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HOUSE-SENATE JOINT HEARING TO RECEIVE

A LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

Tuesday, March 6, 2007

House of Representatives

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

And

United States Senate,

Committee on Veterans' Affairs,

Washington, D.C.

The joint conference met, pursuant to call, at 9:30 a.m., in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Bob Filner [Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs] presiding.

Present: Representatives Filner, Michaud, Herseth, Hall, Hare, Berkley, Salazar, Rodriguez, McNerney, Space, Walz, Buyer, Boozman, Turner, Bilbray, Lamborn, Bilirakis.

Senators Akaka, Sanders, Craig.

The \*Chairman.\* Good morning. I apologize for my being late, and Senator Akaka, the Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, is on his way. We thank you for being here. We thank all of you for being in Washington.

This is a rather eventful time for veterans, and you come at a perfect time. Isn't it that we reinstated the joint hearings so that you can be here.

Not only will the VFW be involved in helping us with our budget and our discussions, but this is an important venue for--to hear the Commanders' legislative agenda, for you to see Congresspeople in action. Sometimes that's one word; sometimes it's two words. Thank you.

Ms. Berkley is one of the fastest amongst us, so we thank you for nothing gets past the gentle lady from Las Vegas.

As I said, it's been rather an eventful several weeks in Washington and around the country on veterans. Things that you and your staff, Commander, have been talking about for years are now on the front page of all newspapers in the nation. They are on the minds of everybody in America. I

think this is a test that this nation has to pass. The Executive Branch has to pass it, the Congress has to pass it, and with your help we will.

We have to say that our veterans have to have the completion of a contract that we made with you. We made a contract. We have not lived up to all its terms. You all know there are good and bad in the VA system. There is wonderful medical care. At some places there is incredible research going on, surgeries, prosthetics, spinal cord. All this is wonderful. And there are so many dedicated people in our system.

But the system is threatening to fall apart at its seams. We have enormous needs still from the Second World War. Vietnam, 200,000 Vietnam Vets are on the street tonight. That is a disgrace. Agent Orange, Persian Gulf War illness, and now PTSD, traumatic brain injury.

We have to care for every veteran in a manner worthy of their sacrifice and worthy of this nation. And it is clear we have--we are not doing it. You have been telling us this for years. And you have asked for a budget to help do that. And we have not gotten to your budget.

So we have resources that we have to give. We have to have new levels of oversight and accountability for a major-- from the second biggest bureaucracy in the--in this nation. And we need to raise the morale of those working for the VA as it--if they get the proper resources to do their jobs.

I have asked, in addition to the budget that is being discussed in the Congress, for an addition to the war supplemental that Congress will be considering next week. I think we need a warrior's supplemental in addition to the war supplemental.

And I have asked the leadership of my party, and that's why I was late this morning trying to argue this point, that we have to make a significant show that we have heard what the American people are saying. We have heard what the veterans are saying and our returnees from Iraq are saying. And give them the care that they deserve.

I asked for an additional \$5 billion, \$3 billion going to a PTSD, \$1 billion for traumatic brain injury. And this is not just the care and research, of course. And \$500 million to, once and for all, clean up the 600,000 claim backlog that we have in our system. And half a billion for

updating the GI Bill for the 21st century would include-- which would include the access to the GI Bill of our Reserve and Guard Units who are doing so much of the fighting these days in Iraq.

I want to add to that, and I am going to need your help, Commander, and your membership. I think we need some--that is a lot of money to spend on these items. I think there has to be some oversight on how that money is spent. I think that oversight should be provided by veterans, your membership that has so much experience, and some health professionals, independent of the VA itself.

So that is going to be my proposal as we go forward for the funding of the war. I look forward to working with you and hearing your testimony today. But now is the time to act. There is--we don't--we--this is a test for America. Everybody in America knows that we have not been living up to our commitment. And we have to do that job.

Thank you for being here at this time. I would yield to the--to the Ranking Member of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Mr. Buyer.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* Thank you, Mr. Filner. And, Commander,

good to see you again. Thank you for coming in the fall. The look back, look ahead hearings that we did with the 19 VSOs and MSOs in the fall, set a good baseline for the Administration to work from. And I want to thank you.

Never in the history of this Committee have we doubled the access of VSOs and MSOs to this Committee. And I am most hopeful that Chairman Filner will invite everyone back in the fall. He has not said he would or not. But I am hopeful we do that, because the purpose is is laying that baseline. So the Administration picks that up during the formation of their budgets from which we then receive.

