

THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
THE AMERICAN LEGION

- - -

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2011

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

The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:04 a.m., in Room G-50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Patty Murray, chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, presiding.

Present: Senators Murray, Begich, Isakson, Wicker, and Boozman. Representatives Miller, Roe, Runyan, Reyes, Sanchez, McNerney, and Walz.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MURRAY

Chairman Murray. Good morning. Welcome to our joint hearing today of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees to receive the legislative priorities of the American Legion.

Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to National Commander Wong, the senior officials joining him, and all of the members of the American Legion who are here with us this

morning.

I also want to welcome Kris Nelson, the National President of the American Legion Auxiliary. Thank you for the great work the Auxiliary does on behalf of service members and veterans and their families. Thank you.

I am also pleased to have Bob Wallace, Eva Wallace, Bill Schrier [phonetic], and Mike Montaney [phonetic] here from my home State of Washington. Thank you so much to all of you for the great work you do out at home.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. And, of course, I want to thank my colleagues from the House who have come across the Capitol here with us. They have not traveled as far as my Washington State constituents, but we know it was a job to get here, so we welcome you.

Last month, I traveled throughout my home State of Washington to hold listening sessions with our local veterans and hear directly from them about the biggest problems that they face, and in very crowded halls, I spoke with veterans, including many Legion members, about what concerns they wanted me to bring back to D.C. to work for, and the things that I heard will not surprise any of you.

I heard about a claims backlog that has our veterans waiting for far too long for the benefits they have earned. I heard about the barriers to employment that have put

veterans out of work at a time when they badly need the dignity that a good-paying job provides. I heard about frustrations with the G.I. Bill. And I heard from older veterans who want access to the care they need.

I know none of these issues surprise any of you because the American Legion is hearing these same things all across the country. Your membership works every day to be a voice for veterans who may not have a seat at the table when decisions affecting them are made. And the work you do continually reminds us that we must never forget the sacrifices of our veterans and their families. That is a lesson I learned very early in my own life.

As many of you know, my father was a World War II disabled veteran who was awarded the Purple Heart for wounds he suffered during the invasion of Okinawa. I grew up watching his struggles with the knowledge he had sacrificed for our nation, and he asked, like most veterans, for very little in return. Later in my life, during college, I worked as an intern at the Seattle VA Hospital and provided physical therapy to Vietnam veterans who came home with the visible and invisible wounds of that war. Those personal experiences have given me not only a very real understanding of the consequences of sending our service members into combat, but also a sense of obligation. We have to care for them when they return.

Over the last 16 years, I have worked to put that knowledge to work on this committee by tackling a range of challenges, including preparing the VA for a generation of new veterans, improving mental health care, providing for a seamless transition from military service to the ranks of our nation's veterans, and ensuring our veterans can find meaningful employment when they return home. And at every turn, the American Legion has been there with support and action.

However, as the veterans I spoke to last month made abundantly clear to me, much work remains to be done. First off, we have a benefit claims system that most agree is simply broken. Earlier this year, I took a tour of the Seattle Regional Office and I was astonished by what I saw--mounds of paper everywhere at a time when more veterans are filing claims and more are filing increasingly complex claims. It is past time to focus our attention on solutions, including improved IT, to reach the shared goal of timely, accurate decisions on benefits claims, and I look forward to the American Legion's participation in the months ahead on this ongoing challenge.

We also need to focus on getting our veterans back to work. We all know our veterans are disciplined. They are team players. They have the skills to make vital contributions in the workplace. But we also know that one

in five of our young veterans is unemployed, and that far too many veterans are finding it difficult to transfer their skills into job interviews and resumes and our competitive job market.

That is why I introduced and continue to work towards passage of my comprehensive veterans training and employment bill, the Hiring Heroes Act, and I am pleased to be joined in this effort to put veterans back to work by Chairman Miller, who I know has a bill of his own and who I look forward to working with on a bipartisan manner on this critical issue. It is an issue that can and should unite all of us.

The lack of jobs for veterans also puts them at risk of joining the ranks of tens of thousands of veterans who go homeless each night across our country, and as we all know, one veteran sleeping on the street is one too many. That is why I am committed to providing homeless veterans the services they deserve. We sought to preserve funding for over 7,000 chronically homeless veterans to participate in the HUD/VASH program for housing and supportive services and we are now working to provide the VA with the resources it needs to meet the President's and Secretary Shinseki's goal of eliminating veterans' homelessness.

Another key challenge will be continuing to improve mental health care for our veterans. This starts with

effectively combating the stigma that keeps our service members and veterans from asking for help. We must continue to reach out to veterans and effectively target suicide prevention efforts. We also have to ensure that mental health services are delivered in a safe and appropriate setting. I am pleased that the VA and DOD are continuing to work towards common mental health treatment guidelines.

Another very important issue to me and to all of you is one that requires immediate attention and that is the issue of the challenges facing our women veterans. I share the American Legion's concern for these issues and have been pushing the VA to provide women veterans with the care and benefits they have earned. I introduced and passed the Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act into law in the last Congress and the provisions included in our bill are in various stages of implementation now, and I am committed to making sure that the VA continues to improve its services for women veterans. DOD and VA must strengthen their efforts to prevent and to provide treatment for veterans both male and female who have suffered military sexual trauma, and our VA must ensure that the privacy, safety, and security needs of our veterans are met.

VA must also work with DOD to improve communications so the transition between military and civilian life is truly seamless. I have visited with our wounded warriors and the

courageous spouses and caregivers who are providing assistance and strength during their recovery. They face tremendous challenges during recovery and transition and we need to be there for them.

And, of course, we can never stop working to ensure that VA has adequate resources to deliver quality health care. Just last week, Ranking Member Burr and I sent a letter to VA asking tough questions about health care funding. We want to be absolutely certain that the VA remains ready and able to provide the health care upon which more and more veterans depend.

As you know all too well, the challenges facing our veterans are numerous, but so are the opportunities to fulfill our obligations to these brave men and women. I am so pleased that we have partners in all the members of the American Legion in this work. Commander Wong, thank you for being here today. I look forward to working with you and the American Legion as we continue to honor our commitment to our nation's veterans.

And with that, I will turn it over to Chairman Miller for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MILLER

Chairman Miller. I thank the Chairman.

Commander Wong, it is a pleasure to welcome you. I cannot help but notice that there is a gentleman named

Kloster sitting close behind you with a big smile on his face this morning. It was a pleasure also meeting with the Florida Commander, Fletcher Williams, yesterday in my office. I look forward to hearing your testimony today.

