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THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 2017

United States Senate,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
House of Representatives,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 2:04 p.m.,
in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John
Boozman, presiding.

Present: Senators Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds, Sullivan,
Tester, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, and Manchin;
Representatives Roe, Coffman, Radewagen, Poliquin,
Arrington, Rutherford, Bergman, Gonzalez-Colon, Walz,
Kuster, O'Rourke, Correa, and Esty.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BOOZMAN

Senator Boozman. Okay. Let us go ahead and get
started, and I just want to take a second to welcome all of
you. There is nothing, you know, from a Committee
standpoint that is so important to look at and see all of
the hats out there, roaming the buildings, talking to
people, talking about how important these issues are so that
we keep our promises. So, again, thank you so much for

1 being here. I know it is a hassle, but there is nothing
2 that is more important. So thank you very much.

3 I want to read a letter from our Chairman, who, because
4 of recuperating right now, cannot be with us. So let me go
5 ahead and read this, and then I am going to put it in the
6 record.

7 "Welcome to the hundreds of VFW members and Auxiliary
8 members in attendance, and a special welcome to the Georgia
9 State Commander William Sandberg and the rest of the Georgia
10 delegation."

11 Do you guys want to raise your hands so we can give a
12 shout-out to the Georgia--very good.

13 [Applause.]

14 Senator Boozman. "I regret that I am unable to attend
15 the hearing today as I am at home recovering from back
16 surgery the rest of this week before returning to
17 Washington, D.C. I look forward to returning with a new and
18 improved back to continue working harder than ever on behalf
19 of our veterans."

20 "As I said at Secretary Shulkin's confirmation hearing,
21 we are about making health care more available to veterans
22 through care in both the private sector and the VA. We do
23 not want to privatize the VA by any means. We want to
24 empower it. I look forward to working collaboratively with
25 you and other stakeholders to help improve the care and

1 services for our veterans."

2 Senator Boozman. So I ask unanimous consent that we
3 put that into the record.

4 [The letter follows:]

5 / COMMITTEE INSERT

1 Senator Boozman. I will now yield to the Ranking
2 Member, Senator Tester.

3 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

4 Senator Tester. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And,
5 Commander Duffy, thank you for being here today with your
6 leadership team. We very much appreciate it.

7 I want to recognize--and if you guys would stand up, I
8 would appreciate it--Jack Hawley, the VFW State Commander
9 from Montana; as well as Tim Peters, Art Widhalm, Virginia
10 Arnold, and Bob Swagel. Would you guys stand, please?
11 Thank you for being here.

12 [Applause.]

13 Senator Tester. And I want to thank you for what you
14 do every day for Montana's veterans.

15 Commander Duffy, we are here because Congress should
16 take its cues from you. The VFW provides a critical
17 perspective on how to best address veterans' challenges.
18 Your members have left the safety of our shores to serve our
19 Nation overseas in uniform. They also provide critical
20 services every single day to veterans and families in
21 Montana and across this country, and I want to thank you for
22 your continuing commitment and service.

23 As I told the American Legion this morning, we hold
24 these hearings because only the VSOs, and not partisan
25 political groups or their pundits on cable, can help

1 Congress focus its oversight and legislative efforts to
2 ensure that veterans have access to quality care and
3 benefits. That means taking cues from you on how to hold
4 the VA accountable, ensure that the VA has the capacity to
5 meet the needs of all veterans, and fixing Choice and
6 Community Care.

7 You are going to hear from a lot of folks today about
8 how much they unconditionally support veterans. While
9 showing appreciation for those words, I hope you will also
10 hold them accountable for their actions. It is a critical
11 time for the VA. Today it is confronted with looming and
12 dramatic funding shortfalls and a Choice Program that at
13 least in Montana is just flat not working.

14 Many veterans have lost faith in the VA over the past
15 few years. We have won some of them back, but much more
16 work need to be done. Rather than just giving a veteran a
17 card to seek care in the private sector, the path forward
18 should be an integrated network of VA and community
19 providers. This means the VA should continue to serve as a
20 coordinator and a primary provider of care while the private
21 sector fills in the gaps.

22 Commander Duffy, I want to commend your organization
23 for its work not only on "Our Care 2017," your recently
24 published report on veterans' health care, but also for your
25 work on the independent budget. It is clear that the VFW is

1 the leader when it comes to gauging feedback from veterans
2 and outlining an appropriate path forward on the delivery of
3 care. Your input and your guidance will be critically
4 important as we move forward, so hopefully Congress will
5 spend less time patting itself on the back and more time
6 rolling up its collective sleeves to enact meaningful
7 reforms on behalf of the veterans of this Nation. I know it
8 is what you expect, but it is also what you deserve, and I
9 look forward to that discussion today.

10 On a sidebar, I want to tell you it was some 48 years
11 ago a VFW member, who happened to be my bus driver, asked me
12 to play "Taps" at the veterans' funerals across our county.
13 It was for that reason that that VFW bus driver and good guy
14 set me on the road to politics. Some might like that, some
15 might not. But the fact is it was that experience, and what
16 an incredible experience it has been in my lifetime, where I
17 played "Taps" for many of the Greatest Generation, even a
18 few World War I members back then, and it gave me the self-
19 confidence to be able to serve here today.

20 So you have helped more than just your veteran
21 population, and I want to thank you very much for that.
22 Commander Duffy, welcome. I appreciate your presence and
23 being here with your team.

24 Senator Boozman. Senator Rounds.

25 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR ROUNDS

1 Senator Rounds. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am walking
2 in, just coming back from another event, and let me just say
3 this: Seldom do we get a group like this in front of us,
4 and I want to take the opportunity to first of all say thank
5 you to you for your service to our country. But, second of
6 all, thank you to your families. I think we sometimes
7 forget to say thank you to the whole crew because, as you
8 all know, this is a team effort. And so let me just begin
9 by saying I most certainly appreciate everything that you
10 have done and your families have done as well.

11 There are a couple of items that I have a real concern
12 about, and I most certainly hope that you will be supportive
13 of our efforts to make some modifications. I would hope
14 that as we discuss items this afternoon, you would take
15 particular interest in the Emergency Care Fairness Act and
16 the implementation which is coming around and offer full
17 support for our implementation of that particular item. We
18 most certainly appreciate all of you being here and your
19 direct participation.

20 And, with that, Mr. Chairman, I will give back my time,
21 and you can move forward, sir. Thank you.

22 Senator Boozman. Senator Brown.

23 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BROWN

24 Senator Brown. Thank you, and I appreciate very much
25 Mr. Chairman saying a few words and Senator Tester and

1 Senator Rounds.

2 I just had a good conversation with an Ohioan by the
3 name of Keith Hardman, who was--Ohio is--not every State is
4 so blessed to have in every county a Veteran Service
5 Commission and a full-time veteran who is serving veterans,
6 and whether it is a small county like his in western Ohio or
7 a larger county which has a number of people, and it has
8 meant all the difference in the world in veterans services.
9 I would thank him, and I know others of you in this crowd
10 have served in that capacity. You served our country, and
11 then you came back and full-time served veterans.

12 A couple of points I will make briefly is the
13 importance of making sure that the VA is not privatized. I
14 know there are people in this institution that would like to
15 privatize Medicare and privatize Social Security and
16 privatize public education and privatize the VA. And you
17 can count on--I know Senator Isakson has spoken out in
18 opposition to that, as Senator Tester has and I have. And I
19 asked now-Secretary Shulkin his position on it, both one on
20 one and then in front of this Committee, and he adamantly
21 stressed his opposition to privatization. I know that is
22 something that is so important to all of you. And, of
23 course, I know what has happened in VA's all over my State
24 with the backlog, and we commit to you that we need to do a
25 better job than we have. I think we have had some pretty

1 good VA Secretaries with McDonald and with Shinseki and back
2 before that, and now I am hopeful with Shulkin. But we have
3 got to get to work on that.

4 So, Commander Duffy, thank you for your work and your
5 leadership, and thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 Senator Boozman. I just want to point out that the
7 House is having votes and will join us shortly, but now I
8 would like to yield to the Senator Majority Leader, Mitch
9 McConnell, who is going to introduce the National Commander.

1 STATEMENT OF HONORABLE MITCH MCCONNELL, A UNITED
2 STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF KENTUCKY

3 Senator McConnell. Thank you, Senator Boozman,
4 colleagues. It is a genuine honor to be here today with a
5 friend of very long standing, known for many, many years,
6 who has ascended to the top position of the VFW. Brian
7 Duffy is an outstanding Kentuckian. As I said, it is an
8 honor to be here today to introduce him. He is a powerful
9 advocate for our Nation's veterans. He has served since
10 last summer as Commander-in-Chief of the VFW of the United
11 States, the Nation's oldest war veterans organization. This
12 is a major responsibility, but it comes easily to a man who
13 has dedicated his entire life to the service of others,
14 first in the Air Force and now to his fellow veterans.

15 Since joining the VFW, Brian has tirelessly worked on
16 behalf of his brothers and sisters in uniform to honor their
17 service and their sacrifice. When he was elected to lead
18 the VFW last year, the first Operation Desert Storm veteran
19 to serve as commander, I knew he would make us all very,
20 very proud.

21 I have quoted him before, but it is worth doing again.
22 Brian called the VFW "an organization of doers and an
23 organization comprised of patriots." I wholeheartedly
24 agree, and I can think of no better example of those traits
25 than the man sitting right next to me right now.

1 As commander, Brian passionately advocates for veterans
2 every day. As the founder of the Bluegrass Chapter of the
3 Honor Flight, he has made it possible for hundreds of World
4 War II, Korea, and Vietnam Veterans to travel to Washington.
5 While here, they visit the memorials built to honor their
6 service and experience the gratitude of our entire Nation.
7 These trips involve immense amounts of logistical and
8 financial planning, and Brian has worked to make sure that
9 Kentucky's veterans have the ability to make this important
10 trip at no cost to themselves.

11 He has also committed himself to the challenges of
12 younger veterans, promoting policies to raise awareness
13 about wounds inflicting the generation which has fought the
14 war on terror.

15 As an avid hockey fan, Brian has organized several
16 Warrior Cup Challenge hockey games to support the Fort Knox
17 Warrior Transition Battalion and to encourage veterans to
18 join the VFW.

19 I also want to recognize another friend, Carl Kaelin,
20 who serves as the chief of staff to the commander-in-chief.
21 Brian and Carl make an incredible team, and I am grateful
22 for Carl's presence here today as well.

23 Brian and his wife, Jean, have been leaders in the VFW
24 literally for years, and I know they will continue to do
25 great things for our Nation's veterans. So I am grateful to

1 Commander Duffy's selfless service, and as I said earlier,
2 this is not just a situation where I am showing up for a
3 constituent, which I would probably do anyway, but this is
4 showing up for somebody that I have known for a long time,
5 have great admiration for, and we are so proud of the fact
6 that this terrific outstanding Kentuckian is now the
7 National Commander. With that, I give you Brian Duffy.

8 Mr. Duffy. Thank you, sir. Appreciate it.

9 [Applause.]

10 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Senator McConnell, very
11 much.

12 Commander Duffy, what I would like to do is go to
13 Senator Manchin, and, again, I would like to do that in the
14 sense--hopefully, we will get some of our House guys done
15 with their votes so that they can filter back in and hear
16 most of your testimony.

17 Senator Manchin?

18 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR MANCHIN

19 Senator Manchin. Well, let me say, Commander,
20 congratulations and thank you for the job you do, and your
21 entire staff, I thank all of you. The VFW is the heartbeat
22 of most of our communities throughout West Virginia because
23 we have such a large veterans population, as you know, and
24 we are very appreciative.

25 I would like, if any of my veterans from West Virginia

1 are still here, I would like for them to stand. Are they
2 here? They had to beat the weather? They are tough cadres.
3 Hard to tell what happened to them. Anyway, they were here,
4 and they have spent a few days with us, and I really
5 appreciate it. We had Todd Kingsbury and Bob Caruthers and
6 Chuck Haney and Vicki Stalnaker and Pam King. They were all
7 here, and I appreciate them very much.

