

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Joint Hearing on the Legislative Presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars
March 7, 2012

“Good morning and welcome to this joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans’ Affairs Committees to receive the legislative presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to Commander DeNoyer, Bob Wallace and VFW’s other senior officials, and to all the members of VFW who are with us this morning.

I also want to extend a warm welcome to VFW Ladies Auxiliary National President, Gwen Rankin, who’s here with us today. Welcome Gwen, and welcome to all of the other officers and members of the Ladies Auxiliary in the audience. Thank you all for your leadership and for your important work representing women veterans.

I’m also so pleased to have Carlos Almeda, Dick Whipple, John Rust, and Kathleen Seureau here from my home state of Washington. Thank you for everything you do on behalf of Washington’s veterans. And of course, welcome to Chairman Miller and my colleagues from the House. Thank you for joining us today for this important hearing.

Last month, I sat down with veterans from across my home state. I heard from veterans who can’t get access to VA mental health care in a timely way; and aren’t getting the type of treatment they need. Women veterans told me about their ongoing struggles to receive specialized care, and time and time again veterans shared stories about a claims system that just isn’t working. Veterans told me about the obstacles to employment they continue to face. Some are afraid to write the word “veteran” on a job application for fear that those who have not served will see them as damaged or unstable.

Last year’s passage of the “VOW to Hire Heroes Act” was a great first step in tackling the high rate of veteran unemployment. But it was only that – a first step. We must focus now on building partnerships with private companies large and small to ensure they have the information and tools they need to hire and train our veterans.

We need to take advantage of the sea of good will across the country from those who want to do the right thing and hire a veteran. And as part of this effort we also need to beat back misinformation about the invisible wounds of war. No matter the challenges on the battlefield, we owe it to our veterans to give them a fair shot as they look for work here at home.

That’s why the litmus test for hiring veterans can’t be fear or stigma of PTSD or other mental health issues. Instead it must simply be whether a veteran is qualified for the job at hand. So I will continue to highlight the tremendous skills, leadership and talent that our veterans bring to the table. And, I will continue to work with employers across the country to ensure that our veterans can find good paying jobs here at home.

While we focus on jobs, we also can't lose sight of our veterans who are heading back to school. Before veterans commit their GI Bill benefits, we need to make sure they have the right information to make the best choice about their education and the school they choose.

I'm pleased to say that in the next few weeks I'll be introducing a bill that targets how educational institutions are recruiting our veterans, and ensures veterans are given a clear picture about an institution's track record with other veterans. But whether it's education, jobs, mental health, or a claims system that just isn't working – each of these challenges serves as a constant reminder of the important work ahead to fulfill our obligation to America's veterans.

Last week I chaired a hearing on VA's budget request for Fiscal Year 2013. Despite a tough fiscal environment, President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have done a good job putting together a budget that reflects a very real commitment to provide veterans with the care and benefits they have earned. This week, the Committee will send its Views and Estimates letter to the Budget Committee. The letter will highlight what VA is getting right, but it will also identify what more must be done.

For the third year in a row, VA has proposed cuts in spending for major construction and maintenance. Last year, for the first time, VA's budget outlined the Department's construction needs over a ten year period. Yet VA's budget requests over the past two years have been just a fraction of this clearly defined need. The size of the gap between the infrastructure funding VA needs and the funding requested of the Congress is troubling. As more of our servicemembers come home, the demand on VA's facilities will only continue to grow. We must make sure VA has the funding it needs to meet this growing demand.

It's also clear that the claims backlog has gone on for far too long. If we're going to overcome the backlog, VA must truly transform its system. This year I will continue to closely monitor transformation efforts; and push VA to eliminate unnecessary practices and fix common claims processing errors.

Another area I continue to be concerned about is mental health. For servicemembers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, VA has projected an increased demand of over 200 percent for mental health care by Fiscal Year 2020. We need to take a hard look at whether the Department's proposed five percent increase is enough to meet the high demand for mental health care. VA must also continue to find ways to make real and substantial improvements to the care it provides. When a veteran has the courage to ask for help, VA must be there: every single time. VA must be there with not only timely access to care, but also the right type of care.

Finally, I'm concerned about the questions and uncertainty surrounding the effect of sequestration on our veterans. Our veterans deserve clarity on this issue – clarity that I'm working hard to provide. I've taken my concerns directly to Secretary Shinseki and to the Acting Director of the Office of Management and Budget. And, I've requested a formal legal opinion from the Government Accountability Office to help provide resolution to this issue. Let me be clear to all of our veterans here today – as Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee - I will not allow the VA budget to be affected by sequestration.

As VFW's membership knows all too well, the challenges facing our veterans are great. But so too are the opportunities to fulfill our obligations to these brave men and women. Let me again thank VFW for your leadership and advocacy on behalf of veterans. Commander, thank you again for joining us. I look forward to working with all of you as we continue to honor our commitment to our Nation's veterans. I'd like to now turn to Chairman Miller for his opening statement."