It was an honor to address your organization in Minneapolis last month. It was an honor to have an opportunity to meet with many of you. I appreciate the invitation and look forward to meeting the Florida delegation today. As a matter of fact, if there are those of you here from Florida today, if you are able, if you would stand, we would like to recognize those from the Sunshine State.

[Applause.]

Chairman Miller. Thank you very much. On behalf of a grateful nation, we all say thank you for your service to our country. Thank you for making this trip to Washington, to your nation's capital. And thank you for bringing your legislative agenda before this committee.

As the Chairman of the Senate committee has already said, we share a common interest together on legislative interests. Most of what she talks about, I agree with. In fact, a great deal of what she talks about, I agree with. But the jobless issue is critical. And since your calendar is free, I know we can get together at the first available moment to discuss our bills and the differences we have, the

VOW Act, which many of you are aware of that has passed our committee and is ready to go to the floor for a vote. It is a pledge that I made when I became Chairman and I reiterated it again at your national convention. We will do everything that we can to get veteran unemployment rates down to five percent. A million unemployed veterans is unacceptable in this country and we need to do what we can to make sure that the tools that are necessary, that the incentives are there for the job creators to be able to hire the most qualified workforce that this country has, and that is our veteran population.

[Applause.]

Chairman Miller. I have a long statement. I would like to ask unanimous consent that it be entered into the record. But I would like to say that I agree with the Commander on the big challenges that lie ahead, not only for VA but lie ahead for our committees as we work towards fixing the process.

Chairman Murray has already talked about the claims backlog process. It is a problem that did not start yesterday. It exists out there today for reasons that baffle us both. We have to fix it, somehow, some way. We have all tried putting bodies forward. We have all tried putting dollars forward. And those have not been successful, because the claims backlog continues to grow

exponentially.

Rigorous oversight--it is something that this Congress has not done their job, both in Democrat and Republican administrations, and it is so critical for us, members of the legislative body, to maintain rigorous oversight and investigation on those departments that we actually have oversight of, And so I, along with Chairman Murray, pledge the fact that we will work to make sure that every single dollar that is appropriated on behalf of you, the veterans of this country, to the VA is spent appropriately, is not wasted, and that there is no duplicity within the system, which I think we all can agree there is plenty of.

Chairman Murray does have her new task as the co-chair of the select committee that has begun its work of trimming the budget of \$1.5 trillion. We are out of other options. It has to be done. But I think I speak for everyone up here when I say that funding for our military and our veterans is and will remain one of this nation's highest priorities. We cannot and must not balance the budget on the backs of America's veterans or allow them to be used as political pawns.

[Applause.]

Chairman Miller. With that, I will yield back.

[The prepared statement of Chairman Miller follows:]

/ COMMITTEE INSERT

Chairman Murray. Well, thank you very much.

I will turn to Representative McNerney to speak on behalf of Ranking Member Filner.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. MCNERNEY

Mr. McNerney. Thank you, Chairman Murray.

I have big shoes to fill with Mr. Filner, but I want to thank Commander Wong for coming here today and bringing the American Legion forward from all the 50 States, not only to hear this hearing, but also to visit your members of Congress and your Senators.

No one wants to serve our country more than the people who have served in our armed forces, and coming here on an annual trek, on an annual trip to make your case and to make that personal connection is very, very important. It is clear from the words spoken this morning and from the actions that have been taken that serving our veterans back is a bipartisan issue, it is a high priority, and we are not going to balance this nation's debt on the back of the members who have served this country.

Again, I welcome you here and I look forward to seeing the members from my State in my office this afternoon, including Commander Wong, who has already scheduled an appointment. So thank you very much.

Chairman Murray. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. And filling in for my Ranking Member Senator Burr today is Senator Isakson.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR ISAKSON

Senator Isakson. Well, thank you, Chairman Murray and Chairman Miller, for calling this hearing today.

Commander Fang Wong, welcome to Washington, D.C. Thank you for your 25-month tour of duty in Vietnam and your 20 years' service in the United States Army. We are grateful for your service as we are for every veteran.

I want to also acknowledge, I think, Roger Tingler, of Covington, Georgia, and Sam Darden, Jr. [phonetic] of Macon, who are in the audience. Am I right? If you are, would you stand up, and anybody else from Georgia. Welcome.

[Applause.]

Senator Isakson. Nobody came to hear me talk today. We came to hear the Commander talk, so my remarks are going to be very, very brief, but they are going to be succinct and to the point.

The men and women in our United States military, when they sign up and when they go to war for us, make a commitment to our country. Our country must ensure the commitment back to them for their lifetime is complete and they can always count on it, and I share the remarks of Chairman Miller and Chairman Murray. We stand here ready, hand in hand, to see to it that our veterans receive the

commitment from us that they have given to the people of the United States of America. We thank you for your service and we welcome you here today.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Chairman Miller, you wanted to make another remark.

Chairman Miller. I apologize, and this is not in any way to diminish the Commander's testimony, but if I could have a personal privilege for a moment to recognize a member of the House committee who yesterday sprung into action at the Charlotte airport, saved the life of an individual who collapsed, giving CPR to that individual, a great friend of the veteran community but a good friend of ours, Dr. Phil Roe.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Well, Chairman Miller, thank you for mentioning that, and Dr. Roe, I think we are all really glad you are here today.

Chairman Miller. I feel better already.

[Laughter.]

Chairman Murray. I also wanted to mention to everyone here today that this is a historical moment. This is the first joint hearing that this committee has gone paperless. We all, instead of printing out thousands and thousands of pages of testimony and all the background that goes into the

memos, we have them on our iPads up here, saving this committee a lot of money and time from our staff, and I think it is really a good way for all committees to go and we are really glad that the Veterans Committee is showing the rest of the Senate and House the way to go.

With that, I would like to welcome Congressman Joseph Crowley, from New York, who will be introducing the American Legion's National Commander.

INTRODUCTION OF FANG A. WONG, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
THE AMERICAN LEGION, BY HON. JOSEPH CROWLEY, A
REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF NEW
YORK

Mr. Crowley. Thank you, Chairman Murray. I feel a little inadequate now with my paper, but--

[Laughter.]

Mr. Crowley. Chairman Murray and Chairman Miller, and I want to also thank my colleagues, my present colleagues who are here today from the People's House as well as some of my former colleagues who now find themselves in the more lofty chamber, for being here today, as well. Thank you for providing me this high honor of presenting, not only on behalf of myself but the entire New York delegation, Fang Wong, the new National Commander of the American Legion, before this historic joint committee hearing today.