8 Let me say I want to thank our witnesses for their
9 testimony before this joint hearing, and our colleagues will
10 be coming from the House shortly. I also want to commend
11 your commitment to our veterans. Together, we can help
12 ensure that our veterans receive the recognition and
13 assistance that they need and deserve.

14 Our great State of West Virginia values our veteran
15 population, which encompasses 9 percent of our entire
16 population. Nine percent of all the people who live in my
17 State of West Virginia are veterans, and that is something.
18 We understand the challenges of rural health care as good as
19 or even better than the majority of the Nation because we
20 are a rural State, period. I do not have a town--I say a
21 town. I am a State of a lot of towns. The largest city I
22 have is 50,000--50,000 in Charleston and 50,000 in
23 Huntington. And then from there it goes all the way down.

24 I met with the VFW veterans from my State yesterday.
25 They all came in, and I appreciated that very much. And I

1 know that they represent my entire State well. I want to
2 thank them for what they do in West Virginia, and I want you
3 to rest assured that no Senator wants wholesale
4 privatization of the VA. I have not heard that word,
5 "privatize" the VA. You hear other people talk about it,
6 but not an elected member that knows the value of our
7 veterans. We must invest in the VA hospitals to update
8 them.

9 I do not think we are going to see new buildings of
10 hospitals going up. I do not think you will see many of
11 that happening. I think you will see us reinvesting in what
12 we have to make the best of the best and make them better.
13 I think also with our Choice we will keep improving and
14 working on choice to where you as a veteran should be able
15 to go to the best care that you desire and the best care
16 that you have confidence in anywhere that it is available,
17 and to it on a priority basis, not having to wait forever to
18 get served. Those are the things that we strive for, and I
19 think that we will do that.

20 Across America, we are finding a challenge in the
21 battle against opiates. My State has been affected more
22 than any other State in the Nation. I lost 630 West
23 Virginians. We have the number one death rate from opiate
24 addiction and overdose. And then, unfortunately, it affects
25 our veterans, our service people too.

1 We need to find a pathway forward. We need to make
2 sure that our fighting men and women are not being
3 overprescribed, if you will, and they are not being
4 overmedicated. There are other ways for the pain and the
5 stress to be handled, and the VA is trying. They are on the
6 front edge of this right now. So I applaud and appreciate
7 everything they are doing.

8 I talked to Bob McDonald when he was there. He got it,
9 and he started working in a different direction. Dr.
10 Shulkin is going to be a great VA leader, I believe. Well,
11 he is the one person that got unanimous consent. We have
12 not had that happen here since I have been here. So God
13 bless the veterans for allowing us to come together as a
14 body. You really make us bipartisan. Without the veterans,
15 we would not have a bipartisan movement, if you will. And
16 we are interested in really how we can work together.

17 I think that when you come here and when you come the
18 way you do come, in force, and you come to visit all of your
19 elected representatives, it means so much, so much more to
20 see you all in person and see the real people that are
21 involved and the real lives that are going to be affected if
22 we do or do not do something.

23 There is a lot on the table right now. I mean, you
24 know, the Affordable Care Act is going to affect a lot of
25 people and a lot of families in many different ways. I

1 think all of us want to improve it and have better quality
2 health care. We just maybe have a different direction. I
3 would like to see us improve it and repair it. I really
4 would. I think that we can do that and come together, and
5 that would be great for our communities.

6 Again, I have always looked for a way to say thank you
7 for the job that you have done and the life you have given
8 me. My grandfather was in the Army, World War I, my father
9 in World War II. My uncle was in the Navy; I had another
10 uncle in the Marines. And I can only look at that
11 generation and look at all of you. Anytime I see a person
12 that has been a veteran or a person with a uniform--I speak
13 to a lot of schoolchildren, and I go and tell them, I say,
14 "Whenever you see a person in uniform, that person has
15 decided that you mean more than they do themselves for your
16 country. They are willing to take a bullet for you. They
17 are willing to defend you with their life. You tell me how
18 many people you have in your family that will do that, let
19 alone someone you do not even know."

20 That is how special the veterans are to me, to West
21 Virginians, and to every Senator up here. So I say thank
22 you. God bless each and every one of you, and thank you for
23 continuing to keep us informed. Thank you.

24 [Applause.]

25 Senator Boozman. Commander Duffy, you are welcome to

1 give your testimony.

1 STATEMENT OF BRIAN DUFFY, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,
2 VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS; ACCOMPANIED BY GERALD
3 MANAR, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE; BOB
4 WALLACE, ADJUTANT GENERAL; CARLOS FUENTES,
5 DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE; AND MARK
6 ALVAREZ, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE CHAIRMAN

7 Mr. Duffy. Thank you, Senator. Members of the Senate
8 and House Veterans' Affairs Committees, I am honored to have
9 the privilege of introducing the national officers of the
10 VFW and our Auxiliary. Mr. Chairman, please allow me to ask
11 those I am about to be introducing to remain standing, and I
12 wish to request that the audience hold its applause until
13 all have been introduced.

14 I am pleased to be joined today by the National
15 President of our Auxiliary, Colette Bishop, from Ohio; the
16 National Auxiliary Secretary Treasurer, Jan Owens, from
17 South Carolina; the Auxiliary Legislative Ambassador, Bette
18 Jean Biedrzycki, from Pennsylvania; my wife, Jean, from
19 Kentucky; the Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief's wife, Mary
20 Lou Harman, from Ohio; the Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief's
21 wife, Mary Lawrence, from New Mexico. The Senior Vice
22 Commander-in-Chief is with us as well, Keith Harman, from
23 Ohio; the Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief, Vincent B.J.
24 Lawrence, from New Mexico. Sitting beside me, the Adjutant
25 General, Robert E. Wallace, from New Jersey; the

1 Quartermaster General, Deborah Anderson, from Missouri;
2 Judge Advocate General G. Anthony "Tony" Wolusky, from
3 Colorado; our Surgeon General, Dr. James "Doc" Tuorila, from
4 Minnesota; National Chaplain, Rev. Peter Hook, from
5 Pennsylvania; the National Chief of Staff, Carl J. Kaelin,
6 from Kentucky; the Inspector General, Harold "Hal" Roesch,
7 from Virginia; the Chairman of the National Legislative
8 Committee, Mark Alvarez, from Florida; Director, VFW
9 National Legislative Service, Carlos Fuentes, from Maryland;
10 and Director, VFW National Veterans Service, Gerald T.
11 Manar, from Virginia.

12 I would like to also recognize the presence of many of
13 our past Commander-in-Chiefs, if they would stand as well.

14 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Duffy. Chairman Roe, Ranking Members Tester and
17 Walz, and members of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs
18 Committees, it is my honor to represent the nearly 1.7
19 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the
20 United States and our Auxiliary. As the VFW National
21 Commander, I have had the privilege of traveling throughout
22 our country and, indeed, throughout the world to visit our
23 troops, our veterans, and their families to discuss with
24 them their issues and their concerns.

25 An important issue the VFW needs your help with right

1 off is to address sequestration. The threat of
2 sequestration and the draconian spending caps limits our
3 Nation's ability to provide servicemembers, veterans, and
4 their families the care and benefits that they have earned
5 and that they deserve. Sequestration also degrades training
6 and limits the resources our servicemembers need to
7 successfully defend this Nation and defeat our enemies.

8 When the 112th Congress created it in 2011, Russia was
9 not in Ukraine and China was not building islands out of
10 rocks. Iran and North Korea were not as emboldened as they
11 are today, and the Islamic State did not exist. Yet here we
12 are, 6 years later, and our brave men and women in uniform
13 are still operating under your budget acts called
14 "sequestration."

15 Let me be perfectly clear as the Commander-in-Chief of
16 the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. This
17 Congress must end sequestration.

18 [Applause.]

19 Mr. Duffy. I also hear from wounded, ill, and injured
20 veterans who are waiting far too long for medical
21 appointments or for disability claim decisions, and they are
22 concerned with access and the availability of mental health
23 providers. Along with the VFW Auxiliary president, I am
24 proud to say that the VFW has partnered with several of the
25 Nation's leading organizations to change the direction, to

1 help change the narrative in which our Nation discusses
2 mental health issues. The VFW's team has given our
3 providers, One Mind researchers, the peer-to-peer group
4 Patients Like Me, the family caregiver-focused Elizabeth
5 Dole Foundation, the Nation's largest pharmacy, Walgreens,
6 and the Department of Veterans Affairs to promote mental
7 health awareness, to dispel the misconceptions about seeking
8 help, and to connect more veterans with life-saving
9 resources. And that includes the peer-to-peer support every
10 member of the VFW and our Auxiliary can provide, which I can
11 tell you is a powerful service that works.

12 Mental wellness is an ongoing VFW campaign, and we call
13 on Congress to do its part to ensure the VA is properly
14 resourced so that more veterans can obtain timely and
15 quality care.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Duffy. In the past 2 years, the VFW has also
18 worked to evaluate the VA's ability to care for our
19 veterans. The VFW did this work through the lens of our
20 members, to ensure that our recommendations are veteran-
21 centric and align with the views, the preferences, and the
22 experience of those the system was created to serve.

23 Now, the good news is that VFW members across the
24 country are noticing improvements. In the VFW's latest
25 health care survey, nearly 60 percent of responding veterans

1 noticed an improvement. Some even said that their VA
2 facility is not in need of improvements. Veterans tell us
3 that the VA has improved its customer service by being more
4 caring and more friendly. And veterans also reported
5 waiting less time for their appointments, and they commended
6 the VA for making several changes that have improved the
7 overall patient experience.

8 But to be clear, the VFW is not content with
9 maintaining the status quo. However, as high users of the
10 VA health care system, we know that implementing systemwide
11 changes takes time, which is why we are pleased to see that
12 the Senate confirmed Dr. Shulkin unanimously, and we look
13 forward to working with Secretary Shulkin to ensure he is
14 able to succeed in what has become the most scrutinized job
15 in this country.

16 The VA still has a long way to go. It needs to hire
17 more providers, train its employees better, and hold the
18 wrongdoers accountable, and get a handle not only on the
19 reported backlog but on the entire workload, and it needs to
20 update an aging capital infrastructure. Access to outside
21 doctors when the VA is not able to care for veterans in a
22 timely manner is part of the solution. However, veterans
23 want to fix, not dismantle, the VA health care system.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Duffy. And we thank Congress and the VA for making

1 several of the VFW suggested improvements to the Choice
2 Program. But it continues to face survival challenges, and
3 it must be improved before it is made permanent. Congress
4 must eliminate the secondary payer requirement under the
5 Choice Program, and Congress must fix how the VA obligates
6 funds for Community Care. Congress must authorize the VA to
7 enter into provider agreements so that it can stop losing
8 200 community nursing home partners a year. And, finally,
9 Congress must repeal outdated laws that hinder the VA's
10 ability to share medical documentation with private sector
11 doctors.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Duffy. Congress and the VA must take the lessons
14 learned from various Community Care program and create a
15 single, sustainable program that integrates the private
16 sector into the VA health care system. The VFW has
17 supported a number of bills that would move towards this
18 goal. However, Congress' self-imposed budget rules have
19 kept such bills from becoming law. The Choice Program is
20 set to expire soon, but Congress has not acted on a
21 permanent solution. Instead of waiting until the 11th hour,
22 which will limit the VA's ability to serve veterans,
23 Congress must provide the VA the resources it needs to
24 continue this important program under the existing
25 authorities.

1 Congress must also pass strong accountability
2 legislation to ensure Secretary Shulkin is able to
3 discipline employees who endanger the lives of veterans,
4 period.

5 [Applause.]

6 Mr. Duffy. But along with the authority to fire bad
7 employees, the VA also needs the ability to quickly hire, to
8 properly compensate, and retain high-quality employees.
9 Congress must improve VA's hiring and retention authorities.
10 The VFW also strongly supports the full expansion of
11 caregiver benefits to all generations of veterans.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Duffy. It is well past time that Congress
14 recognized that pre-9/11 veterans also need caregiver
15 benefits, which keeps them out of costly inpatient nursing
16 facilities and to relieve the burden on a caring family
17 member or members who have suffered long enough.

