinking everything is set up because he is a new doctor to the system. They were in a panic. "Walter, we are sorry. You have to call this 699-whatever Choice number and opt in to Choice." And I am like, if it is Choice, why do I have to opt in? "Because we do not have any money. They took all of our money. It is all gone."

Okay, so I thought about it a couple days. I called the number and finally got through after waiting a long time and told them what my name was, gave them my information as far as

my last four, date of birth.

They asked me for the Choice card. Well, I had gotten three of them, sir. In the process of getting them from last fall, I moved. So they are downstairs in the office in a box someplace, and they said, "Well, based on what you have given us, we are going to have to switch you over to the nurse line and they will start a case for you." Well, that went on, that went on, that went on. I made multiple phone calls. I called their office and they said, "Our system is down. It will be up in about 2 hours." I called back, 2.5 hours later, the system is still down. I give them my name, give them my phone number and say, when the system comes up, could you please call me?

I did not hear from the Choice program until I went to our Congressman Don Young's office in Fairbanks and filed a congressional inquiry. Now all of a sudden, everybody and his brother is trying to call me. I do not think I have to go to a Congressman to get someone who is supposed to be out there to help me as a veteran, having served 27 years, did what I had to do, and now I have to go to a Congressman to get something done?

I do not think that you or Congressman Young or Senator Murkowski should be the appointment makers for all of us veterans here in Alaska. It shouldn't happen, okay?

So last weekend, and I have information, unfortunately, it came out printed not the way I wanted it to because for some

reason it got garbled in the email, information from Senator Congressman Young's office on my follow-up and what I need to get done.

The thing is, with all of that, having gone through that, as I said, I have gotten all kinds of phone calls. I had troubles with my vehicle last week when I was down here. I finally got back. I told them, hey, I will contact you and let you know if I am going to go with this doctor in Fairbanks, because they were not sure. They said they made multiple calls and all this stuff to him. So I said, well, I went by his office and picked up a packet. I have that filled out. I just have to find time. And, of course, yesterday, I was at the session in Fairbanks.

Why do we as veterans have to go through contacting our legislative group to get an appointment? Our system, I won't say it was perfect, but it was damn close -- excuse my language, sorry -- before Choice came about. Why? Because you had to "schedule" an appointment, the nurse would call you up and say, "Walter, I am getting in touch with Integrated Care. They should be getting in touch with you tomorrow, at the worst, the next day, because it is like 3 o'clock in the afternoon." And they will schedule your appointment as soon as you get off the phone, call down to travel. You go to travel.

But listening to the people at the VA here in Alaska,

because I am also a tribal vet rep. It is a program that is part of what was established, which, again, our VA here has been recognized for the health care consortiums for those veterans who are out in rural Alaska that have to go to native health care. It is a great program. I have not personally been out lately, but I plan on going to Bethel and other places to visit those facilities, visit those VFW posts there. And I will talk to the veterans who are there and see if anything has changed.

Because, again, the programs that we had in place worked great. Now you have somebody sitting in the lower 48 that does not have a clue. And when you do finally get through to them and they start looking at your stuff, they want to talk to you about how the weather is in Alaska, what Alaska is like, it has always been on their bucket list. That is not what I want to hear, person. I want you to take care of my issues.

And now they are jumping all over me to call them back, and I did do that not only yesterday after the session in Fairbanks, but I called them and we have just been missing each other, as far as the follow-up.

Why did we have to change the Choice program, which is not a choice? It is not a choice for me or any of these other veterans sitting here. What we had worked. Why should we do that?

The other side of it, and this is from a personal side, is

payment. Right here, sir, I have approximately \$15,000 worth of bills from last September when I had back surgery. The doctor got paid. Everybody got paid, but the top one is from the hospital. They are not beating me up like some of the other veterans I know personally who have things going into collection and all these other kinds of things. This is what is happening to me. I have \$13,000 here.

Well, guess what? After my 5 September surgery, everything seemed to be going great. I got an infection in that procedure. I had to go back in, in October. Well, during the recovery time, I had a PICC line in me. My wife was coming home every day, in the morning getting up before she went to work to give me my antibiotics, coming home for lunch, doing the same thing in the evening. I had a home health care provider. They had to do weekly lab tests and all that.

Here is the other half of those bills, the other part of those bills.

Why do we as a veteran get things that were preauthorized, preapproved, have to go through getting things like this in the mail? Why do we have to face companies, whether it is a health care provider or another service that was preapproved and have to go back to deal with that provider, so that they can get paid? My provider at this point still has not been paid. I would like to provide that to you or provide that to the VA

group that is here. It is totally up to you.

But why can't we go back to what we had, sir? Why can't we, as Alaskans, deal with what we previously had, because it worked for us? We don't care about the lower 48, the rest of the folks. They can come up with their own plan. But our plan worked for us, so why screw with something that isn't broken? It is kind of like in the Army. If it's not broke, don't fix it. Ours wasn't broke.