Elected National Commander at the American Legion's annual convention in Minneapolis earlier this month, Commander Wong hails from the great City of New York. Like many New Yorkers, his roots are from elsewhere. Born in Canton, China, Commander Wong immigrated to the United States as a 12-year-old in 1960. He attended New York City public schools and became a naturalized citizen in 1963.

As a sign of his dedication to his adopted homeland, Commander Wong volunteered for the U.S. Army in 1969 and

served for 25 months in Vietnam. In 1989, he retired from the Army as a Chief Warrant Officer. Following his retirement from the Army, Commander Wong joined the Lieutenant B.R. Kimlau Chinese Memorial Post 1291 in Manhattan, New York.

Through his American Legion post in Chinatown, Commander Wong helped direct relief efforts in the aftermath of 9/11, something that I am tremendously appreciative for, having lost a first cousin and many friends during that horrific attack.

A former National Vice Commander and Past Department Commander of New York, Commander Wong has held elected and appointed offices at the post, county, district, department, and national levels of the Legion. Commander Wong also served as a Director of New York Empire Boys' State and as a member of the Planning Committee for the creation of the New York American Legion College. He has served on several national committees and commissions, including a term as Chairman of the Legion's National Security Commission.

Among the many key leadership roles he has played was as a member of the Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment and Training and Employer Outreach of the Department of Labor. I hope that he will provide me, as well as provide this entire Congress, his knowledge in this field as Congress works together in a bipartisan manner to address

the shamefully high rates of unemployment among our returning war heroes

While he may be the first New Yorker to occupy this post in 31 years, as well as being the first Asian American to serve in this capacity, I know he will make proud all Americans as he continues his lifetime of service to his and our country and to the veterans who have served our country so bravely.

So, Madam Chair, I will yield back my time and ask permission of the Chairs to excuse me from the witness table. I have to go back to the Ways and Means Committee. But I am so grateful and so proud to present to you today my friend, Commander Wong.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

Before we move to the Commander's testimony, I would like to take just a brief moment to introduce the senior leaders joining the Commander at the witness table. We have Verna Jones, Director of the National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission; Michael Helm, Chairman of the National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission; Daniel Dellinger, Chairman of the National Legislative Commission; and Tim Tetz, Director of the National Legislative Commission. Thank you all for joining us today.

Commander, thank you for coming and joining us and we

look forward to your testimony.

STATEMENT OF FANG A. WONG, NATIONAL COMMANDER, THE AMERICAN LEGION; ACCOMPANIED BY DANIEL M. DELLINGER, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION, THE AMERICAN LEGION; TIM TETZ, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION, THE AMERICAN LEGION; MICHAEL D. HELM, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION, THE AMERICAN LEGION; AND VERNA JONES, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION, THE AMERICAN LEGION

Mr. Wong. Well, good morning, Chairman Murray, Chairman Miller, and members of the committee. Thank you, Joe--I guess he just stepped out---for such kind words of introduction. On behalf of the 2.4 million members of the American Legion, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to come before you today.

Prior to begging into the details of my written testimony, I would like to ask the following people to please stand and be recognized, the American Legion national officers serving with me this year. I believe they are all here. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. Wong. The American Legion Past National Commanders in the audience, I believe are on this side. Thank you for being here.

[Applause.]

Mr. Wong. We have with us today Kris Nelson, the National President of the American Legion Auxiliary with us today.

[Applause.]

Mr. Wong. And we also have the American Legion Auxiliary Past National President. I think Sandy is here somewhere. Thank you for being here, Sandy.

[Applause.]

Mr. Wong. It is my pride and honor to acknowledge one more special guest in the audience today. This person has worked with and lent me her full support for many years, for which I am most grateful, my loving wife, Barbara.

[Applause.]

Mr. Wong. As you well know, the American Legion works in partnership with your committees and the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide the smoothest transition possible for our men and women as they leave military service and become veterans. This includes not only the delivery of health care and benefits, but also economic opportunities in the civilian world.

The latter is not happening now. Veterans face an unemployment rate nearly two-thirds higher than those faced by the civilian population. Now, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than one million veterans were

unemployed in June of this year, and of those, more than 632,000 were age 35 to 60. This is unacceptable. And only a strong commitment from Congress to pass legislation to create incentives to promote the hiring of veterans can curve and reverse this trend.

Civilian licensing agencies must recognize military training, education, and experience when a veteran transitions to the civilian workforce. A soldier who can drive a truck in a convey through hazardous routes in Iraq can drive a truck to get eggs to the supermarket on time in America's Midwest. A Navy corpsman who can save Marines on the battlefields of Afghanistan has the skill and can render emergency aid as an EMT back home. Yet the education, the training and experience garnered from their meritorious service is not recognized by civilian licensing and certification agencies.

The American Legion urges Congress to work with DOD, the Department of Labor, and VA to find a way to translate these skills and put these veterans to work where they can make an impact, where they can make a difference. They have already proven they know how to do these things. Give them a chance to use this valuable capability in the workforce.

Turning around veterans' unemployment should really start with the Federal Government. Eighty percent of veterans employed by the Federal Government today are

employed by one of three departments--Defense, Homeland Security, and Veterans Affairs. Surely there are other areas where veterans can be key contributors. Like the civilian workplace, Federal employers need to realize the military prepares people to be team players, to be top-notch planners, and to be winners.

We need to stop asking why the Department of Education, the Interior, or Energy would hire a veteran and start asking the question, why not? If we are going to show America's private employers that a veteran has the job skill to succeed in any environment, the government needs to set the example.

The government cannot solve the problem by itself. Chairman Miller, your job summit with the private sector last week showed your commitment to reach out to the private sector, and I thank you. Congress must provide incentives to private industry to hire our veterans and we must help educate private industry.

Chairman Murray, Chairman Miller, both of you have advanced excellent pieces of legislation that can put America's veterans to work. Whether it is recognizing the needs of often overlooked unemployed veterans between the age of 35 to 60 or requiring the study of equivalency between military and civilian applications, these bills have the tools to help get our veterans back to work.

The American Legion hopes that you will bring your parties together to get a job bill for America's veterans passed. It is our obligation as a nation to ensure that every single member of the military who chooses to leave the service can effectively transfer his or her education, training, and experience into a civilian career field.

Both of these bills call for a mandatory Transition Assistance Program, TAP, in all branches of service, but it will not be enough to make TAP mandatory. Although TAP is already helpful, the program requires reform to ensure it is providing useful assistance to transitioning service members. The American Legion urges Congress to work with the DOD to reform TAP and make it more helpful while making it mandatory to receive this vital training. This should include every service member regardless of whether they are active duty, Guard, or Reserve components.