18 Another issue that has remained unresolved for far too
19 long is the backlog of appeals, which now stands at more
20 than 500,000. A half million waiting.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Duffy. Congress must act quickly to pass the
23 appeals modernization legislation that was developed with
24 direct feedback and support from the VFW, Congress, and the
25 VA. To better manage its disability claims workload, the VA

1 developed a national work queue which moves work around the
2 VA based on capacity. And the VFW understands and we
3 support this concept. However, the current system does not
4 always permit VFW-accredited service officers the ability
5 and the time to review rating decisions for accuracy. These
6 reviews are the final quality check that claims receive
7 prior to being finalized, which helps the VA avoid
8 unnecessary errors and subsequent appeals. The VA must
9 allow the VFW service officer who initiated the claim to
10 review the proposed rating decisions.

11 Moving forward, Congress must also provide adequate
12 resources to improve VA facilities and outreach for our
13 women veterans. These are the fastest growing population
14 within the military and the veteran community. The VFW is
15 also concerned with findings from recent studies that point
16 to higher rates of infertility and pregnancy complication
17 for our women veterans who were deployed to the Gulf War and
18 also that were deployed to the current wars in Iraq and
19 Afghanistan. Congress must commission research to determine
20 if those conditions are associated with their military
21 service.

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Duffy. When servicemen and -women become ill due
24 to toxic exposures, it is incumbent upon a grateful Nation
25 to care for them, and that is why the VFW supports expanding

1 Agent Orange presumptions to our Blue Water Navy veterans,
2 and that is why--

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Duffy. And that is why we support researching all
5 symptoms and all conditions associated with service during
6 the Persian Gulf War. It is also why we support properly
7 researching and evaluating the health effects of burn pit
8 exposure and correcting the presumptive dates for our Korean
9 DMZ veterans. And we also support ensuring the list of
10 presumptive conditions for Camp Lejeune is accurate and
11 providing benefits to veterans who were exposed to radiation
12 on Woomera Air Force Station in souther Australia.

13 I must also mention veteran homelessness, especially
14 those homeless vets with dependent children, which adds a
15 unique set of challenges when obtaining VA care and VA
16 benefits. And the VFW calls on Congress to expand the VA
17 child care program to ensure veterans can attend their
18 medical appointments and have access to employment training
19 and the needed counseling service.

20 And regarding education, a new study commissioned by
21 our partners, the Student Veterans of America, shows that
22 veterans outperform their civilian counterparts in higher
23 education, and that directly translates into a successful
24 transition back into civilian life. And that is why the VFW
25 urges Congress to protect the integrity of the post-9/11 GI

1 bill as a tool to help veterans succeed after their military
2 service.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Duffy. And Congress must ensure Reserve
5 servicemembers placed on active duty for preplanned missions
6 or to heal from injuries sustained during active duty accrue
7 GI bill eligibility. Congress must also close the loopholes
8 currently exploited by predatory institutions who charge
9 exorbitant fees. Congress must provide full GI bill
10 eligibility to active Guard and Reserve veterans who serve
11 in a combat zone.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Duffy. In closing, I would be remiss if I did not
14 mention the sacred mission of recovering America's POWs and
15 MIAs. This mission is very important to the VFW, and we
16 call on Congress to fully fund the Defense POW/MIA
17 Accounting Agency and its support organizations.

18 I thank you again for the opportunity to represent the
19 Nation's largest and oldest major combat veterans
20 organization. We are the VFW, and no one does more for
21 veterans.

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Duffy. I look forward to your questions.

24 [The prepared statement of Mr. Duffy follows:]

1 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Commander. You are
2 leading a rowdy bunch. That is good.

3 [Laughter.]

4 Mr. Duffy. They are energized, sir.

5 Senator Boozman. Well, that is excellent. I tell you,
6 it is great to look out and to see standing room only.

7 I now yield myself 5 minutes for questions. Again, I
8 want to thank you for being here, and I also want to thank
9 your team for the great job that they do representing you
10 and interacting with Congress and are just always available.

11 The folks from Arkansas, Rosalyn Cox and her team, do
12 you guys want to wave? Very good.

13 [Applause.]

14 Senator Boozman. Ros and her team do a tremendous job
15 helping veterans, but not only helping veterans like so many
16 of you, are such a big part of the community, and we really
17 do appreciate that and appreciate all of your service in so
18 many different ways.

19 When I visited with several of our veterans from
20 Arkansas yesterday, we talked about suicide prevention
21 efforts and ways we can improve access to meaningful mental
22 health services and strengthen suicide prevention awareness
23 among our veterans in our veteran communities. Oftentimes,
24 the very folks we need to reach out to most are not formally
25 affiliated with the VA, and many may be unknown to veterans'

1 groups. In your prepared testimony, you talked about the
2 VFW's campaign to change direction and your outreach to
3 nearly 17,000 servicemembers, veterans, and their families,
4 which is so commendable, in all 50 States and in D.C.

5 What plans to do you have to expand the campaign? And
6 how can we help you in doing that?

7 Mr. Duffy. Thank you, sir. You know, it has been very
8 successful. Combined with the Auxiliary to the VFW and
9 harnessing the membership of the VFW, no group can relate to
10 a veteran in distress as easy or as effectively as a fellow
11 veteran. So understanding that the Veterans of Foreign
12 Wars, that many of the veterans that are seated behind me
13 have gone off and they have deployed, they have been on the
14 pointy end of the spear. They themselves perhaps have
15 suffered in the past or are continuing to suffer from some
16 of the mental health wounds from wars and that, they can
17 relate. So just that simple peer-to-peer, a simple program,
18 we are able to identify some of the five basic indices of
19 when somebody is in distress. It can be so powerful, and we
20 can multiply that through an organization with 1.7 million
21 members.

22 I can tell you, sir, I was in Tennessee, and it was
23 just starting, and I was trying to figure out with this
24 program, how do you measure the success? What metric do I
25 use to say that a VFW mental health awareness program can

1 have a positive effect? And, obviously, the extreme, to
2 helping somebody with a mental health issue is when they
3 make that choice to end their life, that suicide decision.
4 And I had a VFW Auxiliary member call me aside, and they
5 said, "Commander, it is working." And I said, "What is
6 working?" "We had a veteran in the post the other day, and
7 because of the program, because we had already had some
8 basic education, we were able to work with that veteran; we
9 were able to discuss some of the basic primer points of
10 helping them. We were able to give that veteran some
11 resources that they could work with in the community."

12 That veteran went home, and, unfortunately, that
13 veteran still had some lingering thoughts of suicide, and
14 that veteran went downstairs to the basement. That veteran
15 took a gun out of a safe and came back upstairs. But the
16 good news is, because of these programs, that veteran put
17 the gun down on the kitchen table, picked up the literature
18 that had been provided by the VFW and the Auxiliary member
19 at the post, and thankfully, the next thing that veteran
20 picked up was the phone and got help.

21 So a community-based initiative such as the VFW and
22 Auxiliary's mental health awareness program can literally
23 save lives, and it has.

24 Senator Boozman. That is excellent and certainly, you
25 know, a very powerful story, and hopefully we can help you

1 again expand the program, and then also not only expand your
2 program, but these the kind of things that the VA needs to
3 be doing, the tremendous delays that we have in appointments
4 at times, and certainly the VA is working hard, and we are,
5 you know, doing a better job of that. The mental health is
6 just such a huge issue not only within the VA community but
7 also throughout the country. But we just really want to
8 compliment you on throwing a program out there that, you
9 know, as your testimony and the story that you just told
10 indicates that it is changing lives and saving lives.

11 Ranking Member Tester?

12 Senator Tester. Thank you, Senator Boozman. And thank
13 you, Commander Duffy, for your remarks, and thank you for
14 your last statement. I think anything that we can do and
15 help you to help remove the stigma from around mental health
16 to make sure that those soldiers pick up the phone is just
17 good news, to get them the help they need, to get them on
18 recovery.

19 I want to commend your organization for its work on
20 "Our Care 2017." It is a recently published report on
21 veterans' health, and the report says that veterans want to
22 fix, not dismantle, VA health care. Now, I just want you to
23 flesh this out a little bit more. When I read that, fix
24 instead of dismantle, how I interpret that is that the VA is
25 the primary provider for health care to the veterans, and

1 the private sector fills in the cracks. Is that the same
2 way you read it? Or do you read it a different way?

3 Mr. Duffy. Senator, we see it that the VA system
4 itself provides quality care. The issue has always been the
5 accessibility, and if we can increase the accessibility--and
6 we are on a positive trajectory, as that report shows, of
7 increasing the accessibility, more and more veterans will be
8 able to get that quality care. And part of the
9 accessibility, quite honestly, goes to the ability for the
10 VA to hire the folks that they need, the clinicians, the
11 doctors, and those that support those positions. And,
12 currently, as I said in my opening statement, some of the
13 procedures and hiring on the Federal level are not as nimble
14 as they are in the civilian population. So from a
15 competitive standpoint, whether it is the compensation or
16 just the process of bringing these doctors on board, the VA
17 needs to have the ability to reform, to be able to bring the
18 professionals on board so the accessibility for the veterans
19 is there, and that is part of it.

20 [Applause.]

21 Senator Tester. You talked about hiring, and one of
22 the things that I believe I talked with the members from
23 Montana about is that--and I appreciate you bringing up the
24 red tape. Salaries may be a problem, but there is
25 opportunity to boost those up. But we have got to make sure

1 they have the budget ability to do that, and cutting the red
2 tape on how long it takes to hire, because it is ridiculous,
3 quite frankly. But there is also the issue of
4 accountability, and sometimes accountability is in direct
5 conflict with the ability to hire, if you know what I mean,
6 because I think people want to have their due process. By
7 the same token, the folks who are not cutting the mustard
8 ought to be shown the door. What is the VA's thoughts on
9 that?

10 Mr. Duffy. You want the VFW's thoughts on that?

11 Senator Tester. Sorry. The VFW.

12 [Laughter.]

13 Senator Tester. Shulkin would have been honored by me
14 saying that.

15 [Laughter.]

16 Mr. Duffy. You know, listen, it really comes down to a
17 simple thing. We will not accept--we will not accept--we
18 will never accept any veteran that is not treated properly.
19 We certainly will never accept a VA employee knowingly not
20 taking care of a veteran or actively doing something that is
21 defined as wrongdoing or malfeasance. I mean, that is it.

22 As far as the hiring side of it, yes, it obviously
23 compounds it if I have to send somebody from accountability,
24 the discipline side of it, up to and including, by God, if
25 it is needed, we should do it, terminate them. It creates

1 an opening. It creates then that vacuum that we need the
2 abilities I just spoke about before to hire folks in there.
3 It also speaks to, quite honestly, that in the VA system
4 they cannot hire somebody, they cannot build a bench, they
5 cannot hire somebody until there is a vacancy. So there is
6 no ability to overlap, to be able to bridge when you have to
7 make some of those tough but required decisions.

8 Senator Tester. Yes. Thank you. Could you talk a
9 little bit--because I just want to get it in the record--
10 about the VFW's perspective on VA being the primary payer?
11 What advantages does that give directly to the veterans if
12 the VA is designated as primary payer?

13 Mr. Duffy. Well, I think quite honestly, first and
14 foremost, it gives them the peace of mind that when they go
15 out, if it is in the Choice Program, that they do not have
16 some paper chasing them, some bill chasing them. You know,
17 when the veteran made the deal with the Government to put on
18 the uniform of the country, nobody talked to them then about
19 some sort of a secondary payer program that was going to
20 chase them years later. As I remember the deal--

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Duffy. As I remember the deal, I put the uniform
23 on, you are going to take care of me. My Government is
24 going to have my back. I was not told that somewhere years
25 later on I would be subjected to the bureaucracy and the

1 administrative shuffle of bills coming for care that I
2 earned.

3 Senator Tester. I appreciate that, Commander, and I
4 appreciate you getting that on the record. Thank you very,
5 very much.

6 [Applause.]

