

Senator John Boozman

Opening Statement

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Madame Chair - Ranking Member Burr,

Thank you for holding this mark-up today so that we may discuss ways in which this body can further improve many of the benefits that serve our veterans, particularly regarding mental health care and homeless veterans.

I very much appreciate you including several provisions that I have been working on with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle.

Included in the Chair's omnibus bill, or the "ACCESS Act," are a couple of important proposals we have been working on, and I appreciate the committee leadership for including them in that package. Sec. 307 of this bill includes an important provision that reflects the work of Senator Begich and me. This provision would ensure that women veterans who are fleeing domestic violence, and find themselves with no place to go, do not have to wait for an even greater crisis before they and their families have access to VA homeless services. This is a common sense provision and I thank the Chair and Ranking member for including it.

Sec. 407 includes a provision that Senator Franken and I have been working on to ensure that we are getting a good return on the investments we have been making in the VA's Office of Rural Health. With so many of our veterans living in rural areas, our nation has seen fit to invest a significant amount of money to improve the accessibility and quality of the health care they receive. I think it is so important for us to have a clear path forward to improve health care for our rural veterans. This provision will ensure that this occurs and I appreciate Senator Franken's work and leadership on this issue and am pleased that it is included in the bill.

I would also like to express my strong support for Senator Burr's legislation, S. 1707, of which I am an original cosponsor. I have been strongly advocating for this legislation for the past few Congresses and it is high time we got this thing done. This bill would protect the 2nd

Amendment rights of our veterans who have served in uniform. I would also express my support for the additional amendments that Senator Burr has offered in response to recent developments that would further protect our veterans' second amendment rights.

Finally, I would like to express my concerns about some of the provisions included in "GI Bill Consumer Awareness Act" that will be discussed here today. We all want to see veterans use their benefits wisely, and all consumers should be protected from fraud. However, I believe there are better ways to accomplish this with tools already at our disposal and do not require the creation of myriads of bureaucratic reports and hoops to jump through that could place an undue burden on the VA and educational institutions. We want to protect veterans and we can do so by empowering them, but we should be careful not to burden them with bureaucracy and limit their choices. We must remember that this benefit belongs to the veteran, or their beneficiary, because they have earned it through their service and sacrifice and we should be careful not to limit their ability to use it as they wish or further limit their educational options.

Again, Madame Chair and Ranking Member, thank you for holding this Mark-up today and for your continued commitment to our servicemembers and their families.