

OPENING STATEMENT Senator Patty Murray

Senator Murray's opening statement

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

January 23, 2007

Chairman Akaka and Senator Craig, thank you very much for holding this hearing. This is exactly the type of oversight and accountability we need to have to make sure our service members get the services they need when they come home.

And I can tell you, we've got a lot of work to do. From the veterans I've talked to, it's clear that we do not offer them a "seamless transition" from the battlefield to the homefront, and that has really got to change.

If we had a seamless transition, why are so many veterans coming home without jobs? Why are so many veterans unable to get housing? We have new reports out today that say that up to 1,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan are homeless today. That is unacceptable.

If we had seamless transition, why are veterans having to wait six months to see a VA doctor for primary care?

Why are so many veterans having trouble getting help with PTSD? On Friday, in fact, the Army's top medical officer said that some returning troops are not getting the help they need, and to me that is unacceptable.

If we had seamless transition, why are so many Guard and Reserve members unable to get help from efforts like the Transition Assistance Program?

Why are our Vet Centers overwhelmed with veterans seeking help?

Why do our veterans have to wait two-and-a-half months to see a mental healthcare professional when they return from combat?

We don't need a hearing to discover if we have a seamless transition. I know we don't. And we don't need this hearing to find out if the Pentagon and the VA are working together enough. I don't think they are.

We do need to use this hearing to find out from our witnesses what they're doing about it and how they are going to fix it.

And I can tell you one thing. The veterans I talk to don't really care about Washington, D.C. talk ? they care about the reality they see in my state and across the nation ? whether they can get a job, whether they can get healthcare, and whether they get the benefits they need, and that should be the test we all use.

If we do want to make progress, Mr. Chairman, I think we have to understand how we got here so we can change course.

How did we get to a point where four years into this war we have a two-year backlog for VA benefits, mental healthcare that is inaccessible, and long lines to see a VA doctor? We better understand how we got here, so that we do not make the same mistakes moving forward.

Mr. Chairman, the first problem is that the Bush Administration did a miserable job planning for the aftermath of the war. The failures we've seen in the planning on the military side are mirrored by failures of planning on the VA side.

We all know, the VA has some of the best employees in the world, and we're very proud of the work they do.

But for too long we've had a VA leadership that has not done an adequate job planning for the many veterans this war is creating. And the VA is still woefully behind in its projections.

Last year, the VA planned to see 110,000 veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. It ended up seeing more than 185,000. For this year the VA projects to see 109,000 veterans ?fewer than they saw last year. That does not make sense.

We need an accurate plan from the VA that spells out the real needs and how the VA intends to meet those needs.

The second problem is the Bush Administration has never made a commitment to fund veterans' healthcare as an essential part of the cost of war. This war is being paid for by supplementals. But those supplementals do not including funding for veterans healthcare. Funding for veterans healthcare has gone up ? but it's still not tied to the real needs. We need to get the VA and the White House to match the funding to the real needs, so our veterans are not behind.

The third problem, Mr. Chairman, is that we have not been able to get straight answers or real numbers out of the VA. The GAO has found ? in report after report ? that VA has misled Congress, concealed funding problems, and based it's projections on inaccurate models. That has to change because our veterans are paying the price.

With all due respect to our witnesses, other officials from your agencies have sat at that very same table and assured us everything was fine ? when it certainly was not. I was assured many times that the VA had the funding it needed ? only to learn later that the VA had a \$3 billion shortfall and the agency had falsified budget savings over many years.

So today, Mr. Chairman, I hope we hear from Dr. Chu and Mr. Mansfield that you realize that there are serious problems on the ground and that you are committed to solving them.

Impact of a Surge

We are having this hearing at a very critical moment. The President has proposed escalating our military involvement in Iraq.

Just four days ago, the VA secretary told the Houston Chronicle that sending more than 20,000 troops into Iraq will not have an impact on the VA's backlog of claims. Secretary Nicholson described the impact of the surge on the VA as ? quote ? "minimal."

Well, I stood here in the Senate with nine veterans last week from the Iraq war and they had a much different picture of that. They believe that the President's escalation will further degrade our ability to care for our veterans.

Today ? without the surge ? veterans are waiting for the services that they've been promised. If we're not meeting veterans' needs of today, how can we keep the promise to troops who are sent to an escalated war?

State of the Union

Tonight, the President will deliver his State of the Union speech. During last year's speech, the President did not mention the word veteran once. I hope tonight, finally, he does talk about our veterans, and acknowledges that our VA is overwhelmed and under-funded, and outlines his plans for meeting our troops' needs when they return home.

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