7 Senator Boozman. Representative Radewagen.

8 Mrs. Radewagen. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 I want to first thank you all for your service to our
10 great Nation. It is that sacrifice that allows us to be
11 here today, and we are all most grateful to you.

12 I also want to thank you all for being here to inform
13 Congress of the VFW's legislative priorities for the 115th
14 Congress. Your advocacy on behalf of our Nation's veterans
15 is legendary, and I know that I can speak for everyone here
16 this afternoon when I say that this entire Committee on both
17 sides of the aisle are fully dedicated to ensuring that the
18 Federal Government lives up to our end of the bargain when
19 it comes to providing the best resources and services to our
20 veterans.

21 As a member who represents a United States territory, I
22 am particularly interested to hear about your priorities for
23 those veterans who live in either rural or remote locations,
24 such as my home district of American Samoa, where our people
25 enlist into this U.S. armed forces at a rate higher than

1 that of any other State of territory in the Nation. This is
2 a fact that we are very proud of. In the past, our veterans
3 in these rural and remote locations have often been denied
4 the services they have earned--not purposefully, but often
5 they do not know the resources available to them or must
6 travel long distances to receive services. I look forward
7 to working with the VFW and other VSOs to improve the
8 outreach to these areas in partnership with the VA, and we
9 welcome your input in this mission.

10 I want to mention also that we have an active VFW
11 chapter in American Samoa, and we are very proud of that
12 fact. So thank you again for being here today. Your work
13 is so important in ensuring that Congress is fully informed
14 on those issues that are most important to our veterans.
15 Thank you again for your service to our grateful Nation.

16 Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of
17 my time.

18 [Applause.]

19 Senator Boozman. Thank you.

20 Senator Blumenthal?

21 Senator Blumenthal. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. I want to
22 thank all of you for being here today. I cannot tell you--
23 or I can tell you, you know how powerful the picture is of
24 you, all of you, being in this massive room, and it sends a
25 profound message to all of us, including my colleagues. And

1 as the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, so
2 my thanks to every one of you, and particularly the folks
3 from Connecticut who are here. I understand that State
4 Commander John Schmidt and many of his team are here. If
5 you could just stand so we can thank you for being here, all
6 of you from Connecticut. Thank you.

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Blumenthal. Commander Duffy, thank you for
9 your service to our Nation and for your very powerful
10 statement just now to my colleague Senator Tester. The
11 VFW's advocacy and other veterans service organizations has
12 been so important in reminding us of the debt that we owe
13 you and your right--it is not beneficence or charity on the
14 part of the United States Government. It is a right, and it
15 is part of the deal that we made. In fact, the failure of
16 our Nation to keep faith with veterans is one of the reasons
17 why I wanted to be in the United States Senate and to be on
18 this Committee so we would do better in skill training and
19 job opportunity and, yes, health care, and particularly
20 mental health care, which is so vital to addressing the
21 hidden or invisible wounds of war like post traumatic
22 stress. And as I have said before, I am proud to say that
23 two of my sons have served. One is a veteran of service in
24 the United States Marine Corps Reserve, deployed to
25 Afghanistan. The other is an active duty naval officer now.

1 But so few of the Nation's population has direct
2 experience. In fact, I wear a Blue Star. A lot of folks
3 will come up to me at an event and say, "Oh, is that the
4 Connecticut flag?" And I say that with sadness, not really
5 to amuse you, because there is so little awareness and
6 appreciation for the families as well as the men and women
7 who serve. So I want to thank all of your families as well,
8 and ask you a question based on a common interest with you
9 that I have involving women's health care, which you raised
10 in your testimony. I noted your support for improving
11 health care for women veterans, both in terms of tangible
12 resources and the less tangible issues that exist with
13 providers, assuming that a female veteran is a spouse or
14 caregiver rather than a veteran herself. And that must
15 change. We agree, all of us in this room, I am sure--and I
16 hope the VFW's focus on that issue and this Committee's
17 continued outreach will help to change the dynamic.

18 In light of the need to fill the women's health primary
19 provider position, in 18 percent of VA facilities across the
20 Nation--and that means 18 percent of facilities lack a
21 provider of female primary care--could you please comment on
22 how the slow hiring process can impact the recruitment of
23 much-needed providers such as those women health care
24 providers? In other words, what can we do to accelerate
25 that process of hiring women's health care providers? And

1 is that a priority that you would urge the VA to recognize?

2 Mr. Duffy. Thank you, Senator, and first and foremost,
3 in regards to your family serving and yourself, thank you
4 for your service. And in regards to the Blue Star, you
5 know, that is one of the other charges of the VFW and the
6 Auxiliary. We are one of the last places that somebody can
7 actually teach Americanism, that can actually teach some of
8 the basics so that the confusion that you mentioned
9 regarding your lapel pin is--it is sad. You are right. It
10 is a sad thing.

11 In regards to the women's health part of it, we
12 understand--I have commissioned, the previous Commander-in-
13 Chiefs have commissioned committees of our female VFW
14 members so that we can better understand. We are also
15 growing in our ability to fully understand the population of
16 female veterans. You know, as I said in my opening
17 statement, they are the fastest growing demographic not just
18 in the military but of veterans as well. So in regards to
19 the females in the VA system, yes, those female warriors
20 that choose to want a female primary care provider should
21 have that choice. In regards to how do we get more of that
22 into the VA system, again, it goes back to we have got to
23 really focus on what the VA is able to provide to those
24 professionals to attract them into the VA system versus
25 going to some private medical facility. The package has to

1 be attractive enough. The passion of medical professionals
2 I think will always be there to serve veterans. I can tell
3 you from personal experience, when I go into my VA CBOC down
4 in southwest Florida when I am in the snowbird mode, it is
5 incredible, the dedication of the VA folks from the first
6 person when you walk in to when I get to see my doctor
7 himself. So to the female veteran side of it, that has to
8 happen. We have to stop being reactive in the VA, from the
9 standpoint that this infrastructure, 15-plus years on with
10 the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we are still in a reactive
11 mode rather than a proactive mode to put these facilities in
12 place.

13 But I can tell you this: The VA is making some
14 incredible advances, and they are catching up, but they
15 cannot catch up probably fast enough so the trajectory of
16 growth of our female veterans.

17 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, Commander Duffy, for
18 that excellent answer, and thank you also for mentioning
19 earlier the need, the continuing need to reform the appeals
20 process. And I am committed to carrying forward the
21 legislation that we introduced during the last session, and
22 I want to thank the VFW for all of your support on that
23 issue, on the veteran suicide prevention measure that we
24 adopted, and your continuing involvement makes a big
25 difference. Thank you so much.

1 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Senator Boozman. Representative Gonzalez.

3 Miss Gonzalez-Colon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank
4 you, all of you, for your service to our Nation. We really
5 thank you for all you have been doing since you have been
6 enlisted and fighting for our freedom. And being the only
7 representative from the island of Puerto Rico here, for me
8 it is an honor to be in front of you today.

9 I do not know if you are aware that more than 211,000
10 Puerto Ricans have served in the armed forces. Of them, in
11 the Philippine Insurrection, 900; in World War I, 18,000;
12 World War II, 65,000; Korean War, 60,000; Vietnam War,
13 48,000; Persian Gulf, more than 4,000; Somalia, 700; war
14 against terrorism, over 15,000 people from Puerto Rico who
15 served in the armed forces. Of such amount, an estimate of
16 1,300 passed away while serving. So for me, it was an honor
17 to serve in this Committee. Actually, I asked to be part of
18 this Committee as the first Representative from the island
19 to be there.

20 One of the issues that you bring up in your report--and
21 I really want to thank you for that because it is extensive
22 and it goes to the women's veterans issues, their health
23 care, the caregivers, even including the reproductive area
24 of health care, and I have never seen that in a veterans
25 report before. So thank you for that.

1 One of the issues I want to bring to you is that--and I
2 said it this morning--more than 15,000 retirees from the
3 island cannot benefit from TRICARE Prime just because they
4 are living in Puerto Rico. So we are treated as an overseas
5 territory, and most of our people cannot receive the same
6 benefits, although they fight equally among the people from
7 the mainland during their time. What are your comments on
8 that, Commander?

9 Mr. Duffy. Ma'am, I am going to ask my associate here,
10 Carlos, if he could address that.

11 Miss Gonzalez-Colon. Thank you.

12 Mr. Fuentes. Thank you for the question, ma'am.
13 TRICARE is a very important benefit, and we want to make
14 sure that our TRICARE beneficiaries are taken care of. So
15 you have our commitment to work with you and the TRICARE
16 contractors to make sure that our military retirees in
17 Puerto Rico are taken care of.

18 Miss Gonzalez-Colon. Thank you. And also, you know,
19 we have got a problem with them, of course, clinics in VA,
20 because we are in a remote location. So most people who
21 have a disease, a rare disease or a degenerative disease
22 such as Alzheimer's, have to travel to New York to receive
23 their treatment, and that happens with a lot of different
24 conditions in the island. And the lack of specialist
25 physicians in orthopedics in the island obligates our people

1 to move to Florida, Texas, and even New York because they
2 cannot receive the same treatment in the island. So I will
3 commend you and ask for your help to lead our efforts to
4 have quality for the veterans that come from Puerto Rico.

5 Thank you, and I yield back my time to the Chairman.

6 Senator Boozman. Senator Hirono.

7 Senator Hirono. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would like
8 to exercise a point of personal privilege and recognize the
9 eight veterans from Hawaii who traveled probably aside from
10 our territories the farthest to join all of us here. So
11 with your indulgence, I would like to recognize them: Lane
12 Martin, Jonathon Ho'omanawanui, Norbert Enos, George
13 Bartlett, Joseph Frank Bragg, Stanley Fernandez, Nicholas
14 Young, Frankie Ritchie. You are all sitting back there, so
15 why don't you get up? They are wearing leis. Thank you.

16 [Applause.]

17 Senator Hirono. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I would
18 like to thank the VFW for being the first VSO group to
19 formally stand behind our effort to award the Congressional
20 Gold Medal to the Filipino World War II veterans, 200,000 of
21 whom signed up to fight alongside our heroes in World War
22 II. And so you were the first organization to pass a
23 resolution in support, and it was through our combined
24 efforts that we were able to get this legislation passed and
25 signed into law by President Obama. Thank you.

1 [Applause.]

2 Senator Hirono. And we are certainly now in the
3 process of putting together all of the names going forward
4 so that we can appropriately recognize them with the Gold
5 Medal.

6 I have a question regarding nursing home care coverage.
7 There is a law that currently requires the VA to provide
8 nursing home care for those seriously disabled veterans at
9 no cost to them, and this particular law is set to expire at
10 the end of this year. And according to VA, around 35,000
11 veterans nationwide and nearly 350 Hawaii veterans received
12 care under this specific program last year, including a
13 facility on Maui, which I recently visited last week.

14 Commander, could you comment on the importance of
15 extending the VA benefit and its impact on the lives of your
16 members? Because we need to get this law reauthorized.

17 Mr. Duffy. Ma'am, I agree with you, and even further
18 to that point, not just should we provide long-term care for
19 those that qualify based on 70 percent or a service-
20 connected injury, I believe quite honestly it is in the
21 benefit of the country, it is certainly in the benefit of
22 the VA, to look at the cost for those veterans that need
23 long-term care of being able to put them in long-term care
24 versus not putting them in long-term care, the burden that
25 is on them. So I would not only support--or we would not

1 only support your position; I think we would even go
2 further. Veterans, when they need long-term care, it should
3 be provided without regard to whether they were 70 percent
4 or whether they were service-connected.

5 I will tell you another area in that that we need to
6 address. Currently, we are losing over 200 nursing or long-
7 term care facilities a year because they can no longer--the
8 rural ones especially, they can no longer--they do not have
9 the staff or the infrastructure to compete and submit to
10 Federal Acquisition Regulation programs. We need to provide
11 the VA a way that they can provide to these facilities a
12 simpler ability to compete so that they can continue to be
13 part of the long-term care answer for our veterans. Every
14 year, 200 of them are closing. Can you imagine, with 200
15 closing, how many veterans every year are being forced out
16 of the place that they have considered home simply because
17 there is not the mechanics in place to get around this
18 Federal Acquisition Regulation similar to what we use for
19 Medicare?

