

Ranking Member Richard Burr

Statement of Senator Richard Burr

November 5, 2009

Hearing on VA and Indian Health Service Cooperation

Thank you Mr. Chairman. Welcome to our witnesses this morning.

We are here today to ensure that the resources of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Indian Health Service are being used to deliver timely, quality, and coordinated health care services to Native American veterans.

Mr. Chairman, Native Americans have the highest record of military service per capita when compared to other ethnic groups. I believe this record of service to nation and country is rooted in their culture and traditions. Courage, duty, honor, sacrifice...these are values that make our military men and women second to none...and they are the values that run thick in the culture of so many Native American tribes. And when they return from military service with medical needs, they should expect a well coordinated healthcare system.

Today, I hope to learn how VA and the Indian Health Service coordinate the health care for those who are enrolled in both systems. For example, the tribal hospital in Cherokee, North Carolina has 700 enrolled veterans, 140 of them are also enrolled for VA care. I hope to learn whether the remaining 560 veterans are aware of the VA healthcare benefit they may be entitled to.

This is just a snapshot of an issue that I'm sure exists for North Carolina's 7,600 Native American veterans and others across the country.

VA and IHS need to do a better job in sharing information to determine whether a patient is dual-eligible. This information will lead to a more efficient allocation of resources, better planning, and well-informed sharing agreements.

In 2003, VA and the Indian Health Service developed a Memorandum of Understanding outlining five mutual goals:

1. improve access to quality of care;
2. improve communication;
3. encourage the development of partnerships and sharing agreements;
4. ensure appropriate resources are available; and
5. improve health-promotion and disease –prevention services.

Today, I hope to learn where we are in meeting these important goals, and what areas still need improvement.

It is extremely important that these goals be taken seriously. For too long, when it has come to fair dealing with Native Americans in this country, our actions have not matched our words. We must not let that be the case here, especially when we're talking about those who have worn the uniform.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to the testimony and, again, thank you for calling the hearing. I yield back.