

## **RANKING MEMBER RICHARD BURR**

**March 5, 2013**

Good morning, Chairman Sanders, Chairman Miller, and Ranking Member Michaud. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for holding this joint hearing to listen to the legislative priorities of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Before I begin, I would like to welcome all of the VFW members who are in attendance today. Specifically, I want recognize the North Carolinians who have made the trip to Washington for this hearing. Thank you for being here.

Commander Hamilton, I would like to welcome you and your leadership team and congratulate you on being elected as National Commander last July. Your service in the U.S. Marine Corps as well as your years of experience developed through various VFW leadership positions demonstrates your commitment to veterans. You provide a unique perspective from the work you have done in your home state of Florida as well as positions you have held at the national level.

The testimony you will provide today will be valuable as the Committees prepares to analyze VA's fiscal year 2014 budget request, when it is finally submitted. As you are well aware, ensuring veterans have access to VA services has been a Congressional priority. Unfortunately, even with recent budget and personnel increases many veterans are still having difficulties accessing mental health services or facing an ever growing claims backlog.

Commander, given your position and experience, I am interested in hearing your views on current veterans' programs. Specifically, whether they are meeting the needs of veterans and what shortfalls exist. Given the fiscal constraints we are facing, I believe your assessment is crucial as we attempt to evaluate the efficacy of these programs.

To that end, I want to briefly highlight a few areas of concern. One is the disability claims backlog. In recent years, Congress has provided funding to allow VA to hire thousands of additional claims processors and to develop new technologies. Even with these and other new initiatives, veterans still face large backlogs, long delays, and frequent errors when trying to access disability benefits.

While VA has spent tremendous time and money trying to modernize to better deliver benefits and services to veterans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been little benefit to veterans. In fact, a report by the Inspector General's office recently found that, in the regional offices using the Veterans Benefits Management System, it actually took longer to complete certain phases of the claims process. In these sites, claims processors have had to switch between VBMS and the legacy systems, potentially adding to the delays and the frustration of processors. Moving forward, we must ensure that VA has a realistic plan to begin providing

veterans, their families, and their survivors with timely and accurate decisions. If VA is not on track to do that, we cannot wait any longer for VA to correct its course.

Another area of concern is how we are assisting veterans find careers after their military service ends. Commander, as you pointed out in your testimony, veteran unemployment, especially among post 9/11 veterans, is unacceptably high. I believe that one of the keys to addressing veteran unemployment is ensuring that veterans are able to translate their extensive military training into occupational licenses and credentials civilian employers are looking for. I hope that we can work together to identify best practices within the federal government, as well as in the states, that will help us better translate military training into the civilian world.

Finally, as many of you know, during last Congress we held several hearings regarding mental health services provided by VA. During those hearings, we learned about serious problems veterans face while accessing VA mental health services. Ensuring veterans have access to needed mental health services will continue to be a top priority for me. In order to guarantee veterans receive quality mental health services VA must also require appropriate credentialing and training for their mental health professionals. Veterans receiving treatment for PTSD must have providers that are able to meet the unique mental health needs of veterans.

Again, I would like to thank you, Commander, for your presence today and thank the Chairmen for the opportunity this hearing presents for the Committees to hear from you and the rest of VFW's membership about the issues veterans are currently facing.

I thank the Chair and yield back.