The whole key here i--to my comrades is the timeliness of your testimony. And the key is how could we get the input from 19 VSOs and MSOs before we do the budget views and estimates? And that is why I changed the process last year. I am more of a man of substance than theater. And it is extremely important that we were to get that information early.

This year, we only receive the testimony of one organization. And that was the DAV. And now we did receive the testimonies on the Independent Budget. The American

Legion Commander came and testified for the first time. But trying to get everyone in ahead of time, I had asked the Chairman to bring everyone in and to get that testimony. He declined to do that and held a hearing on Filipino veterans instead.

So what we--what do we have to do? By Thursday, we had to turn in our budget views and estimates. So we appreciate you being here. But, Commander, your testimony now is not timely. And that is the challenge that we have to face.

But I do want to--everyone to know that when we went through the President's budget--first of all, let me compliment the Secretary, because when we went--when we went through the--a few years ago, when I took the--my experience and expertise in healthcare modeling, from having done the military health delivery system, and said, "All right, let's get into the modeling issues of the VA." We learned that there was some bad inputs and stale data being utilized. And the Secretary acknowledged. And he said, "I take ownership of these budgets." And from that date forward, he has increased over \$16 billion. And so let us acknowledge what he has done.



With regard to the budget and which he sent us, from this side of the aisle, we went through the President's budget with a fine-toothed comb. And what I--Commander, what I would like to do is share with you. We have some increases above his request. And I would like to share them with you.

With regard to the--under VHA, on medical services, i.e. workload, it is \$100 million increase. With regard to mental health, it is a \$200 million increase. On long-term care, it is \$80,200,000 increase. With regard to prosthetics, it is \$65 million increase. TBI and polytrauma, we have a \$50 million increase. OIF/OEF health services, it is \$100 million increase. Case management, \$10 million; blind rehab services, \$25 million. Dental care is \$100 million. I will comment on that in a second. The MCCF subsidy, to bring it to a realistic baseline, is \$60 million; emergency services, \$60 million; medical prosthetic research, an increase of \$51 million; medical facilities, \$80 million.

And a real differential between our proposal and Mr. Filner's is is that we go into major construction. And you brought that up in the fall. I did not forget that. And there are many different construction, major and minor, for

which are on our priority list. But we need to get on with it. And your message was loud and clear. And all of yours also Mr. Wallace.

So we personally fund the projects from the prior years, i.e. Los Angeles, California, with regard to seismic corrections, \$103,864,000. Fayetteville, Arkansas, is a clinical addition of almost \$60 million. And then we did the advance planning, which is five percent. And we did that in Tampa, Florida, the Polytrauma Expansion and Bed Tower, \$8 million. In Seattle, Washington, we did seismic corrections, \$1.8 million. In Bay Pines, Florida, in-patient/out-patient improvements of \$6.8 million. And in Palo Alto, California, the ambulatory care seismic corrections of \$14 million.

We also did the advanced planning on Charleston of \$36.8 million. The Secretary said you put it in there, we will get on with the Charleston model for which we are also then leveraging down in Louisiana, which we also discussed in the fall. So it goes beyond that. That is VHA.

We get into the NCA with regard to the National Shrine program on VBA. I think we are in agreement with the majority in adding about 1,000 FTE and going after the claims

backlog.

The total--our recommendation this was about \$1.4 billion above the President's number. So I know what your testimony was on the Independent Budget. This is a--this was a pretty big number. And we are not that far off from where the majority also has recommended.

I would like to recognize some fellow Hoosiers, the State Commander Larry Shaw from Marion, Indiana, is here. The Junior Vice Commander, Rick Faulk of Indianapolis, the State Adjutant Quartermaster, David Havelly of Greenwood, and Legislative Committee Chairman Tom Burks from Indianapolis is also here. We appreciate your being here.

I want to pay compliments to you and to your post across the country. The VFW's military--your program, in particular, your Operation Uplink. Congratulations. And the VFW's Military Assistance Program is also an excellent program.

Let me also pay a graceful good morning to your National President of the Lady's Auxiliary, Linda Meader, because there is always a strong woman that makes the men look good. And so welcome.