Today, there are enough roadblocks already in place for an injured service member transitioning back into civilian life. It should not be an added difficulty of filing for a VA disability claim and then waiting for months while the claim is adjudicated. More than one million veterans currently sit at home waiting for their claims to be either approved or denied. Many are dipping into their life's savings or their retirement savings or their monthly household budgets to pay their medical expenses. Some are

forced to choose between medication or food on the table. Some go into massive debt while waiting for the VA to rule, to decide. Sometimes even a retroactive settlement cannot repair credit history or return a home lost through a mortgage default.

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has veterans' interests at heart when he said he wants to break the back of backlogs and meet a goal of no claims pending more than 125 days and deliver with a 98 percent accuracy. Accuracy is the only way to whittle down this backlog and the only true measure of a successful claims system. Unfortunately, VA is still using speed as the primary measurement of success. But as we all know, when we rush, we make errors. Who pays the price when errors are made in this particular instance? I will tell you who, the veterans, who may see a claim process go from nine months to five years because of that one error.

VA needs to develop a better mechanism for tracking errors and initially use the knowledge of those errors to make a better training system. Everyone makes mistakes. The key is the ability to learn from those mistakes and avoid them in the future. VA and others who complain that training takes away time, time they would spend working with the claims, but ladies and gentlemen, do you want somebody to work on your claim if they do not know how to do it right?

We need to take the time to find mistakes and ensure proper training is only going to save time down the road. When VA employees are properly trained and focused on getting the claims right the first time, many of the lengthy delays associated with the appeal process will be eliminated. It is a long-term investment that will pay real dividends and bring the backlog down. Accuracy will reduce the backlog.

Also critical is the need to get VA and DOD back on track with the Virtual Lifetime Electronic Records, especially now at a time when service members in the National Guard and Reserve go back and forth, back and forth between active and veteran status. Last February's GAO report, which highlighted severe problems with implementation, troubles the American Legion. We have been promised more seamless transition for years. The VLER needs to be a coordinated effort with frequent and clear lines of communication to be effective. The development of a seamless electronic record to follow a service member through active duty and veteran status is long overdue and cannot be subject to any further delays.

Another issue the American Legion views as critical is the treatment of post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, the signature wounds of the War on Terror. Invisible wounds of war can be as scary as losing a limb.

They produce severe mood swings, erratic behavior, loss of memory, depression, divorce, and even suicide. PTS and TBI are service-connected disabilities that ripple through every community in America, and they are tearing our families apart.

The American Legion recognizes the need for research and action to address this problem. The Legion's Ad Hoc Committee on PTS and TBI includes many national experts, such as Columbia University's Dr. Gene Stillman and VA Health Care System innovator Dr. Kenneth Kiser, along with a number of predominant Legionnaires and mental health experts. The committee has met with military, VA, and private sector specialists to consider new strategies to meet the needs of these veterans. This committee has examined the current treatment program imported by VA and DOD along with ultimate treatments that have proven were effective but await the government's blessing for compensation. If this American Legion committee has learned one thing--one thing--it is that there is no magic bullet for curing post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury. And if the treatment worked, regardless what the treatment is, it should be used to help the suffering veteran.

Prescriptions are not the only answer, and sometimes drugs only make the condition worse, especially if they are drugs issued under a fail-first philosophy when medical

science is absolutely sure of the efficiencies of other drugs. Other options need to be explored, and the cost of researching and implementing those options should not be an issue because the toll of the war does not end at discharge. For those who are disabled, physically or mentally, it is a lifelong engagement and struggle and we need to understand that.

As for female veterans who gave VA less than satisfactory grades for health care in an online survey conducted by the American Legion last winter, our nation's commitment must likewise be genuine. It is a sacred obligation to care for those who have stepped up and risked their life for our freedoms, regardless of gender, regardless whether they lost a limb from an IED or lost the ability to sleep at night as they struggle with combat stress.

The American Legion understands the financial challenges our nation now faces. The Legion understands that though tough spending decisions are coming, that is why the Legion greatly appreciates the assurance our veterans have been given from members of Congress, the Secretary, and the President himself at our national convention that the benefits earned by those who have served our country in uniform will not be sacrificed to achieve budget goals. Our veterans have sacrificed enough. They have paid in full

their debt to society. However, the debt society owes them is quite another matter, and it is a matter that the American Legion strongly believes this committee is willing to address.

In this uncertain time, there is one simple yet urgent step which can be taken immediately to help ensure seamless transmission of benefits to veterans. The House and Senate have both passed spending measures for VA. Though the two bills still need to be reconciled before they can be signed into law, in order to better plan for the future and ensure continuity, the American Legion urges Congress to come together soon and pass the Military Construction and VA appropriation measure before October 1. Please, do not condemn VA to another round of uncertainty through a series of Continuing Resolutions. You are so close to the finish line. Help start this fiscal year off on the right foot. Help the veterans.

Madam Chairman, Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee, I thank you for the opportunity to come before you and renew the American Legion's commitment to work closely with Congress to ensure that we are all living up to our most sacred obligations. I invite you to read our annual report and visit our website on a regular basis to see how the Legion is fulfilling its end of the sacred duty we all share, that is, to care for our nation's veterans and

their family.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to sit before you and testify on behalf of my great organization. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Wong follows:]

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Commander Wong, thank you so much for that excellent testimony.

We will now have questions from the panel, and I will just start with a few. I really appreciate your attention and focus on the employment of our returning heroes, and I know Chairman Miller and I are both working on this. I wanted to ask you, you mentioned mandatory TAP and, of course, seamless transition. Do you hear a lot from your membership about the lack of certifications service members receive, that their resumes do not show the true breadth of the skills that they have learned in the military?

Mr. Wong. Madam Chairman, I was fortunate to serve on the Department of Labor Advisory Committee for a couple of years, and at that particular period of time, TAP was one of our major concerns. We actually conducted field trips by the committee members to various military installations to see how it worked, and what we find--this is a couple of years back--at that time was TAP really needs some standardization and repackaging because we find that, depending on what installation or the service that you attend, they do different things.

The instructions presented were really outdated and the things that they stressed mostly perhaps is not really close to what the service member really needs. There were some

services that were required mandatory. I believe the Marine Corps is still the only service that requires mandatory training. A lot of the other posts--I went to Fort Monmouth and the Army post and basically it is open. You should come. However, if you are not there, it is okay, that type of atmosphere.

The committee that I served with, we spent a lot of time studying that, and we made a lot of recommendations to the Secretary and, I guess, to Congress that we should do something with TAP and get some standardization because we find out from a lot of success stories for service members that we have opportunity to interview and talk to that TAP, if used properly, actually helped them prepare.