20 Senator Hirono. Thank you very much for pointing that
21 out, and we will certainly follow up on how we can improve
22 the bill that I plan to introduce forthwith.

23 Regarding claims processing, I know that we have a huge
24 backlog, and one of the ways that we can speed things up is
25 to automate, use automation as much as possible. And we

1 were able to do that with regard to survivor benefits. I
2 would ask for your identifying other areas where we can
3 speed up the process through automation so that we can do
4 everything we can to eliminate the claims backlog, so we can
5 have a dialogue with you folks, if you can review what we
6 have in place to see where other improvements can be made,
7 because now survivor benefits can be done without everybody
8 having to go through the kind of paperwork that had been
9 required before.

10 For homelessness, that is a still a big issue, I would
11 say, for veterans. We have done our best. We have not
12 quite gotten to eliminating 100 percent of the homelessness
13 among veterans. There is more to be done. Are there
14 particular aspects of veterans' homelessness that you can
15 help us identify as areas that we need to press forward on?
16 We did the housing first. That is still a need. But would
17 you like to give us your opinion on this?

18 Mr. Duffy. Thank you, ma'am.

19 Senator Hirono. With your indulgence, Mr. Chairman. I
20 realize I am out of time.

21 Mr. Duffy. I spoke briefly earlier when we talked
22 about the women veterans. Here is another area that,
23 although it is not totally women veterans, but predominantly
24 it is. When we have a homeless female veteran, especially
25 if they have dependents, it is almost impossible, unless

1 there is some sort of a child care program at a VA facility-
2 -and there are a few pilot programs out there that are
3 working wonderfully. How can you have a homeless female
4 veteran with dependents come and keep the appointments, come
5 and be able to take care of the counseling, take care of
6 some of the job training, give them that ability to truly be
7 able to return back to the pride that they have burning
8 inside them? That would be one area right there that we
9 really need to look at extending and bringing on a child
10 care component to all of the major--certainly the major VA
11 medical centers to afford those homeless veterans that
12 ability.

13 The other area is, you know, until a veteran becomes
14 homeless, they are not homeless. So when we have folks that
15 are on the verge of going homeless, because they have
16 already gotten eviction notices, we cannot define them as
17 homeless. If they are living with a friend or a relative
18 because they are in a dire situation, they cannot take
19 advantage of those benefits because they are not defined as
20 homeless quite yet. So we need to also look at an
21 opportunity or an ability to say, you know, you are on a
22 trajectory that is not a good one, and we recognize that
23 homelessness is but a short distance away, and we are going
24 to give you the benefits before you are officially--or I
25 guess you meet the official definition of being homeless.

1 Senator Hirono. I think that is a good point.
2 Preventing homelessness is really better than once they get
3 to that point, so thank you very much.

4 [Applause.]

5 Senator Hirono. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 Senator Boozman. Senator Sullivan.

7 Senator Sullivan. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and,
8 Commander and gentlemen, thank you for all that you are
9 doing. I strongly believe that your examples of what it
10 means to serve and sacrifice are certainly appreciated by
11 all of us. But I think it is appreciated by all the
12 American people. One of the most powerful things we see
13 every year in the Congress is all of you, this entire body,
14 walking the halls of Congress. It is just powerful, and I
15 love it. So thank you so much for what you are doing.

16 You know, it is kind of like a big family, you know,
17 all of us who have served. I am proud to say my father was
18 a naval officer. I had five uncles and great-uncles who all
19 served in World War II. And one of the things I like to
20 remind my own daughters in terms of service is that although
21 you might not be wearing the uniform, you, the VFW, you
22 represent not only the Veterans of Foreign Wars but the
23 families. So I always like to remind folks, even if you
24 have not worn a uniform, if you are a spouse or son or
25 daughter of one of you who are in the audience, you are

1 serving your country. You have served your country just
2 like the person wearing the uniform.

3 I know we have been doing a lot of applauding, but how
4 about we do a round of applause for our family members?

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Sullivan. I am going to take the prerogative
7 also to do a little--we all do our shout-out to our State.
8 In Alaska, we have an enormous population of veterans. We
9 are a little bit bigger than Connecticut. I do not know if
10 Senator Blumenthal is still here. But if there are any of
11 my VFW brothers and sisters from Alaska who are still in the
12 audience, if you can stand, I would love to recognize you
13 for a round of applause. There we are.

14 [Applause.]

15 Senator Sullivan. So I wanted to talk about the issue
16 of the transition to civilian employment, and, you know, we
17 talk about homelessness and suicide, and those are all
18 really important areas to focus on. But I think the best
19 way to deal with some of the challenges that we have is to
20 make sure our veterans get good jobs, get good-paying jobs.

21 The last time I was recalled to active duty in 2013, I
22 came back to Camp Lejeune, went through the TAMP classes,
23 and they were pretty good. I had already had a job lined
24 up, so I was not that focused on it. I was focused on
25 getting back home to see my wife and daughters. But I

1 really want--I think we could do a lot better in this area,
2 and it would be really great--and I know we do not have a
3 lot of time in the hearings, but I know you mentioned it in
4 your initial testimony. But what do you think are the
5 biggest barriers to successful transition? You know, I have
6 talked to General Kelly about this. You know, we have
7 veterans who could go into homeland security. Our veterans
8 have such great skill sets. They go into the building
9 trades unions. What do you see as ways that we can do a
10 much better job, whether it is moving into a Federal agency,
11 moving into the private sector, moving into State
12 government-focused areas? And what do you think we can do
13 in Congress to help with that transition and making sure our
14 veterans who leave active duty or leave the reserves with
15 these incredible skill sets? Talk about a win-win for the
16 vet and for the employer who is going to hire him. How can
17 we do a better job in that? Because I think we are only
18 scratching the surface, and I think if we get good jobs for
19 our veterans, then we will start to take care of
20 homelessness and suicide and other things.

21 Mr. Duffy. Well, the good news is that veteran
22 unemployment is down. That is the good news. But is there
23 more to do? Absolutely. One of the areas is the transition
24 itself, the TAP program. When it was made mandatory, that
25 was good. All the servicemembers as they transition from

1 active duty back to a civilian career are required to go
2 through the TAP program.

3 Senator Sullivan. And are you satisfied with how that
4 is working?

5 Mr. Duffy. That is where I am going.

6 [Laughter.]

7 Senator Sullivan. I take it that is a no.

8 Mr. Duffy. I think quite honestly the materials that
9 are being provided are excellent materials to ready these
10 troops as they come back into civilian life. But what we
11 have to be very, very careful of is the way it is delivered.
12 If I am seeing TAP only at the end of my career, I see it as
13 nothing more than a checklist that needs to be completed so
14 I can get on the bus or I can get on the airplane and I can
15 get out of there and I can go on with life.

16 TAP needs to be seen, TAP needs to be worked throughout
17 the Department of Defense from the day a person puts the
18 uniform on to the day that they take the uniform off. It
19 needs to be a transition the entire way through. We spend
20 so much time training somebody how to enter the military,
21 and we spend so little time training them how to leave the
22 military.

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Duffy. And if I could, in regards to when they do
25 leave--and I am so proud. I am a retired pilot with United

1 Parcel Service, and there are a lot of other great
2 corporations out there that are doing some incredible things
3 to make sure that when veterans do leave, that these large
4 corporations do see the value, do see the skill sets coming
5 out of the military. And whether they make a transition to
6 get higher education prior to joining and starting a career
7 or whether they go straight from the military--and many of
8 them are coming out with their degrees already in place.
9 Large corporations are missing an incredible opportunity to
10 grab these highly skilled, mission-oriented individuals.
11 And I am proud to say--and if I could sir, recognize with us
12 today Pat O'Leary, the veterans affairs manager for United
13 Parcel Service, who took his own time to come here to be at
14 the hearing.

15 [Applause.]

16 Senator Sullivan. Well, thank you, Commander. We want
17 to work with you on this. I could not agree more. We need
18 to do a lot more. I think it is going to be a win-win, and,
19 you know, in my own experience, I have seen Marines getting
20 out, combat veterans who led Marines in combat, and they get
21 out and they are saying, "Well, I do not think I have a
22 skill set." You know, I looked at one of my guys, and I
23 remember saying, "You have more skills than a Harvard MBA."
24 Truly. We have just got to make sure--

25 [Applause.]

1 Senator Sullivan. We have just got to make sure we
2 know how to translate that and get them the jobs that then
3 they can excel in in the private sector.

4 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 Senator Boozman. Thank you.

6 Senator Tester has got a quick follow-up, and then we
7 will go to Congressman O'Rourke.

8 Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is very
9 quick.

10 I mentioned in my opening statement that Congress
11 should take its cue from you and the other VSOs. I think
12 Secretary McDonald has done a great job setting the tone for
13 what should be expected, and I think Secretary Shulkin will
14 follow his lead for taking your input and using it to make a
15 difference.

16 Have you or any of your representatives from the VFW
17 personally met with the President?

18 Mr. Duffy. Personally met with the President?

19 Senator Tester. Yes.

20 Mr. Duffy. No, but I sense it is imminent.

21 Senator Tester. You sense it is imminent? Yes, well,
22 that is why I am asking the question, because I want it to
23 be imminent. And just very briefly, what would your top
24 priority be when you talk to him?

25 Mr. Duffy. Sequestration, sequestration,

1 sequestration, sequestration.

2 [Applause.]

3 Senator Tester. Good answer.

4 Senator Boozman. Congressman O'Rourke.

5 Mr. O'Rourke. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and, Commander
6 Duffy, thank you for your testimony and for being here.
7 Your leadership and the team that sits to your right and
8 your left--I am going into my fifth year serving on the
9 House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and to the degree that we
10 have been successful and responsive, it is in large part
11 thanks to the guidance and direction that we have received
12 from your team and the members back in Texas and especially
13 in El Paso, the community I have the honor to serve and to
14 represent.

15 One of the bills that we have written recently, along
16 with Senator Murphy, tries to address the access to mental
17 health gap that we have in so many of our communities, and
18 it is critical in El Paso, Texas, where, when we surveyed,
19 more than a third of veterans in our community are unable,
20 even after repeated attempts, to a mental health care am
21 partner. And we know that care delayed becomes care denied,
22 and it has some very negative outcomes, suffering at a
23 minimum and worse in the worst cases.

24 Senator Murphy and I wrote a bill that would ensure
25 that those who have other than honorable discharges are able

1 to immediately access mental health care. VFW was
2 instrumental in providing guidance and feedback on this. I
3 would love to get your thoughts and those who sit with you
4 on the panel on other ways that we can address the veteran
5 suicide crisis in this country, which I think should be
6 priority number one for our VA. I know it has been a
7 priority for the VFW, and I would love to get your thoughts
8 and your guidance on this.

9 Mr. Duffy. Thank you, sir. And as you know, that is a
10 special project not just for the VFW but for the veteran
11 community and for the community outside of the veterans that
12 I spoke about earlier.

13 One of the areas that I think would be very useful is
14 leveraging--especially in the rural areas, leveraging
15 telemedicine, being able to use telemedicine when you cannot
16 have a face-to-face session. I think that would be very
17 valuable. But one of the limitations to telemedicine is we
18 have a limitation restriction of interstate telemedicine.
19 So if I have a telemedicine site in the border of Texas and
20 the patient is in Oklahoma, unless they are on Federal
21 grounds, we cannot use telemedicine for anything. But it
22 would be very useful, I think, in the rural areas to be able
23 to exploit and to use telemedicine in a very positive way.

24 Another one would be to develop a robust, peer-to-peer
25 program similar to hospitals using it for--in the civilian

1 side, they use it for when perhaps they have somebody come
2 in--what comes to mind, quite honestly, is sexual trauma and
3 some others where the hospitals know that they can call
4 trained, peer-to-peer volunteers. I think the same thing
5 could possibly be used to help, and I think it would be
6 possibly very valuable, and, again, to get past the
7 limitations and tyranny of distance in the rural areas, if
8 you could develop a team of peer-to-peer--or a system of
9 peer-to-peer, well-trained volunteers. So those are a
10 couple that come to mind off the top of my head, sir.