My--I grew up, my grandfather and father were very active in the American Legion. My mother was President of Indiana Auxiliary. And so as a young man, I remember in the back where the guys were in the alley doing the barbeque and having a little libation. Shoeing me out of there, because they loved to tell their stories. And I would have to go back to the kitchen. And the ladies would always give me a towel to do dishes. So I learned up--I learned--I grew up doing dishes at the Legion post.

The other thing I would like to share is--before I close, two things. Number one, Mr. Wallace, you came out of the corner like a bear. And rightfully so with regard to the data loss, i.e. security lapses. At the same time, this Committee was challenged. The Independent Budget was opposing our centralization of the IT systems.

We have progressed. And the Secretary has taken the issue on on centralizing the IT systems. We the Committee, and I know, Mr. Wallace, you also acknowledge that the security lapses are going to occur until we can perfect that system. And we are giving the Secretary the tools to take care of this. But I am just as challenged as you are,

Commander and Mr. Wallace, with regard to these continued security lapses.

It is--it is totally--it is unacceptable. And so we are doing everything we can to cover and make whole if, in fact, there is a loss.

The last--well, let me just--let me just hold here. And I will cover the other during the Q&A, since Mr. Craig has arrived.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Buyer. I would like to recognize for an opening statement, the Chair of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, the gentleman from Hawaii, Mr. Akaka. Welcome.

Senator \*Akaka.\* Thank you very much. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Aloha. I welcome all of you here today. In particular I give a warm aloha to Commander Gary Kurpius, his senior officials, and all the VFW members and Ladies Auxiliary members. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you with special warm aloha. Also to Nick Young, State Commander, and his colleagues. If you are here, will you please stand quickly and his colleagues, Richard Wong, George Barlett, George Enchetta, Ben Akihito, Norbert Enos, Jerry

Enos, Paula Komikow, Anita Akihito, and Betty Morris who have traveled all the way from Hawaii, from my home state of Hawaii, to Washington, DC. Aloha. Thank you very much for being here.

It is a real pleasure joining Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House Committee, my friend and Ranking Member, Larry Craig, and all of my other colleagues for this very important event. I am delighted that we have reinstated the joint hearings and look forward to meeting some of you today.

VFW has a long and proud tradition of public service. Your many charitable works and advocacy on behalf of veterans, are truly exemplary. And I applaud you for all that you do.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to ensuring that we fund VA so that the department can furnish the necessary healthcare, rehabilitation, and compensation to those who have served. Anything less, is a breach of our fundamental obligation to those who wear and have worn our nation's uniforms.

Although VA is one of our nation's top healthcare

providers, many veterans are waiting far too long for both primary and specialized care. Unfortunately, VA lacks efficient resources to meet the growing demand.

In the budget process for this coming fiscal year, Democratic colleagues on the Committee and Senator Sanders who with--who caucuses with us, have recommended to the Senate Budget Committee that VA receive an additional \$2.9 billion for VA healthcare over the President's budget request.

I am also concerned about VA's ability to provide benefits in a timely and accurate manner. The wait for benefits and adjudication is way too long, as many of you know. Now is the time for VA to hire and train staff to meet present and future demands of the system.

My Democratic colleagues and I have recommended that VBA be authorized an additional \$50 million for compensation staffing and training. Even as Congress debates the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must ensure that VA is given the resources needed to carry out its mission, not only for our newest veterans and those Guard and Reserve members coming home from conflict, but for veterans of all wars.

Commander, I share in your commitment to ensure a seamless transition from military to civilian life for our newest generation of veterans. VA must be an active partner with the Departments of Defense and Labor, so that our newest veterans do not fall between the cracks.

I apologize, Mr. Chairman and all of you, but I must excuse myself. I know the members of the VFW will understand fully. There is a hearing right now in the Armed Services Committee where I also am a member, focusing on Walter Reed.

I visited Walter Reed last week with Armed Services Chairman--Committee Chairman Levin and other Senators. There is much work to be done both with respect to Walter Reed itself and to the overall matter of VA DOD cooperation. I am pleased that the White House is taking this situation seriously. And I look forward to working with the President's Commission.

I, again, thank Commander Kurpius and the membership of the VFW for your service and dedication to our nation and its veterans. Thank you all of you for being here. Wish you well in this year. And I do that with much aloha. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.



The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Senator. Thank you. I would now recognize the Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Senator Craig.

Senator \*Craig.\* Well, Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. And to all of our Veterans of Foreign Wars, welcome. We are so pleased to have you with us this morning.

