

SENATOR RICHARD BURR, Ranking Member

STATEMENT OF SENATOR RICHARD BURR

Hearing on

VA and DOD Collaboration: Report of the President's Commission on Care For America's Returning Wounded Warriors; Report of the Veterans Disability Benefit Commission; and other related reports

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and welcome to our distinguished panelists. I appreciate you being here this morning. You've all spent many hours with one thought in mind -- improving the lives of those who've served our country in the Armed Forces.

You've given us some policy suggestions I believe can help shape how we care for our servicemen and women for decades to come. For your commitment to them and for your advocacy on their behalf, I say thank you.

Let me begin by making two very broad points:

First, we are here today to review recommendations on how best to deliver health care, disability compensation, and rehabilitation benefits to those who have been injured in military service to our country.

As we look at our strengths and our inefficiencies and in getting the job done right, we have to keep in mind that the opportunities for today's professional warrior are fundamentally different than those of earlier generations. Today's all-volunteer force knows that injury, even serious injury, need not be an impediment to continuing on with a productive, fulfilling life.

I'm amazed when I hear over and over how some soldiers with very serious injuries are able to return to their units, or how they plan to resume fully active lives, go to school, and get a good job. Modern technology and modern attitudes about disabilities not only give them that hope, they appropriately give them that expectation.

Our job, then, is to give these brave men and women the tools they need and to remove the stumbling blocks in their way. In fact, they demand that from their government.

Today's soldier chooses a military career, and their expectation is the same as it would be for any professional working in any organization across America: If one is hurt on the job, one expects quick, effective, and relatively hassle-free physical, vocational restoration and supportive services from the employer.

My second point is about our system of benefits and services for our veterans, servicemembers, and their families. And rather than use my own words I'll read from the Dole-Shalala Commission report:

The Commission learned that, on the whole, we are a generous and giving Nation when it comes to providing for our service members and veterans. Benefits include health care for veterans through the VA...for retirees through the military health system and through civilian providers through TRICARE. In addition, we pay retirement and disability benefits, and provide for education, adaptive equipment, employment hiring preferences, and more. The total cost of these benefits was well over \$127 billion in 2006.

So, as of last year, we had a budget of over \$127 billion to assist veterans and servicemembers-- more than double what it was just a decade ago. I highlight this information to suggest that the challenges facing many veterans today have as much to do with confusing, bureaucratic programs operated by many different offices of the government, as they do with the lack of benefit programs or the lack of resources.

I'll never shy away from providing our military men and women and our veterans with the resources they need. But I expect, and these citizens expect, that these resources will be used effectively to deliver needed benefits and services.

There is a saying that goes . . . if you aren't part of the solution, you are part of the problem. So let us commit to talking today about meeting the challenges ahead of us.

Secretary Shalala and Senator Dole, when you briefed us two weeks ago, I was pleased to hear that officials and staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense

were beginning to implement 90 percent of your Commission's recommendations. Mr. Chairman, I commit to and look forward to working with you to conduct oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that the best of these recommendations to improve veteran care are implemented without delay.

Senator Dole and Secretary Shalala, you also said in our recent briefing that 10 percent of your Commission's recommendations require legislative action. You called this "the hard part." Of course I'm speaking about your recommendations to reform the disability compensation system. As you know, the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission has also spent the better part of three years looking at the "hard part." I expect everyone calls it the "hard part" for good reason.

I am fully aware that reforming the disability system will require a large, upfront cost. But if done properly, it would also be an investment. Chairman Akaka, I pledge to work with you as the Committee works to better the lives and well-being of those wounded in defense of the United States. Knowing the character of the men and women of our Armed Forces, it is an investment that comes with little risk and great reward.

One final thought before I conclude my statement. Almost every Member of this Congress has had the opportunity to visit with Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen who are fighting in the War on Terror. In my own conversations with them, I can't help but be inspired by their love of country, their commitment to duty, and their extraordinary optimism in the face of adversity.

We've all referred to the men and women who served with Senator Dole in the Second World War as "The Greatest Generation." And, my encounters with today's heroes remind me that greatness, when we talk about risking one's life for the freedom of others, is of every generation. Greatness belongs to the few whose deeds merit that title.

To all who have served in combat, to the families who have sacrificed so that their loved ones could serve the rest of us, and to all who have been injured or who have died for our freedoms, you have my enduring respect and gratitude. No matter when you served, or on what continent you fought, you have made the most supreme sacrifice. For that, and I know I speak for everyone in this room today, we are grateful.

Again, thank you to our distinguished guests this morning. I look forward to hearing your testimony.

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