The thing about that is when we take in inductees and volunteers into the service nowadays, DOD and the government, we, the taxpayers, spend millions and millions of dollars to train them to be a professional soldier. But when the time comes for them to change the uniform and go back to the civilian world, perhaps we are not spending nearly the time or attention to prepare them back to the civilian world where they could seamlessly go back to a normal life.

Of course, anybody that ever served in the service, especially those great men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, nothing will ever be normal. Nothing will be

the same once they go back to their world. But we should do what we can to help them and prepare them and make sure that they get the benefit.

And a lot of times with TAP, I believe we are not providing the opportunity or providing the tools where they could easily equate what they perform, what they were trained in the military as to what is out there in the civilian world for them. And the civilian licensing agency, the certification agency, they are throwing--I am not saying that they are bad, but they are throwing roadblocks up there and saying that unless you are getting this piece of paper, you are not qualified.

You know, when we entrust 18-, 19-, 20-year-old young men and women that volunteer to serve for our freedom, we entrust them operating machines, tanks, planes that cost millions and millions and millions of dollars, how can we tell them that you are not qualified? We have to understand one thing. When the government trained this particular individual, he or she, to me, is the most disciplined, most learnable, most qualified individual, because one thing that we need to understand, they love this country. That is why they serve. And we owe it to them that we do everything we can to make sure that when they go back, they will have a good job. They will have a good career.

Chairman Murray. Thank you. I really appreciate that.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. I have a number of other questions, but we have a lot of members here, so I am going to turn it over to Chairman Miller.

Chairman Miller. If I could just follow on with the TAP issue, Friday, I was the reviewing official at Parris Island, the end of 13 grueling weeks, I am sure, for some young Marines--very grueling, right? It is my belief, and I want to know if you share the same belief, and you talked about TAP needing to be revamped and changed--13 weeks to make a Marine or the other boot camps, I mean, I do not think that just having them in a classroom for a day or two or however long the TAP program is is enough. Do you think there is a way that we can convince DOD to give a substantial amount of time at the end of service--I know that service member is focused on really one thing, and that is reuniting with their family and getting on with their life. But this TAP program is so important to that individual to prepare them for that transition. I would like to know what you and the Legion think about the possibility of making it not only mandatory, but a longer program.

Mr. Wong. Mr. Chairman, maybe we are talking about two separate issues here. When we are looking at TAP, TAP basically they were provided to members separating from the

service, and most of the time it happens at an installation. You are right in a lot of instances that the members will go there maybe for a week and TAP is only part of that one-week transition training or orientation.

What we learned--again, I refer back to experience with the committee with the Department of Labor--what we learned is that in a lot of installations, they will provide the TAP training a lot sooner, like six months out. They will offer the opportunity to anybody who wants to attend, they could sign up for it. And then that way, they will get the basic information, and then as they are getting close to the separation day or the retirement day, they will be reinvited back. By that time, they will have the time in between to learn or figure out what he really needs or what she really needs and able to ask some more direct questions or receive more direct help from the instructor.

And that, in several instances where we interviewed some of the recently separated members, they indicated that helps a lot, whereas you cram it in, let us say, one day, half a day at the end and the service member has a lot of other things on their mind to worry about that. They may hear it, but then they do not have time to sit down and allow that to sink in and realize how important in preparing their resume and in preparing himself or herself to be interviewed, and that may not be the top priority at that

time. So if we do it sooner and then give them an opportunity to come back, then I think that will be more helpful.

The other scenario that I could see is like when we are moving soldiers back from the war zone, a lot of them, we let them go home real quick and they may still have service obligations left, but we release them. There are different opinions about how do we separate them. We ask questions, are you okay, do you feel any different, and things like that, and we have to bear in mind, when you are young, you serve from your loved ones over a period of time, when you have the opportunity, if that is the only gate or offer that stands between you and your family, I will bet 99 percent or 100 percent of the time, that soldier will say, "No, no, no, no, no, I just want to be with my family."

And so I do not know how to fix that. I do not know whether we should keep them a little bit longer, mandatory. But that is something we need to look forward to, because part of the signature wound of this conflict or these two wars that we encounter is the PTS and TBI, and a lot of times if we could catch them early, we have a better chance of helping them. So that is something that we certainly have to look at closely and monitor that closely.

TAP, we need to change. We need to give them more time. But as far as getting the soldiers back to their

loved ones, we may have to think about what is the proper length for a cool-off period that they could basically--you know, back in World War II, it takes them a month to travel back, and that is the cool-off period. Now, they could be home in 24 hours or less. So if the doctor asks--the doctor may ask the right question, but the soldier is not hearing the right thing. The soldier is going to give the question that will get him out of the door and get on that bus.

Chairman Miller. I yield back.

Chairman Murray. Senator Boozman.

Senator Boozman. Thank you, Madam Chair and Chairman Miller.

I think the statement that you just said about answering the questions to get out of the door and stuff is so true. My dad did 20 years in the Air Force. It is not only true now, it has been true throughout the history of the services, and this is why we have problems with trying to determine eligibility as we go back and things, because of that very thing.

I really do not have any questions. I just want to congratulate you on being Commander and really look forward to working with you in the future, all of you. I want to commend you on being here. I cannot tell you how important it is. I know this is a difficult trip for many of you, but there is no substitute for being up here and meeting with

your members of Congress, meeting with us on the committee, and, again, expressing how important these things are as we move forward.

We have got two Arkansas folks here that we are very, very proud of the tremendous job that they do in Arkansas, R.D. Kinsey and Steve Gray. You guys wave your hands. Now, they are a little bit nervous. We have got a big football game with Alabama on Saturday--

[Laughter.]

Senator Boozman. and Arkansas essentially has the one school that everyone is focused on, so like I said, that is a big thing coming up. We will be really happy or really sad on Sunday and Monday.

But again, thank you for being here, and as always, look forward to helping in any way that we can.

Mr. Wong. Well, thank you, Senator. I can assure you that no trip is tough for the American Legion when it involves veterans. That is why we are here.

Senator Boozman. Well, thank you.

[Applause.]

Senator Boozman. I apologize for not being at the breakfast. I had the opportunity--and it is really what all of you all have served for--I had the opportunity to introduce a young man from Little Rock, Arkansas, who grew up in a very tough situation. He was the Southwest Honoree

of the Boys' Club. This young man--actually, his dad was on the "Most Wanted List," lost his life at an early age, left him in a very, very difficult situation, his mom. And the odds that he overcame are tremendous. But again, that is what it is all about, is providing the resources, and through your all's sacrifice, being in the military.

