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Statement of Chairman Bernard Sanders

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Joint Hearing on the Legislative Presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars

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"I would like to welcome all of our guests to this morning's joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees. We're gathered to hear the legislative presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

To begin, Commander Hamilton, I would like to thank VFW for the work it does each and every day on behalf of our nation's veterans. I would also like to thank each and every veteran here today for their honorable military service.

The work done by the Veterans of Foreign Wars is so critically important to our nation's veterans, and their families, in local communities as well as on a national level. The VFW provides expert advice and assistance with claims; advocates for better health care and benefits for veterans; and supports military and veteran families in their time of need through its family assistance programs. For this, I am grateful.

The knowledge VFW gains from its daily interaction with veterans is an invaluable resource for members of these Committees and the Congress as a whole, as we continue to address the issues that are so important to our nation's veterans and their families. I look forward to VFW's continued input into the legislative process.

I would also like to acknowledge VFW members who are here today from Vermont: State Commander Allston (Joe) Gilmond, Senior Vice Commander Russell Bibens; Junior Vice Commander Brenda Cruickshank; Department Adjutant John Boardman; Sam Haskins; Joe Lumsden; and Malcolm MacAskill. Thank you for traveling to be with us today and for all the work you do on behalf of Vermont's veterans.

We are all too familiar with the challenges facing VA, and often allow them to cast a shadow over VA's successes. So I think it is important to take a moment to acknowledge some of the very good things that VA is doing every day. For example, VA has one of the highest reported rates of patient satisfaction in the country and that is no small feat; VA continues to acknowledge that some exposures cause long-term health consequences – we saw this with the Secretary's granting service-connection for conditions related to Agent Orange exposure; VA has taken an aggressive stance on homelessness by taking on the ambitious goal of eliminating veterans' homelessness by 2015; and

through its world class research program, VA is making significant advances in health care for veterans.

The claims backlog is one of the most significant challenges VA faces. To VA's credit, it has been working aggressively to overcome these challenges and to provide more timely and accurate decisions. In each of the last three years, VA has processed more than one million claims – more claims than ever before. Yet, at the same time, more than a million new claims have been filed in each of those three years. Claims for increased evaluations or additional medical conditions continue to make up a significant portion of the claims workload as a result of the increasing age of many veterans. We also continue to see more veterans seeking benefits for the first time. These are not only veterans of the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also veterans of other eras.

As more veterans seek the benefits they have earned, VA must do even more to address this growing demand. VA must continue to transform. It must also measure and understand the impact of transformation on its workload and respond accordingly. VA must move to a paperless claims system and continue to eliminate VBMS' technical issues. And most importantly, VA must focus on quality by ensuring its employees have the training, focus, and tools necessary to get claims done right the first time.

As we all know, there is still much room for improvement and a lot of work yet to be done. That is why we must continue to work together to find innovative solutions until we have truly created a 21st century claims system. VFW's expertise has been and will continue to be important to finding solutions to the challenges facing the claims system. No veteran should ever be discouraged from reaching out to VA for help in the future because of a negative experience with the claims system.

This is even more significant as we look at the suicide rate among veterans. In recent years, we have made great strides in terms of understanding and acknowledging the challenges that come with the invisible wounds of war, and in developing and offering more effective treatments. VA has hired more mental health providers, but our work is far from complete.

I do not believe that there is a "one size fits all" treatment for PTSD and other mental health conditions. We must tailor these treatments to fit the individual and expand the types of treatments available to include complementary and alternative medicine options. I also believe VA should reach out to local communities and partner with Federally Qualified Health Clinics and Community Health Clinics that can provide quality mental health services closer to where veterans live.

We have made a promise to our veterans that, after sacrificing so much for our country, they and their families will be taken care of when they return home. If even one veteran feels that he or she does not have anyone to reach out to or that the right type of treatment is not available, then we have failed in our promise.

Outreach must be a top priority, so that veterans no longer struggle needlessly without knowing that help is available. In talking with veterans and veterans' advocates, I am hearing that there are many veterans who are unaware of their earned benefits. That is unacceptable, and I will be working with VA to ensure that they continue to make veterans aware of their earned benefits. We

must recognize that we cannot rely solely on social media and websites to communicate with veterans about their benefits. Local efforts must be put into place as well – with VA visiting Senior Centers and rural areas where older veterans congregate.

Outreach is particularly important when it comes to women veterans. The face of the veterans' population is rapidly changing. With greater rates of women serving than ever before, we can only expect for this population to continue to grow.

Women face a unique set of health challenges, challenges that VA is currently developing a capacity to address. Perhaps the most pressing women's health issues are those that stem from Military Sexual Trauma. MST is epidemic, with one in five women veterans experiencing this trauma over the course of their service. It is up to VA to see that veterans are provided with the physical and mental health care that they desperately need.

Recently, the White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont opened a Women Veterans' Comprehensive Care Clinic. It is absolutely beautiful primarily because of group of local women veterans assisted in the design, as well as the interior design of the clinic. We need to ensure that changes like this are happening across the system.

As the debate over the national debt continues to drag on, we in Congress cannot forget the debt we owe to veterans and their families – after sacrificing for our well-being, the least we can do is ensure theirs. While VA is exempt from sequestration, I remain committed to protecting VA from future cuts that would hamper its ability to adequately serve veterans.

Some in Congress believe the Chained Consumer Price Index is a viable option to battle the deficit crisis. This careless attempt to balance the budget on the backs of disabled veterans is wrong. Adoption of Chained CPI would substantially cut the VA benefits of more than three million veterans and survivors. Such actions would be an injustice to those who have proudly served our nation.

Any attempt to balance the budget on the backs of those who served and their families is a non-starter. Asking for disabled veterans to make due with less, in order to protect tax loopholes for the wealthiest Americans is beyond the pale. It is unconscionable.

In my Views and Estimates letter to the Budget Committee last week, I urged them to reject any change in the calculation of the COLA. I will not accept anything that fails to fulfill the promises we have made to our nation's veterans and their families.

Clearly, veterans face a tremendous series of issues, far more than they should ever have to. No veteran, family member or caregiver should ever have to fight the Federal government to receive their earned and well deserved benefits.

Commander Hamilton, again welcome and I look forward to hearing your testimony today and to working together in the future.

Thank you again VFW members for your continued service in your local communities and your steadfast commitment to those who have served in the United States Armed Forces.”