

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Chairman Phil Roe
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

Joint Hearing to receive the legislative presentations of Paralyzed Veterans of America; Association of the United States Navy; American Veterans; Vietnam Veterans of America; Non Commissioned Officers Association; Gold Star Wives; National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs; Wounded Warrior Project; and, National Guard Association of the United States

**Thursday, March 9, 2017
10:00 AM
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room G-50**

Good morning. Thank you all for being here today. It is a great privilege for me to be here with Ranking Members Tester and Walz to welcome you to this morning's hearing. Unfortunately, Chairman Isakson is on medical leave and won't be able to join us. We all wish him a speedy recovery and look forward to seeing him soon.

I want to welcome our witnesses today, starting with:

Mr. Al Kovach (KO-VACK), Jr., the National President of the Paralyzed Veterans of America;

Rear Admiral Garry E. Hall, the National Executive Director of the Association of the United States Navy;

Mr. Harold Chapman, the National Commander of AMVETS;

Mr. John Rowan, the National President of Vietnam Veterans of America;

Master Chief Vince Patton, III, President and National Commander of the Non Commissioned Officers Association of the United States of America;

Ms. Misty Brammer, a Member of the Government Relations Committee of the Gold Star Wives of America;

Mr. Randy Reeves, President of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs;

Lieutenant General Michael S. Linnington, the Chief Executive Officer of Wounded Warrior Project; and, last but not least;

Major General Gus Hargett, the President of the National Guard Association of the United States.

Being here this morning is an honor for those of us who sit on the on the Veterans' Affairs Committees. This hearing gives us the opportunity to hear from you about what we need to do to improve the lives of veterans.

I want acknowledge the vital role each of your organizations play in assisting our Committees. We need to hear from you because you have the pulse of the veteran community. You give us valuable insight into what veterans actually experience when they access the VA. Simply put, our Committees could not ensure that veterans receive the service they deserve without your help.

I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to recognize and extend my gratitude to your organizations' auxiliaries – whose members commit countless hours to improving the lives of our nation's heroes.

Before we begin, is there anyone here from my home state of Tennessee?

Would you please stand or raise your hand and be recognized?

Thanks to you, and to everyone here, for traveling to Washington to ensure that the voices of our veterans are heard.

I'd like to take a moment to discuss one of my top priorities as Chairman, and that is the issue of accountability. I recognize that most of the time, the vast majority of VA employees work hard to provide veterans

with quality healthcare, accurate claims processing, and other services, such as, educational benefits and home loans guarantees.

At the same time, there are a few employees who consistently don't do the right thing. We've seen it time and again, with manipulated wait time data, physician malpractice or negligence, and mismanaged funds.

Unfortunately, current law makes it very difficult to hold these employees accountable. That is why I introduced a bill, the VA Accountability First Act, that will make it easier for the Secretary to remove employees for poor performance or misconduct. The Committee marked this legislation up yesterday and I'm pleased to say we'll be on the floor of the House next week seeking passage.

But our work will not stop there. I intend to focus on strengthening VA's healthcare system, which must include an integrated network of community-based services. Our Committee heard from the Secretary Tuesday night about this and I'm confident we'll chart a course together to ensure veterans have the access to quality medical care they need, unencumbered by bureaucratic red tape.

Further, we will remain focused on what seems to be a perennial problem, VA's disability claims and appeals

backlog. I am concerned that from May 2016 to February 2017, the number of backlogged disability claims rose from 76,000 to almost 100,000—a nearly 33% increase. Not only must VA find a way to reduce the backlog, but it must also improve its accuracy rate so that veterans receive the correct decision the first time.

As you know, appeals reform is a priority for all of us, and in a perfect world we wouldn't be worrying about appeals because veterans would receive accurate initial rating decisions. However, until that day, we must continue to move forward with developing a timelier and more efficient appeals process that better serves our veterans.

It is also important to take a look at our educational programs, including the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, to ensure that our returning service members have access to the best training and educational programs.

In order for meaningful reform to take place – for these and other programs – we need your help. We need to find the right solutions that will best serve our veterans. I look forward to hearing your views and advice on how we can best do this.

I will now read a statement from my good friend
Chairman Isakson:

“Welcome to the nine military and veterans service organizations and their members who are in attendance. I regret that I am unable to attend the hearing today. Per my doctor’s orders, I am at home recovering from a February 20 back surgery. I look forward to returning to Washington, D.C., next week with a new and improved back to continue working harder than ever on behalf of veterans.

As I said at Secretary Shulkin’s confirmation hearing, we’re about making health care more available to veterans through care in both the private sector and VA. We don’t want to privatize VA. We want to empower it. I look forward to working collaboratively with you and other stakeholders to help improve the care and services for our veterans.”