

Senator Patty Murray
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Statement
June 24, 2015

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. We have some critically important bills on the agenda today that could really improve care for the men and women in our military, something I believe everyone in this room is interested in doing. Before I get to the bills, I want to address some very disturbing news. According to VA's most recent data, wait times are again increasing dramatically. I understand VA has seen enormous growth in demand for care from veterans. But to see wait times climbing again, after we provided \$15 billion to address this very problem, is concerning. As the expiration of the Choice Program approaches, VA needs to be ready with a comprehensive plan to bring down wait times, and to create a comprehensive program for non-VA care that will work for the future. I will continue to keep a close watch on this situation, and I want to see continued progress to bring down wait times.

Now, turning to the agenda --

First on the list is my bill, the Women Veterans and Families Health Services Act. This bill would finally end VA's decades-old ban on fertility services and give new hope to veterans – who were injured while fighting for our country – to realize their dreams of starting a family. I believe offering this service is critically important to fulfilling the promise to take care of the men and women who served our country.

My bill would also expand the services that DoD is allowed to offer, taking lessons from the best practices of some of our close allies around the world. My bill would also offer assistance for adoption. And it would make permanent the child care pilot program, which has been very successful.

Caring for our veterans shouldn't be a partisan issue. I think we all agree that our country has a duty to do whatever we can to improve the lives of those who have sacrificed so much for our country. Cost cannot be an excuse to deny essential care to seriously injured veterans. Not when they have put everything on the line to protect our country.

But since there are concerns about the cost, let's remember that according to a Pentagon report, the military health system can provide a cycle of IVF for \$7,000 which is significantly less than the \$12,400 it costs in the private sector. It's not often the right thing to do is also the cost effective option – we should take that opportunity and pass this bill right away.

Equally important is my military caregivers legislation that I was very pleased to introduce with Senator Collins. This program recognizes the sacrifice of the friends and family who take care of our injured servicemembers by offering assistance to ease their burden. Our bill would finally open the caregiver program to veterans of all eras, through a responsible, phased-in approach that will allow VA to manage the additional workload. This is just common sense, and it's the right thing to do for our veterans and their caregivers. It also expands the services available for caregivers, and aligns eligibility for VA and DoD services. Finally, the bill takes a major step

toward improving caregiver support for the whole country by coordinating the many services offered across the government.

I am committed to working with my colleagues to make sure VA has the resources it needs to effectively administer this program. In fact, an amendment I authored to the VA appropriations bill will give VA another \$10 million to hire more caregiver support coordinators. These additional staff will help address some of the important findings from the GAO, strengthen the program, and prepare VA to finally meet the needs of veterans of all eras.

We also know that treating a veteran through the Caregiver Program is far less expensive than through a private nursing home or through a VA nursing home. But most important, it helps veterans stay out of the hospital, and have shorter stays when they do have to go in. It allows veterans to be in their own homes, surrounded by their loved ones. Giving veterans a better quality of life is not just the cost effective thing to do, it's the right thing to do.

Our veterans shouldn't have to wait any longer for these important improvements to their care.

Finally, thank you to our witnesses. And a special thank you to the VSOs for appearing today and for your support for these two important bills.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I look forward to working with you to get these bills through markup and then through the Senate floor.