As is the tradition and it is certainly my pleasure and pride to do, let me introduce a few fellow Idahoans from our Gem State, our Department Commander, Gary Ellis of Hammett, Adjutant and Legislative Committee Member, Bob Finney of Boise, and our Quartermaster, Dan Johnson, also of Boise. Gentlemen, thank you--well, there is Dan--for being here. We appreciate it a great deal. I have a wonderful working relationship with them out in our state of Idaho.

And to you, Mr. Commander, a special thanks for you being here this morning. You and your predecessor have been advocating for America's Veterans of Foreign Wars over the years down through almost the centuries now. And that is a proud and responsible tradition. And you have our respect for it.

My Chairman, as you know, and Danny has just said and is

leaving, is going to the Armed Services Committee in the United States Senate for a hearing on Walter Reed. I think it is important for us to underline that. It isn't the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the Senate that is holding that hearing. It is the Committee that is responsible for our active military. Walter Reed is an Army hospital. It is not a Veterans' hospital. But we are extremely concerned about the care of those who are soon to become our veterans.

I say that because I and all who serve on the Veterans' Committees in the House and the Senate, have taken increased pride over the last several years as the veterans' healthcare delivery system has grown to be rated as the number one healthcare delivery system in the nation. And that is something we can all be very proud of. And it is something that VFW can be proud of, because you have been the advocate. That doesn't mean it is perfect. It doesn't mean we quit advocating. It doesn't mean we don't critically observe and watch and monitor, for all the right reasons.

But I grow increasingly frustrated when those who choose to blow the line are now saying our veterans are not getting served. Some veterans are not getting served. But when you

build one of the finest healthcare delivery systems in the nation, as we have, by the very reality of that lines form.

When I was doing a radio interview yesterday and I said, "I don't see anybody fleeing veterans' healthcare. I see quite the opposite. I see people standing in line to get in." While we don't like lines, it is representative of the fact, in my opinion and the opinion of professional healthcare deliverers around the country, that you as veterans have something to be very proud of. And that is the healthcare delivery system that is known as veterans' healthcare.

We, you, and I, and this--these Committees jointly have done a lot of positive work over the years. And we will continue to watch, be involved, and work very, very critically on all of these important issues. You have been part of the Independent Budget that has served as a great comparative between the work we do here, and the work you feel is necessary in providing for veterans in our country.

But I do want to point out one thing that is always frustrating to me when I look at the Independent Budget, and I look at our work and what we must do, and the dollars and

sense that we obligate for veterans' services and healthcare. I don't think Congress can ignore, as the Independent Budget does ignore, the \$2 billion or more in collections that can reasonably be counted in the budgets today. And I believe it would help us all here in Congress to be more accurate in the Independent Budget's crafting if we looked at the reality of the incoming collections that VA has on an annual basis. Two billion dollars, that is in the budget. That is part of what we spend. And that is the reality of how we have to appropriate dollars.

Nor can we ignore the fact that at present spending rates, VA's budget will double nearly every six years. That is the demonstration of a phenomenal obligation of this country and our citizens to the men and women who serve and have served in uniform.

And that will be a phenomenal task in the coming years with all budget constraints and all budget realities to continue that rate of spending into the out years to sustain the quality of healthcare, and the delivery system we have, and to meet the new needs and the new responsibilities of those veterans coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan that are

going to be unique and different from veterans who were in Vietnam, or who were in Korea, or in War II or the seven or eight or ten remaining, so we think, from War I.

Again, to all of you, thank you so much for being here and the advocacy work you do on behalf of America's veterans. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Senator. Commander, I know the--our colleague from Alaska, Congressman Young, wanted to be here to introduce you. He could not be here now. And I think Mr. Wallace will do the introductions. And then we will hear from the Commander. Thank you for being here.

Mr. \*Wallace.\* If I may, Mr. Chairman, prior to introducing the Commander, introduce some of our national officers that are here. Members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I am honored to have the privilege of introducing the national officers of the VFW, and our Ladies Auxiliary, and the VFW past commanders and chief. Members of this Committee, please understand and be assured that these are the individuals leading our organization.

We now boast more than 1.8 million members in the

Veterans of Foreign Wars, plus 600,000 plus in our Ladies Auxiliary. Mr. Chairman, please allow me to ask those to be introduced to please remain standing. And I wish to request the audience to hold its applause until all have been introduced.