And the other thing I would like to say, growing up in a military family, I understand that it is not just you that are on serving at the time, but it is a family affair and we really do appreciate the sacrifice of your families, and then also the Auxiliaries that do such a tremendous job. When I go to the meetings and stuff, the ones that are actually doing the work, out there getting the coffee made and checking everybody in, are the Auxiliaries. So a special thanks to you all. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

Representative McNerney.

Mr. McNerney. Well, I want to thank the Chair and Chairman Miller, also, for having this hearing today and how important it is to allow Commander Wong to address the committee.

A lot of very important and very big issues have been raised here this morning--veterans' homelessness, the jobs issue, the backlog. These are issues that have the

committee's attention that we are working very hard on and listening to input from the VFW and from the American Legion and from all the veterans' groups that have insights on how to move forward on these.

What I would like to do today is ask a question that is a little closer to home but actually has implications on a larger scale if you consider it, and this is an issue that was brought to my attention by my good colleague and friend Mike Thompson from California.

Commander, I am sure that you are aware that as a part of the U.S. Postal Service's efforts to get its financial house in order, they are considering closing 3,700 Post Offices throughout the United States. One of these offices that they are considering is in the Yountville Veterans Home in Yountville, California, and the reason I am bringing this up is this is at a veterans' home. It serves veterans. It makes their lives easier, and I was wondering if you and the Legion has a position on the closure of this and similar Postal Offices throughout the country and how do you think that this will affect our veterans.

Mr. Wong. Sir, the American Legion is an organization that we operate by resolution by our NECs or by our national convention delegates. At this time, we do not have an official position to your question. However, American Legion being American Legion, we do have a lot of members

who work for the Post Office, and one of them is none other than our Chairman for the VA and R Commission, Mike Helm, so Mike, would you care to address that, since you work for the U.S. Postal Service?

[Laughter.]

Mr. Helm. Thank you, Commander. Mr. McNerney, the American Legion is an organization guided through the resolution process, like Fang said, and I have a lot of feelings about how the Postal Service could fix its financial future, but those do not matter here today.

What we are talking about is service, and most importantly for the American Legion, service to a special group of veterans. California Representative Thompson made us aware, just as he did you, of the situation at Yountville Veterans Home. That is one of the oldest in the nation and it currently has about a thousand veterans who reside there. They represent every era of warrior, from World War II to the present conflicts. Its residents range from those who are in the final stages of life to those who are trying to adjust to TBI and PTSD injuries from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Post Office in that facility serves these veterans and acts as a sort of town center. The Postal Service says closure of that office would save approximately \$1,000 per year, and the veterans would only have to cross the railroad tracks and a State highway to get to the next nearest

facility. This \$1,000 in savings is part of the \$15 billion in savings they need to find. The math does not make sense here, \$1,000 in savings per year to bridge a \$15 billion gap.

Why are we going to ask our nation's veterans, some with dementia and wheelchairs, to play a real-life Frogger game to get to the nearest Post Office? It seems we could cut out redundant Post Offices here on Capitol Hill and other communities before we need--

[Applause.]

Mr. Helm. --before we needed these veterans to make this sacrifice for \$1,000 in savings. The American Legion opposes this recommendation based on the impact it would have on these veterans.

Thank you, sir.

Mr. McNerney. Well, thank you for that answer, and while I still have the microphone and before I yield back to the Chair, I would like to recognize the members that are here from my great State of California. Would anyone from California please stand.

[Applause.]

Mr. McNerney. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

Dr. Roe.

Mr. Roe. I thank the Chairman for yielding, and

Commander Wong, thank you for your service and each and every veteran in here for your service. From one veteran serving veterans, it is a true honor to serve on this committee, the Veterans Affairs Committee.

We have already gone through our annual mourning in Tennessee of the Florida loss, so I feel your pain, Arkansas, if you lose next week. We do this every year.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Roe. Commander, you mentioned a couple of things, I think, that are very important. One--I am on the Education and Workforce Committee, in addition--is to be able to take those skills that are learned in the military and somehow--and we have talked about this--get those folks certified. Yesterday when I walked through the airport, I did not forget I was a doctor. That is a skill I have. And the same thing, veterans do not forget the skills they learned when they enter the civilian workforce. So I absolutely want to work on this, especially with EMTs and transferring that to college credit, so they can go ahead if they want to be a nurse or whatever, PT or whatever they want to be.

And on the issue of the Post Office, if it is \$1,000, I will write the check now for that.

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. Another issue, Commander, that you brought up

that is very near and dear to my heart--I live within a mile of a VA hospital, Mountain Home VA in Johnson City, Tennessee--is the issue of homeless veterans. I find that one of the most tragic things. Not only do you not have a job, you have no hope if you are homeless. So I know that General Shinseki is absolutely committed. I have spoken to him time after time about this. He is absolutely committed to doing away with homelessness in this country. It is a scourge. It is an embarrassment for me as a Congressman for that.

I also helped co-found the Invisible Wounds Caucus, and obviously, when you have a situation when you have more veterans dying of self-inflicted wounds than combat, we have a huge problem with that and we need to address that problem, and I believe VA is doing that. I think they are trying to do that.

The backlog, this is just my second term in Congress. You know you are a first-term Congressman when your two CODELs that you make are to Great Lakes, Illinois, when it is four-below-zero in January, and two, when you go to Detroit, as Senator Murray did, and look at these stacks. It looks like "National Treasure" when you pull back and see the reams of paper. It is incomprehensible. We have to do something with that, and one of the points you made is fast is not better. Proper and correct is better so you can

expedite those claims. So I think that is something we want to work on.

Oversight, our Chairman mentioned. We did an O and I investigation of some government set-asides for VA, for veterans--for veterans' jobs--and 75 percent of them did not go to veterans. That is ridiculous. I have never heard of anything like that in my life when I heard that.

And lastly, I want to just finish by saying that we had a--you mentioned the Continuing Resolution, and I think the maddest I have been--it is pretty hard to get me upset, and I will pass along a little personal information. As I practiced medicine for 31 years and took care of some of the sickest people in the world, I never took an antacid. Within six months of being in Congress, I take a Prilosec every day.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Roe. So if that tells you where we are coming from. But we had a Continuing Resolution debate the last of March, and when I found out that if we did not pass this Continuing Resolution, that soldiers in the field protecting the freedoms that we enjoy right here today, assembled right here today, would not get paid, I went ballistic. And, ladies and gentlemen, the first paycheck that ought to be written to anybody in the United States of America ought to be to a veteran, a soldier in the field protecting our

freedoms in harm's way. That is the first check.