11 Mr. O'Rourke. Let me ask one more question on a
12 different subject, one that you were discussing with Mr.
13 Sullivan as I walked in. The rate of small business
14 ownership by World War II veterans I think was just around
15 50 percent. The rate of small business ownership among
16 post-9/11 veterans is around 4 percent. In Houston, Texas,
17 I met with some folks at Combined Arms who really talk about
18 the potential that we can unleash in our veterans community
19 and creating more jobs. I met with Bunker Labs in Austin,
20 Texas, which is already starting veterans on an
21 entrepreneurial path. Your thoughts on using post-9/11 GI
22 bill benefits to allow veterans to start businesses or other
23 ways that we unleash that entrepreneurship in the veterans
24 community?

25 Mr. Duffy. As far as using the post-9/11 GI bill for

1 entrepreneurial--you know, we would have to study that. But
2 right off the top of my head, I would be very fearful that
3 there would be some predatory grabs on that particular
4 program. We would need to really study that one. But the
5 hair on the back of my head says no. No. Post-9/11 GI bill
6 was there for the purpose of higher education. I think
7 there are other ways to do that through the Small Business
8 Administration, to star programs there, to add to the
9 catalogue of what is available to veterans. But to use the
10 post-9/11 GI bill as a way to fund an entrepreneurial
11 experiment, no.

12 Mr. O'Rourke. I appreciate it. Thanks for your
13 feedback. And, again, thanks for being here, and your
14 advocacy and your leadership. And I will yield back to the
15 Chair or the Ranking Member.

16 Senator Boozman. Senator Cassidy.

17 Senator Cassidy. Hi, gentlemen. Thank you all for
18 being here.

19 First, let me give a shout-out to my people from
20 Louisiana. Thank you all for being here. Can you all stand
21 up or let me know where you are? Thank you all.

22 [Applause.]

23 Senator Cassidy. And knowing that it has been said, I
24 thank you all for holding your 2017 national convention in
25 New Orleans. You will have a great time, fantastic time.

1 [Applause.]

2 Senator Cassidy. I spoke with the folks from Louisiana
3 yesterday regarding mental health, and I gather that that
4 has been something which has already been discussed here. I
5 am not sure what I am particularly interested in has been
6 discussed. I gather that there is a disparity between
7 different VA medical centers and the quality of service that
8 is rendered. So in one place it is top-notch, and in
9 another place not so much.

10 Now, as we know, quality should move towards a common
11 point, and the fact that there is variability and in some
12 places the veteran, if he shows up 30 minutes late, is
13 rebooked 3 hours later as opposed to in another place they
14 actually accommodate him later that same day. I say that
15 because in my State sometimes veterans will drive an hour
16 and a half to get to their appointment. If there is a wreck
17 on the freeway, they may not arrive on time.

18 First, let me ask you if you have any kind of data from
19 your members of any sort of variability as regards mental
20 health services in particular at VAs across the Nation.

21 Mr. Fuentes. Senator, thank you for the question. You
22 are absolutely right, there is disparity among VA medical
23 facilities, and that should be eliminated. In our report,
24 we see that 60 percent of veterans have noticed an
25 improvement, but there are 40 that say they have not and

1 things need to improve. So VA is looking at the right
2 things. They have an access initiative to grant same-day
3 appointments for urgent primary care and mental health care.
4 That is the right approach. That needs to continue. But
5 more than anything, it needs to be consistent and
6 standardized throughout the system. And it is not quite
7 there, but we will hold VA accountable and ensure that they
8 continue that work.

9 Senator Cassidy. Are you polling periodically or is
10 that a one-time poll? For example, when we know that in
11 Kansas City it is doing great and in Spokane--I am just
12 picking cities--it is not doing well, but a year from now
13 both are doing better or, no, you have done a point in time?

14 Mr. Fuentes. We do point in time, but we do track
15 locations. I do not have specific locations that have stood
16 out. But we could work with your staff to identify some of
17 those.

18 Senator Cassidy. We are trying to look at the data the
19 VA makes publicly available. Again, once folks are
20 accountable, I have learned that they are just more likely
21 to perform at a higher level. Not that they are doing
22 poorly, but we all do better when we think somebody is kind
23 of watching us. So if you all have ways to help us improve
24 that sort of monitoring, we would appreciate you speaking to
25 us. My Louisiana folks know how to reach me.

1 [Applause.]

2 Senator Cassidy. With that, Mr. Chair, I know it is a
3 long meeting. Thank you all for your service, and whatever
4 we can do to help you as you help other veterans, we would
5 appreciate that opportunity. I yield back.

6 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Dr. Cassidy.

7 At this time I will yield 5 minutes to Mr. Correa.

8 Mr. Correa. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Very quickly, if
9 I can see the hands of our California folks here today?
10 Thank you very much for being here. Thank you for your
11 service to our country.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Correa. I wanted to ask a quick question. When I
14 was in California, one of my primary goals was to make sure
15 that in California contracts, public works contracts, there
16 would be a set-aside for veteran contracts, and I always
17 wanted to make sure that the State actually followed the
18 law.

19 A question for you, gentlemen. In terms of assuring
20 that we have economic activity and job creation through
21 entrepreneurship for the veterans, do you see any of those
22 efforts needed at the Federal level?

23 Mr. Duffy. Sir, we always support any program that
24 hires veterans. We obviously would like to see it start
25 right here in Congress to the extent possible.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Correa. I am sorry, sir. I did not hear you.

3 What was that?

4 [Laughter.]

5 Mr. Duffy. To the extent possible, we support--or we
6 support veteran hiring, and to the extent possible, we would
7 like to see Congress itself take the lead. And I know many
8 of the folks in Congress serving and much of the staff are
9 veterans, and we thank you for that. But we always think
10 that there are opportunities to hire more veterans here in
11 the District of Columbia, here obviously in the House and
12 the Senate, and I think, quite honestly, what an example
13 that would set if we increased the amount of hiring of
14 veterans right here.

15 Mr. Correa. Thank you, sir.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Roe. [Presiding.] I thank the gentleman for
18 yielding. I will now yield time to Mr. Coffman.

19 Mr. Coffman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you
20 all for your service. I am proud as an Army and Marine
21 Corps veteran and a veteran of the Persian Gulf War and Iraq
22 War as well to be a lifetime member of the VFW. Thank you.

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Coffman. I do have legislation before you that we
25 will send to you concerning veteran mental health, and the

1 fundamental issue is that during the course of my career, I
2 witnessed two reduction in forces, one in the aftermath of
3 Vietnam and then another in the aftermath of the first Gulf
4 War, so about the 1974 time frame and then about 1991-92
5 time frame. And in both, they were orderly reductions. In
6 other words, on the junior enlisted side, it was essentially
7 that you were not eligible for reenlistment, but you
8 received an honorable discharge and went your way. On the
9 officer side, probably in post-Vietnam if you did not have a
10 college degree, that was kind of a dividing line that if you
11 were--but if you were a prior NCO, you reverted back to that
12 rank; if not, you were just out.

13 Post first Gulf War, essentially officers, they were
14 pushed out, were given priority in the Reserves and were
15 given some sort of cash payment on the way out. And junior
16 enlisted were denied reenlistment or NCOs were denied
17 reenlistment based on competitiveness.

18 We are doing something very different today in the
19 military, and that oftentimes, too many times, what are
20 minor infractions are combat veterans coming back from tours
21 of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan are given other than
22 honorable discharges, and they are denied treatment for the
23 VA, even mental health treatment from the VA. And when we
24 talk about veteran suicides and other issues, I think we can
25 trace it back to some of this stuff.

1 Let me tell you, when I was a junior enlisted in the
2 Army or a junior officer in the Marine Corps, nobody ever
3 would have been discharged for basically non-judicial
4 issues, Article 15 or office hours or whatever you want to
5 call them. And so that is the case today, and it is a way
6 of thinning the ranks in the middle of somebody's
7 enlistment.

8 And so what this legislation does, I think it is the
9 Veteran Access to Mental Health Care Act, but we will get
10 you the exact number of it, and it essentially says this, it
11 says that we will not deny a veteran, a combat veteran, or a
12 victim of sexual assault or someone with PTSD due to the
13 Drumming Program, that has any record of PTSD, that we will
14 not deny them mental health care. And so I think that is
15 very important, and I need the support from your
16 organization on that issue, and I wonder if you could
17 comment on that.

18 Mr. Duffy. Thank you very much, and Carlos is going to
19 speak to it in detail. But let me tell you that the premise
20 that you entered that with, there is absolutely no reason,
21 no excuse that force reduction should be used as the
22 catalyst, the rationale for putting somebody out on bad
23 paper. If you are putting somebody out on bad paper,
24 because what you are really doing is trying to downsize to
25 reach some goal that the DOD has put in front of you, that

1 is incredibly unfair, especially to somebody that has put
2 their life on the line.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Coffman. Well, thank you very much. Are there
5 other comments on it?

6 Mr. Fuentes. Congressman, first and foremost, I would
7 like to thank you for your leadership on the Fairness for
8 Veterans Act.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Fuentes. And thank you for getting it passed that
11 finish line in the NDAA. And I know your in your position
12 on the Personnel Subcommittee you are going to hold DOD
13 accountable to make sure that they follow through with that.
14 So thank you for that.

15 We certainly support improving access to these folks.
16 We are working with the VA now to amend its regulations,
17 because VA has the authority to grant them eligibility for
18 health care and benefits. We are pushing them to make sure
19 that they issue those regulations, and we will work with you
20 and your staff to make sure these folks have access to the
21 health care that they have earned and deserve.

22 Mr. Coffman. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.
23 Thank you.

24 Mr. Duffy. If I can add to that, especially when it
25 comes to somebody that has suffered from sexual trauma.

1 Mr. Coffman. Sure.

2 Mr. Duffy. Unbelievable.

3 Mr. Coffman. Absolutely. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

6 Mr. Coffman, I have a constituent, a former constituent
7 in my district, who is a Medal of Honor winner who received
8 a less than honorable discharge. This was after World War
9 I. I am going to try--it is hard to believe, but that
10 actually happened. And I think he probably had PTSD, and he
11 hit an officer and was discharged dishonorably. And this
12 man I think won more medals than Sergeant York did in
13 Tennessee. He is from Morristown, Tennessee, and I am going
14 to try to get that reversed.

15 At this point in time, I want to take just a minute or
16 two and apologize for the House side and keeping you all
17 here. We have been involved in an hour and a half worth of
18 votes, and we could not get out of that. So I want to
19 apologize and give you my opening remarks as briefly as I
20 can.

21 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ROE

22 Chairman Roe. It is an honor and a privilege for me to
23 be here with Ranking Member--well, Ranking Member Tester is
24 gone--and Ranking Member Walz to welcome you all to today's
25 joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs

1 Committees to receive the legislative presentation of the
2 VFW. Thank you all for your brave and honorable service to
3 our Nation, service that continues through your work with
4 the VFW and your attendance here in Washington today.

5 I want to extend a special welcome to Commander-in-
6 Chief Brian Duffy and his wife, Jean. Welcome, Commander.

7 Thank you, sir, for your years of service in the United
8 States Air Force, for your leadership within the VFW, and
9 for being here today to share your wisdom with all of us
10 today.

11 I want to welcome the VFW Auxiliary National President,
12 Ms. Colette Bishop. Welcome.

13 Ma'am, thank you for being here and for all the good
14 work you have done and all the work the Auxiliary does for
15 our veterans and their families.

16 I would also like to recognize the VFW members from my
17 home State of Tennessee who are in the audience today. If
18 you would, please stand or raise your hand if you are here
19 and be recognized.

20 [Applause.]

21 Chairman Roe. It looks like we have some fellow
22 Methodists that are in the back, like I am, in the back of
23 the audience. I am grateful not only to have you here
24 today, but also for the work the VFW and Auxiliary do across
25 this country every day in service to our veterans and their

1 families.

