

**STATEMENT**  
**Senator Patty Murray**  
**Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**  
**Hearing on Exploring the Implementation and Future of the Veterans Choice Program**  
**Tuesday, May 12, 2015**

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, I believe making sure our country keeps the promises we've made to our nation's heroes should be at the top of our list of priorities, all of the time. Taking care of our veterans when they come home is a fundamental part of who we are as a nation and we must make sure that the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) has the tools and resources it needs to provide critical care and support. It is part of the cost of going to war.

Ensuring that all veterans receive quality care in a timely manner remains a critical issue. The Department must work quickly resolve challenges associated with the implementation of the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act. I continue to hear from veterans about delays and confusion in getting care through the Choice Program – and delays in filling positions created by this legislation. This is very concerning to me.

No doubt, the \$5 billion we gave to build and strengthen VA for the long-term is making a difference in some areas, but there is much more to be done. In my home state of Washington, we are seeing some positive effects of this legislation in addressing critical shortages, as several VA medical centers have already announced they will hire hundreds of new medical care staff. They will also be able to upgrade and expand many of the facilities in Washington.

It is critical that VA uses that \$5 billion as it was intended by Congress: to hire more providers, create more usable clinical space, and improve access to care for veterans. The Department should not be diverting this money from those serious needs to make up for the failures in constructing the Denver hospital.

Despite this, low utilization of the Choice Program and increasing delays make it clear that it's time to start planning now for what the future of non-VA care will look like. The Choice Program was a temporary, emergency authority. When it expires, VA needs to have one reformed program in place to help veterans access care outside VA in a way that complements services provided by VA, provides coordinated care with strict quality of care requirements, has consistent processes and eligibility rules, and is cost effective. I look forward to working with all of you on this important task.

Finally, I would also like to thank both panels of witnesses for testifying at this hearing. Your hard work is very important for us as we work to make sure there are adequate resources to provide veterans the benefits and care they have earned.