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. And to your point, the last check that ought to be written ought to be written to the Congressman that will not make the first check right.

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. So I look forward to working with you all. It is a true pleasure. This is a bipartisan effort, as you well know, to do what is right for veterans, as you so eloquently said in your opening statement. If there is anything our office can do for any of you--and if you are a Tennessee veteran, would you please stand? I do not know whether any are here or not. I kind of snuck in. Thank you for being here.

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. I yield back. Madam Chairman, I yield back. Chairman Murray. Thank you. Representative Walz.

Mr. Walz. Thank you, Madam Chairwoman, for your leadership, and Chairman Miller, thank you so much.

Commander Wong, congratulations. It was great to have you out in Minnesota, and I also want to say what an honor and privilege it was to address the national convention. It is a singular honor, and thank you for that.

President Nelson, we are incredibly proud of you for

all the work and for bringing Minnesotans here to the Capitol. But I especially appreciate all the work you have done in your initiative on membership and engaging the public, and this is exactly the way we need to go. So thank you all very much for that.

Commander, your testimony was spot-on. It is music to my ears. I am very appreciative to it, and I think now, more than ever, that time is critical. You have addressed the needs that we know are out there, and as a nation, it is our job to attack them. And I want to be very clear. Our veterans are not victims by any stretch of the imagination. What we need to do is we need to keep the priorities, and Dr. Roe is exactly right. This is about prioritizing and getting things straight.

I am just--right now it is going to be a challenging time, but I think we need to be very, very clear. We talk about shared sacrifice and equal sacrifice. Now we are seeing some proposals on copays and some things like that, and as I stated out in Minneapolis, for veterans and for soldiers, that copay was paid at Chosin Reservoir, at Caisson [phonetic] and Sadr City, and the idea to ask again-

-

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. It is not about victims. It is about a shared sacrifice. No one was willing to go share that

sacrifice at the time when people volunteered or were drafted and went and did what they needed to do, and I think we as a nation do a disservice to the entire system to not have an honest discussion on that.

And nobody is saying that these are not challenging times, and nobody is saying that we should not get this fixed. But if you hear the platitudes, we had better follow through, and I think we have got some difficult decisions ahead of us now, but it is going to take those to make sure, because as I said, again, the American Legion goes far beyond an organization supporting veterans. The American Legion is a foundational institution protecting our national freedoms, going forward and advocating for work in our communities--Boys' State, Legion-based ball, the things that build our communities. And so these decisions as they come to national security are going to be very, very challenging and I want to make sure we get them right.

I spent a lot of time this summer looking at this issue as we move forward dealing with the National Guard and Reserve, which the American Legion has been fabulous on partnering, making sure G.I. Bill benefits and things. But we have a decision that we have an operational Reserve force that is the best in the world, the best we have ever seen, and we have to be very careful on a national security perspective what we do with them, if we pull that back. So

I appreciate your commitment in getting it.

I want to highlight on two things. I think you are absolutely right. When we had the summit last week and Tim and the rest of you were there, the one thing we heard from employers is this unemployment rate certain is not because they do not want to hire veterans. Our employers want to do it. There are many great initiatives amongst the private sector, but they are pretty scattershot. I think we heard there are 1,400 different initiatives and things like that about trying to streamline and get these forward.

I think you are absolutely right, and one of the things I heard from that is this idea of transferring and crosswalking military experience over into the civilian sector. And there are some great groups out there. I just want to mention one.

I represent Southern Minnesota that has the Mayo Clinic. I would like to see organizations like the Mayo Clinic, when they are advertising a position for an EMT, put 68 Whiskey on there, and everybody knows what that means, and we know that that is there and that is the qualification and that those skill sets--and that the Mayo understands that if you have a 68 Whiskey MOS, you are fully qualified as an EMT and we do not have to get something else. Those are things that we can engage the private sector, engage State licensing agencies. We have made some progress in

Minnesota on CDLs and things like that. But you are absolutely right. I think that is the direction we need to go.

I wanted to just ask one question of you, Commander. Of all these agencies, whether it is Labor, and I think you are right of bringing them all together, who do you think is best suited, because I still have this problem, and I come back to again, we are so siloed up that the DOD's job is to defend and fight wars. The VA's is to care for veterans. The Labor Department cares on those statistics. Who do you think is best to take this?

Mr. Wong. Well, taking care of the veterans' community is everybody's job. It is all the departments, that they all have part of it and they need to bring that energy to the table and work closely together with open communication, with servicing and taking care of the veteran in mind. So I do not--I am not going to say that we need to create another super-department to pull that in. That is not going to happen, and it should not have to be that way. Each department, when it was created, they were given a specific task of part of the function to take care of this nation. So I believe each department should step up to the plate, understanding their responsibility concerning the veterans and then work with the other departments. And if there are differences, they should go ahead and resolve it quickly and

get to work.

I would like to make one comment. I understand, you know, with the super committee looking at all the fiscal decisions. It is going to be tough. It is going to be tough. And do not get me wrong. I believe that the veterans know that and we understand how important it is to keep this nation strong. And we will be happy to participate and provide our share as long as it is fair.

What kind of worries me is a couple of days ago, I was reading the paper and there is a newspaper reporter reporting about the upcoming battles with all the budget cuts and all that, and unfortunately, that individual referred to a sacred area that is going to be looked at. So I was interested. I looked at that. What are we talking about? He is referring to the medical benefits and retirement benefits earned by military personnel--

Mr. Walz. That is right.

Mr. Wong. --as social welfare. I resent that. We are not here looking for a handout. We earned this right--

Mr. Walz. That is right.

Mr. Wong. --and you folks should protect that right for us.

Mr. Walz. That is right. Hear, hear.

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. Well, I could not agree more, Commander. As

a personal side note, I had the opportunity--I lived for several years in Foshan in Guangdong, for your hometown in Guangzhou--in Foshan. My Guang'an is not good, so--

Mr. Wong. Yes. I could detect your Minnesota accent.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Wong. But congratulations to you. I yield back.

Chairman Murray. Thank you.

Representative Runyan.

Mr. Runyan. Thank you, Madam Chair and Mr. Chairman.

I apologize for being late. I was on the other side of the Capitol talking about some serious job issues dealing with ANWR and how we are going to move forward and try to become energy independent and not have to depend on foreign oil from people you guys went over and put your lives on the line to defend us against.

Commander, I agree. You guys paid up front and that is something I think a lot of people forget about. You stepped up, put your life on the line and sacrificed a lot for what we have and our abilities and the freedoms we have here.