2 I am also grateful for the hard work the VFW does right
3 here in our Nation's capital.

4 The legislative wing of VFW is a trusted partner in
5 informing Congress and crafting legislation to drive
6 constant improvement and increased accountability at VA.

7 I was pleased to learn that Ranking Member Walz has
8 brought on the former Director of VFW's National Legislative
9 Service, Ray Kelly, to serve--

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Roe. --as Staff Director for the House VA
12 Committee on the minority side. Ray, it is a pleasure to
13 have you with us here today on the dais.

14 Through the participation in roundtable discussions and
15 providing materials for hearing and other activities, VFW's
16 insights and front-line knowledge of the VA health care
17 system continue to assist veterans struggling to receive VA
18 care in a timely manner and inform the Committee where
19 improvements are still needed.

20 Commander-in-Chief Duffy, I greatly appreciate your
21 thorough and comprehensive testimony for today's hearing.
22 In it you have touched on just about every aspect of VA
23 health care and benefits.

24 I am pleased to see support for so many initiatives I
25 have been advocating strongly for, such as the consolidation

1 of Choice with other Community Care programs, using provider
2 agreements to fill gaps where VA cannot offer certain types
3 of health care, improving VA's aging IT infrastructure, and
4 the inclusion of a strong network of women-specific health
5 care within VA.

6 As a veteran and a private OB/GYN practitioner who took
7 care of the health care needs of female veterans for the
8 Mountain Home VA Medical Center in Johnson City, Tennessee,
9 I am acutely aware of the specific health needs of female
10 veterans and will be working to see that those needs are
11 met.

12 As I begin this journey as Chairman of the House
13 Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I will be looking to VFW for
14 insight and guidance.

15 VFW's membership surveys provide comprehensive,
16 quantitative data that will help frame the big picture of
17 how our Nation's heroes receive the care and benefits that
18 they have earned.

19 I am confident that, working together with the nearly
20 1.7 million members of the VFW and your Auxiliaries, there
21 will be no challenge that cannot be met on behalf of our
22 veterans.

23 With that, I thank you once again, and now I would like
24 to recognize--I know you all have been here a long time, so
25 I am going to--you know, the three most dreaded words any

1 politician can say is, "I'll be brief."

2 [Laughter.]

3 Chairman Roe. I am going to now yield 3 minutes to Mr.
4 Walz.

5 Mr. Walz. Well, thank you all. And I concur with the
6 Chairman. Your patience is greatly appreciated. But you
7 did witness something as rare as seeing a Sasquatch. That
8 was the Senate waiting on the House.

9 [Laughter.]

10 Mr. Walz. Which rarely happens. So, Commander,
11 congratulations to you. Thank you as always for your voice.
12 I often say--and we are having the privilege of having our
13 VSOs here this week. When you have got the National
14 Commander and the leadership and the folks behind you, it is
15 an impressive sight, and it acts as the conscience of this
16 Nation. So we are grateful you are here.

17 To the Minnesotans, are there still a few left or did
18 they head back? If they are here--oh, there we go.
19 Welcome. We are glad to have you.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Walz. Thank you, folks. And I would say,
22 Commander, you are absolutely right. I would like to give
23 thanks to this whole group up here whose members are here,
24 but Jeff Denham from California, myself, back when we
25 started here in Congress and the need and the high

1 unemployment rate amongst veterans, the House Jobs Caucus
2 making sure we were focusing on that. We took that to heart
3 when we hired Ray Kelly, and, Carlos, you are welcome now.
4 You had a job.

5 [Laughter.]

6 Mr. Walz. But it speaks volumes for the work that you
7 do. It speaks volumes for your leadership. I often say as
8 dues-paying members to organizations, you wonder where your
9 dues go. They go to putting the best people forward that
10 help us make policy for veterans, and without you, those
11 things would not happen. So, Commander, I appreciate your
12 call to hire veterans. It is not only the right thing to
13 do; you will not be sorry because the quality of work that
14 you get is well worth it. So we appreciate that.

15 I just have one question, and, again, I am always
16 grateful, you are a very data-driven organization, and, Bob,
17 I know we have talked over the years on that, that you have
18 to know what the problem is before you can solve it. You
19 did a great service again by letting us see what veterans
20 are thinking, and I thought this was interesting because
21 there are two stories in this. How would you improve VA
22 health care systems? And the choices we are giving--fix
23 inefficiencies, dismantle, universal health care card, or
24 unable to categorize--it was overwhelmingly fix
25 inefficiencies. Did they list any of those things that they

1 would like fixed, one or two things? If someone came up
2 with that, was that data disaggregated to the point where we
3 know maybe what they were talking about that came up a lot?

4 Mr. Fuentes. Yes, Congressman, there were a number of
5 issues that were highlighted of things that need to be
6 improved. Certainly access was the number one thing.
7 Hiring more doctors, decreasing wait time and travel,
8 customer service, streamlining processes and systems that
9 are just either complex or do not make sense. The phone
10 system came up a couple times. You know, veterans just want
11 to be able to get to the right place, and fast.

12 Mr. Walz. Does it come back to you if they can get in,
13 they can get in without a hassle and get to the right place,
14 they are pretty satisfied? That is fair to say? Great.
15 Well, again, I appreciate all the work. All of you for
16 coming, thank you for that. I yield back.

17 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding, and
18 now as a former captain and barely made major, I have got to
19 yield to a lieutenant general, which is pretty easy to do.
20 General Bergman, you are recognized for 3 minutes.

21 Mr. Bergman. Okay.

22 Chairman Roe. And if you want to take 3-1/2, General,
23 it would be okay.

24 [Laughter.]

25 Mr. Bergman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Anybody here from Michigan? All right.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Bergman. Any Marines in the crowd?

4 [Cheers.]

5 Mr. Bergman. A little louder.

6 [Cheers.]

7 Mr. Bergman. Oohrah, come on, guys. You are not
8 getting that old.

9 [Laughter.]

10 Mr. Bergman. Well, I tell you what, folks. You know
11 what? And it is important because, you know, age plays a
12 factor. And I will ask you one rhetorical question here.
13 Whether you are the VFW, the American Legion, multiple
14 service organizations, you have a challenge in increasing
15 your membership with the young folks, the young veterans
16 coming back. And I hope--I know you are looking at that,
17 and anything that we can do here to just provide maybe comic
18 relief in some areas to entice them to come to a meeting,
19 but the idea is that our future is based upon who we bring
20 in at the next levels. You have all served honorably.
21 Thank you for what you have done.

22 Question: What is more important from a VFW
23 perspective--receiving top-quality health care or receiving
24 health care strictly through the VA hospital system?

25 Mr. Duffy. Sir, when we have the ability--when

1 accessibility is not a question, quality health care from
2 the VA is always there, so I am really not sure I understand
3 your question. The VA does provide quality care. It is a
4 matter of accessibility at times.

5 Mr. Bergman. The fact of the matter is it is not
6 always accessible, but the important thing is if you are on
7 the battlefield, do you care who bandages your wounds? No.
8 You need to have it accessible, and you need to have it
9 accessible now. And as this panel looks at the challenges
10 we have--and as the Subcommittee Chairman on Investigations
11 and Oversight on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, we are
12 going to be asking some tough questions, because you ask
13 tough questions of us so we are going to ask tough questions
14 of everybody else, because we are all in this together.
15 And, oh, by the way, I will just conclude by saying thank
16 you for your service, thank you for what you are going to do
17 tomorrow, and what you are looking at is the son of a World
18 War II Navy vet who my dad and a couple of his buddies
19 started Warren Butler Post 6212 in Savage, Minnesota, in
20 1946. And--

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Bergman. When I came back from Vietnam, my dad
23 signed me up as a life member in that same post.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Bergman. So I am with you. God bless you all.

1 Thank you, and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

2 Chairman Roe. Thank you, General. Always rely on the
3 Marine and a General to ask a hard question, Commander.

4 I will now yield 3 minutes to Ms. Kuster. You are
5 recognized.

6 Ms. Kuster. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank
7 you to the General, who is the Chair of our Oversight and
8 Investigations Subcommittee. And I, too, want to commend
9 hiring military veterans. I am very proud of my Marine,
10 Kevin Diamond, who is doing a great job keeping me on the up
11 and up, and I appreciate his hard work.

12 A couple of things. I just want to dive in. My time
13 is short. I want to pick up on this question that the
14 General has raised because we had a veterans town hall in my
15 district in New Hampshire. The northern part of the State
16 is a rural part of the State, so access is the issue that we
17 deal with. And there was a long testimony actually by the
18 wife of a veteran who cared a great deal on her husband's
19 behalf about the camaraderie from getting services through
20 the VA, and she talked a lot about how people within the VA,
21 many of them veterans themselves, the caregivers. And so I
22 am just going to set up a couple of things that I am
23 concerned about heading into the months ahead with the new
24 administration, and I would love to get your thoughts.

25 Number one, as I said to these folks in New Hampshire,

1 my goal is to make sure that as many veterans as possible do
2 get their care in the VA, literally in the four walls of the
3 VA, whether that is a CBOC or a hospital setting; that we
4 work with the VA--we are working on a particular pilot that
5 might help in other places that is going to be patient-
6 managed care where they cannot physically get to the VA but
7 they use local care but it is managed by the VA nurses so
8 that they can be followed and, frankly, that the bills will
9 get paid to the provider. That is a big issue for us.

10 But I am concerned about moving the care outside of the
11 VA and the possibility of budget cuts. Given what we heard
12 last night, there is going to be a lot of spending around
13 here on other things, and I am very worried about the
14 veterans getting their care. And then, finally, the freeze
15 that we have right now, the hiring freeze, is a real problem
16 because even though there is an exemption for some of the
17 types of employees, it is not for all of the employees that
18 might be necessary to provide high-quality care.

19 So 36 seconds, if you could cover it, thank you very
20 much. I appreciate it.

21 Mr. Duffy. In regards to the hiring freeze, I had an
22 opportunity to speak yesterday with Secretary Shulkin, and
23 we spoke on that very subject, and he explained to me the
24 way that the VA is affected by that. And we are satisfied
25 that those areas that deal with interaction with the

1 veterans are not affected, so we are satisfied in that area.

2 In regards to the camaraderie, you know, we think that
3 the more you put--and we spoke, and your comment--and I
4 appreciate that you have a veteran with you there, a Marine.
5 It seems like the Marines are taking over the back row back
6 there.

7 Ms. Kuster. I do not want to start a rumble in this
8 room now.

9 [Laughter.]

10 Mr. Duffy. But the more that you can bring veterans
11 into the employment of the VA itself, I think the more you
12 are going to gain, the quality and the empathy and the
13 understanding that only veterans can bring to fellow
14 veterans, that they have been there, they have done that,
15 that those that are well meaning that perhaps are not
16 veterans can learn so much from those that are veterans in
17 employment. So the more that we can increase the veterans
18 as employees of the VA, I think a natural byproduct of that
19 will be increased quality of the care and, again, the
20 empathy versus apathy, which, unfortunately, from time to
21 time is the other choice.

22 Ms. Kuster. Great. Well, that is certainly my goal,
23 and I also want to--

24 [Applause.]

25 Ms. Kuster. --commend you all on the gender-specific

1 and including that in your priorities. Representative
2 Walorski, Representative Brownley, and myself are very
3 focused on this, and we look forward to working with you.

4 I yield back.

5 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentlelady for yielding
6 back.

7 I think what you are saying, Commander, is it is a
8 culture. It is the same reason I get up every morning and
9 check my gig line. I just do. Sorry. Still do.

10 Mr. Rutherford, you are recognized for 3 minutes.

11 Mr. Rutherford. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 I want folks to know I am a first-time Congressman from
13 northeast Florida, which has a very large veteran
14 population. So anybody from Florida, please stand so I can
15 see you. Oh, look it here.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Rutherford. God bless you all. God bless you all.
18 Thank you.

19 Commander Duffy, I want to thank you for that very
20 comprehensive study that Mr. Walz mentioned earlier, "Our
21 Care 2017." And I want to read just one paragraph, and then
22 I want to put it in the context of a Subcommittee meeting
23 that we had just the week before last. And the paragraph
24 out of your report says: "Deficiencies that veterans
25 identified"--and that is at 92 percent identified

1 deficiencies as the problem--"were regarding a shortage of
2 health care providers, inadequate customer service, waiting
3 too long or having to travel too far for their care, and
4 bureaucratic processes and systems which do not make much
5 sense to them."