I was fortunate enough that Chairman Miller asked me probably, what, the second week I was elected to chair the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorials. So dealing with that and having the opportunity to sit down with Secretary Shinseki on numerous occasions, a very dedicated, driven man, and the one word that keeps coming

out of his mouth is the accountability, specifically in the disability claims department. I think he gets it.

I think the biggest thing is, and we kind of touched on it and my colleague, Mr. Walz, kind of touched on it, everybody is out there with their own stovepipe protecting themselves, and you see it throughout the military. I deal with it specifically in my district, having Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst being a joint base now, and everybody is out there defending themselves instead of thinking, what is the best thing to bring each other together to move forward. And I think sometimes the VA has an issue with that. We do see--you can see the model of the bureaucracy that is there. We have to figure out a way to work together within the VA to get the results for our veterans, instead of sitting here spinning our wheels all the time.

I think we are moving forward. We had a mark-up last week on an accountability aspect of getting these claims right the first time. If they are not done right the first time, what is the deficiency? And take these claims adjustors that are getting it wrong and get them educated on what they are doing wrong so we can get on with it, because most of these claims are from our previous conflicts. What is coming down the road in this past ten years of conflict that we are not ready for? It is going to continue to pile up on us.

I look forward to that challenge. I was honored when the Chairman asked me to chair that subcommittee and knew it was going to be a challenge, and we also deal with the unfortunate situations we had of many years of mismanagement over at Arlington, and we are tackling that. I believe the management team in place over there has got it right. There is so much that they uncover on a daily basis that I think it weighs on them. A lot of times, people look down on them, but I think what Ms. Condon is doing over there is the right direction. She has got a Herculean task ahead of her.

I thank all of you guys for your service to this great country. Anything I can do, my door is always open and I am here fighting for you. So thank you, and Madam Chair, I yield back.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Thank you.

Representative Reyes.

Mr. Reyes. Thank you, Madam Chair and Mr. Chairman, and Commander, thank you for your testimony and great answers.

In fairness of full disclosure, I, like my colleague, Mr. Walz, are members of the American Legion, so you are our commander and we appreciate the work that you are doing. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. Reyes. And I apologize, but I do not know if anybody else is a member of the American Legion, but this morning is important, not just to the Legion but to veterans everywhere, and I wanted to personally thank you, Commander, as a member for the great job that the Legion does in getting information out to its members, and duplicated by the way that our members share that information, at least as has been my experience in my community of El Paso, Texas, home of Fort Bliss, White Sands, and Holloman.

I wanted to recognize the members that are here from Texas, if they would either wave or stand up. Thank you all. Thank you. I appreciate that.

[Applause.]

Mr. Reyes. I wanted to make sure that we understand, and everybody does, that we are in tough budget times, but like you, I feel we should, as a Congress, take care of the veterans first and foremost, and then take care of the men and women in uniform, as well, in the same priority, and everything else after that.

There is a piece of legislation that is being proposed, and I signed onto it because I think the intent is good. What I am not comfortable with is that we have been advised that the--and it deals with--let me explain it. It deals with a veterans' identification card. A lot of veterans have, for many different reasons, have asked a lot of us on

this committee to consider doing legislation to have them have a veterans' identification card. We are going to be looking at that, but there is currently, because of the financial situation, there is a proposal to charge the veteran for that identification card. I do not agree with that, but the only way to make sure that we have a debate and hopefully take away that charge is to be part of that legislation.

So I would just like to give you the opportunity to comment on that, because, like you, I feel that the veteran has already contributed and we should not be charging them, certainly for a veterans' identification card. So can you please comment on that, because I think it would be important to get your perspective.

Mr. Wong. Absolutely. You understand, at this particular point, we do not have a resolution on this particular issue.

Mr. Reyes. Right.

Mr. Wong. We could look into it. However, I have a better solution for this and we could cut away a lot of time. All they have to do is join the American Legion. They have their American Legion card. What better identification card do you have?

[Laughter and applause.]

Mr. Wong. So if you can propose a bill and make it

mandatory that every veteran must be a Legion member, we solve the problem.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Wong. Madam Chairman, if I may, I would like to make one statement. We really appreciate the service Secretary Shinseki and the VA provide us. They provide the best care bar none, make no mistake about that. But being a watchdog sort of organization, we also need to make sure that the money and the efforts are spent wisely. So that is why we may be--you might think that we are a little critical, but it is important because it involves the veterans, our brothers and sisters that need help. So that is the issue.

Now, earlier this morning, we heard from the Under Secretary from VA and she talked about a lot of the initiatives that are ongoing right now, ultimately that will take care of the claims problem, you know, with cutting down on the days and the accuracy. So we are excited. We look forward to working with them closely, because they do, I mean, we rely on them a lot on a daily basis. So we look forward to closely working with them to get this issue resolved. It is not just a VA issue. We need to help them to get this particular problem out of the way.

Chairman Murray. Well, thank you very much, Commander, and your constructive criticism is absolutely essential for

all of us to be able to make sure we are serving our veterans as best as we can.

Mr. Reyes. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Chairman Murray. Senator Begich has just walked in. Senator Begich.

Senator Begich. I will not delay. I know you are getting close to the end. But first, I just want to acknowledge an Alaskan that is here, Jimmie Foster, his service as a National Commander. Mr. Foster lives in Anchorage, where I was Mayor, and recently relinquished his responsibilities as the American Legion National Commander, and an incredible job he has done. So I just want to acknowledge him while he is here, but also--absolutely. Good job.

[Applause.]

Senator Begich. Any time we have an Alaskan in the room, we love to brag about them, especially when they reach the national level.

But, Madam Chair, I will not take any of your time. I know my staff is here, so I am going to get some good feedback of the testimony and the conversation that has gone on here. With Alaska the highest per capita of veterans, 77,000 veterans, we take the work of the Veterans Committee both in the Senate and the House very seriously, and the work that needs to be done in Alaska, not only in the urban

areas but the very remote areas. So it is always a pleasure to be, at least for a second or two or longer at times, with such great people that are here. So thank you, Madam Chair. Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Chairman Miller, do you have any other issues that you want to bring before the committee?

Chairman Miller. No.

Chairman Murray. I do not, either, and I want to thank you, Commander, for sharing the American Legion's views with us, and I especially appreciate all of your membership who are here today and remind us so well with your presence of the importance of the issues that we deal with on this committee. So I look forward to working with all of you in the weeks and months ahead as we strive to keep our commitments to our veterans. Thank you very much, Commander.

And with that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:23 a.m., the committees were adjourned.]