6 In our Subcommittee meeting just the week before last,
7 the GAO had issued a report on official time that union
8 members at the VA facilities where they actually are able to
9 conduct union business for the AFGE on Government time.
10 They discovered doctors--a doctor, at least, paid \$212,000 a
11 year who in the previous year spent 100 percent of his time
12 on official time doing union business. Now, that means 100
13 percent of his time was dedicated to something other than
14 serving the men and women in this room who he is hired to
15 serve. That seems like a travesty to me.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Rutherford. Then I asked Mr. McCloud from the VA,
18 I said, look, the total number of official time hours that
19 were used last year"--they do not know what the number is,
20 but they guesstimate, GAO guesstimated because they really
21 do not know, 1.3 million hours.

22 So my first question is: What is the official pool?
23 How many hours are they allowed to take? No one on that
24 panel knew the answer--or at least they would not give the
25 answer. The VA representative did not know the answer. The

1 head of AFGE did not know the answer. That is a travesty.

2 So what I want to commit to you all today is that we
3 are going to get to the bottom of this official time that I
4 know from this report is taking away from your care that you
5 should be receiving at these VA facilities. And I think Mr.
6 Walz touched on this earlier. Commander, if you know of any
7 other travesties like this, if you could point those out to
8 us, I guarantee you the Chairman and this Committee will
9 absolutely go after that.

10 Thank you.

11 [Applause.]

12 Chairman Roe. Thank you.

13 Mr. Rutherford. I yield back.

14 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Mr. Rutherford.

15 Mr. Rutherford. If we could allow Mr. Duffy to answer,
16 if he needs to.

17 Mr. Duffy. Your staff is constantly--I mean, that is
18 why we exist. We are a veterans service organization. We
19 will constantly, constantly--the product that we have, the
20 widget that we can give to you as Members of Congress, is
21 our advocacy. So we will forever, to the last VFW member,
22 always be very vigilant to make sure we are doing everything
23 to make sure that you have all the information that you need
24 for oversight and for providing the benefits that the
25 veterans have earned.

1 Mr. Rutherford. Thank you. I yield back.

2 Chairman Roe. Thank you.

3 Mr. Poliquin, you are recognized for 3 minutes.

4 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.

5 Maine is a small State. I represent one of the most
6 rural districts in America. Have we got some Mainers here?
7 Who is from Maine? Is that Pete? Who is down there? Where
8 is Pete Miesburger? Pete, are you there? Okay.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Poliquin. Now, I know, Mr. Chairman, we have got
11 Florida and New York and Tennessee and Virginia; we have got
12 Maine here, and Maine is one tough State, and we love our
13 veterans.

14 Chairman Roe. I know it is because I ruptured a disk
15 hiking in that State this year.

16 [Laughter.]

17 Mr. Poliquin. Well, you would probably get great
18 service at the VA, sir, and we are going to make sure that
19 continues. But I will tell you, we are very proud of our
20 veterans in Maine, and we love them. We do not have a
21 country, Mr. Commander, we do not have a country unless we
22 get folks like you to stand up and serve. You give us our
23 freedom and our liberties, and I have a 26-year-old son who
24 I really worry about, but I worry less every time I meet a
25 veteran. I really appreciate everybody being in this room.

1 You know, we are counting on you folks to speak up. I
2 am new to this Committee. We need you folks who are on the
3 ground to tell us what the problems are so we can fix them.

4 For example, we found out last year that our WASPs, our
5 women pilots from the Second World War, were being denied
6 burial facilities, opportunities, over at Arlington if they
7 so wished. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine our
8 fighter pilots from the Second World War teaching men how to
9 fly, flying with aerial targets--hopefully the men would not
10 hit them--being denied burial services?

11 Well, I will tell you, Martha McSally, who is a veteran
12 and one tough cookie that flew A-10s, I believe, over in the
13 Middle East, she led the charge. I joined in with others,
14 and now we have fixed that problem. But we count on your
15 folks to speak up.

16 I am very worried, representing rural parts of our
17 State, about access to health care by our veterans that live
18 in rural areas. We have fixed that problem in northern
19 Maine where we have extended a pilot program where our
20 veterans in Aroostook County can get their health care
21 services locally instead of driving 5 hours down to Togus in
22 Augusta when the snow is blowing sideways and they are not
23 feeling well.

24 Now, I know we have got to continue to support, Mr.
25 Chairman, the VA because veterans love to spend time with

1 veterans and they heal better, and it is a great way to take
2 care of our veterans. But if there are pragmatic, practical
3 ways to get our health care services in rural areas, we want
4 to do that. And I would really appreciate you folks
5 speaking up if you find that we are off track.

6 I will close by saying the following: There is change
7 coming through this town. We have a new administration with
8 a majority in Congress that are huge supporters of the
9 military, and we will make sure, we will do everything
10 humanly possible to make sure our military is fully funded
11 so they can defend our freedom and win when they are called
12 upon.

13 [Applause.]

14 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding. I
15 will now yield myself 3 minutes.

16 I grew up in a military town, Clarksville, Tennessee,
17 where the 101st Airborne is. My scout master was a first
18 sergeant in the 101st Airborne, so I had already been
19 through basic training three or four times by the time I
20 went to do basic training.

21 [Laughter.]

22 Chairman Roe. My medical training part of it was at a
23 VA hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. After that, like many of
24 you out there--we are about the same vintage--I went to the
25 mailbox and won a free trip to Southeast Asia.

1 [Laughter.]

2 Chairman Roe. All expenses paid, and so I was a
3 battalion surgeon in the 2nd Infantry Division at Camp
4 Casey, Camp Bradley, later in Seoul. I moved my family to
5 East Tennessee. I saw patients from the VA hospital, so I
6 think I understand, and the thing that I am going to focus
7 like a laser beam on is not bureaucracy, but it is quality
8 of care for veterans. That is what I faced--I tried to do
9 my entire life for my patients, and now 21 million veterans
10 in this country are my patients. And as the Chairman of
11 this Committee, I want to be sure that we do everything we
12 can to provide the best quality of care for patients
13 anywhere in a timely fashion. That is what I would like to
14 see.

15 [Applause.]

16 Chairman Roe. Very briefly, I want to ask you guys
17 this, and this is a bit of a frustration for me. Since
18 2001, we have almost quadrupled, the Congress--I got here in
19 2009, and Mr. Walz got here a term or so before. But we
20 have gone from the time I got here from spending \$97
21 billion--that is a lot of money--to almost \$180 billion. We
22 have increased the VA's size from 260,000 employees to now
23 over 360,000 employees. It is bigger than the U.S. Navy.
24 And I do not believe it is that much better, so we have got
25 to figure out how to streamline and, as Mr. Rutherford was

1 saying, put the emphasis on what the VA should be doing,
2 which is taking care of people, timely taking care of
3 claims.

4 I have a friend of mine who died 2 years ago, one of
5 the best friends I will ever have on this Earth, died of a
6 very rare lymphoma. He applied for benefits a year before
7 that when we found out he had the diagnosis. He has been
8 dead for 2 years. It still is not resolved for his widow.
9 And I see that. It is heartbreaking. I hear stories that
10 go on and on and on.

11 So what I need your help to do is, as Mr. Poliquin was
12 talking about, to point out these things that we see, that
13 you see, that we can be helpful. And I can tell you in a
14 bipartisan way this Committee will try its best to do it. I
15 give you my solemn promise. As my tenure here goes on, that
16 is my mission. So you understand at the VFW. And I cannot
17 thank you enough. It is a huge organization, our State of
18 Tennessee. You guys do an incredible job for veterans
19 there. I want to thank you for that.

20 I will now yield. I am through with questions. Anyone
21 else? Yes, Lou?

22 Mr. Correa. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just very
23 quickly just wanted to emphasize again a comment I made
24 yesterday, which is you folks here are our eyes and ears
25 when it comes to benefits. If you do not step up and tell

1 us what the VA is doing right or what they are not doing
2 right, then it is going to take awhile for us to figure that
3 out. So please, folks in California, I have an open-door
4 policy. If you see anything, you let us know. And as the
5 good Chairman here has said, and our Vice Chairman, we are
6 on it.

7 Thank you very much.

8 [Applause.]

9 Chairman Roe. Thank you.

10 I will now yield to Mr. Walz for closing comments.

11 Mr. Walz. Just a closing comment and one question. I
12 would like to say again, thanking the Chairman, we are very
13 lucky as veterans to have him in this seat. He has got the
14 full confidence of this entire Committee, and I hope he has
15 confidence--he is exactly right. We should know what we are
16 getting for our money. We should know where that money is
17 going. We should know if it is getting better. We should
18 be able to measure those things.

19 I guess the question I would ask, and this is the one I
20 think I would like to know this, too. We together and the
21 Congress by Article I should be making these decisions. So
22 I am a bit troubled on the hiring freeze. And I will tell
23 you this: If you want to know one thing that irritates
24 constituents more than anything, when they think Congress
25 plays by a different rule. Apparently we are because I was

1 able to hire Ray, so there was no hiring freeze.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Walz. No one said anything about that. And the
4 point is that was a veteran looking for work. If the VA
5 needs to hire people, then we should be there overseeing
6 that and allow them to do that if they need to do it. If
7 they do not, then we should tell them not to hire, and they
8 are not going to do it.

9 I think an arbitrary hiring freeze makes me nervous
10 that if there are positions we need filled and we cannot do
11 that, that poses a problem. And I think it runs counter,
12 because the Chairman is exactly right. If we have spent
13 that much more, we better be dang sure we got our money's
14 worth for it, and that is what we need you to help us with.

15 So I would just ask you to think about that one. Let
16 us know on that. Let us know where you are seeing the
17 hiring freeze either hurting in processing of claims or some
18 of the support positions in health care. And Ray was just
19 mentioning and I wanted to mention it and maybe point them
20 out on here, Commander, if you yourself or one of your staff
21 can tell us about your fellowship program. We have got some
22 fellows here?

23 Mr. Duffy. Thank you. Yes, we have got a very close
24 alliance with Student Veterans of America, and this is the
25 third year that the student veterans are joining us, the

1 fellowship, to allow them the opportunity to go with the VFW
2 members, to come up on the Hill, to visit with their
3 Representatives, to learn more, and to also engage on
4 particular issues that they are working with. And some of
5 them are actually taking these issues and they are getting
6 credit for it. So can I ask the fellow student veterans of
7 America, please stand to be recognized.

8 [Applause.]

9 Mr. Walz. As always, leading by example. Thanks for
10 getting them involved, and they know and believe they can
11 make a difference.

12 With that, I yield back.

13 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

14 I want to express actually agreement with what my
15 colleague said. I wrote the letter to the President about
16 exempting the VA from the hiring freeze, and it was signed
17 by many other people, and certainly they responded very
18 quickly. The Trump administration was just out of the
19 chute. They exempted it, and certainly in critical care
20 areas where physicians and other nursing and other
21 specialties like that were exempted. And I appreciate them
22 responding quickly, and they did.

23 [Applause.]

24 Chairman Roe. Commander, I want to thank you and all
25 of the people, the veterans, who came today from literally

1 all across the country, and especially the fellowship
2 students. I think that is a phenomenal program that you
3 have. I think you have the commitment of both Democrats and
4 Republicans on this Committee to work together for what is
5 in the best interest of veterans. No question in my mind
6 about that. And I certainly relish in my new role as
7 Chairman and look forward to working with you, and, again,
8 you are our eyes and ears out there. We can only be in a
9 few places. You guys and gals are all over the United
10 States. So thank you very much, and I want to thank all of
11 you for coming.

12 I ask unanimous consent that all members have 5
13 legislative days in which to revise and extend their remarks
14 and add extraneous material. And hearing no objection, so
15 ordered.

16 The hearing is adjourned.

17 [Whereupon, at 4:07 p.m., the Committees were
18 adjourned.]