The National President of our Ladies Auxiliary, Linda Meader, from the great state of New Hampshire; the Senior Vice President of the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, Virginia Carmen; and Junior Vice President of VFW Ladies Auxiliary, Dixie Hild, from Nebraska; National Secretary/Treasurer of the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, Connie Atkinson, from Missouri; National VFW Ladies Director of Legislative Service, Gwen Brown, from the District of Columbia; the Commander-in-Chief's wife, Nancy Kurpius, from Alaska; Senior Vice Commander and Chief's wife, George--Gloria Lisicki, from New Jersey; Adjutant General's wife, Becky Kent, from Arizona; Quartermaster General's wife, Judy Maher, from Missouri; Surgeon General's wife, Carolyn Self, from Maryland; wife of the Chief of Staff, Alice Minnick, from Alaska; wife of the Inspector General, Cheryl Paulson, from North Dakota; wife of the Assistant Adjutant General of Operations, Cecilia McNeill,

from Virginia; wife of the Assistant Quartermaster General, Theresa Greene, from Kansas.

The National Officers of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Senior Vice Commander and Chief, George Lisicki, from New Jersey; Junior Vice Commander and Chief, Glen Gardner, from Texas; Adjutant General Allen F. "Gunner" Kent, from Arizona; Quartermaster General Larry Maher, from Missouri; Judge Advocate General Ken Burton, from Texas; Surgeon General Bill Self, from Maryland; National Chaplain Charlene Cobb, from Wisconsin; Assistant Adjutant General John McNeill, from Virginia; Assistant Quartermaster General Bob Greene, from Kansas; National Chief of Staff John Minnick, from Alaska; Inspector General Wayne Paulson, from North Dakota; Director of VFW National Legislative Service Dennis Cullinan, from Virginia; Director of National Veterans Service William Bradshaw, from Maryland; Chairman of VFW National Legislative Committee this year, Bob Craft, from Wyoming.

Past Commanders and Chiefs of the VFW, Jim Mueller from Missouri; John Fergus from Tennessee; Ed Banus from Connecticut; Jack Carney from Florida; George Kramer from Illinois; Bob Curio from Arizona; Art Felwalk from Indiana;

Jim Goldsmith from Michigan; Walter Hogan from Wisconsin; Cooper Holt from Tennessee; Alan "Gunner" Kent from Arizona; Jack Mahan from Montana; Jim Nayer from Texas; Tom Pouliot from Montana; Larry Rivers from Louisiana; Ray Sisk from California; John Smart from New Hampshire; Ray Soden from Illinois; Paul Sparrow from Massachusetts; Norman Staub From Kansas; John Stein from Kansas; John Stong from Minnesota; and John Waslick from Ohio.

We are also pleased to have with us guests from the Russian Federation Committee of Warrior Internationalists. They are veterans of the Afghan War. They are headed by General Aushev, who is a hero of the Soviet Union. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman and members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, it is my distinct honor and privilege to introduce a true veteran's advocate. Gary Kurpius was elected Commander and Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars on August 31st, 2006, at the VFW 107th National Convention held in Reno, Nevada.

Gary served in the U.S. Army from 1967 to 1969. In Vietnam, he served with the 541st Transportation Company



providing convoy security throughout the central highlands. He was awarded the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal with four bronze stars, and the Republic of Vietnam Service Medal.

A native of Minnesota who moved to Alaska, Gary has been an All-State Post Commander as well as an All American District Commander, and also served in--as an All American Department Commander in 2001.

He brings a unique quality in the position of Commander-in-Chief, because he served as Department of Alaska Service Officer for more than 20 years, taking care of America's veterans and shepherding them through the VA bureaucracy on getting their just, due entitlements.

Gary completed a four-year millwright apprenticeship and graduated in 1977 from Minnesota's Lake Superior State College in Duluth. He also attended Vermillion Community College.

In 1999, he received the Alaska Community Service Medal. He was selected Vietnam Veteran of the Year for St. Louis County by President Jimmy Carter and recently completed a two-year term as Governor Tony Knowles appointee to the

Alaska Veterans Advisory Committee.

Mr. Chairman and members of this Committee, Gary Kurpius brings unique qualities and sincere commitment from the battlefield, to the advocating for America's veterans as a Service Officer for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, to the position of Commander-in-Chief. He understands the issues veterans face when they go to the VA for help.

It is my honor and distinct privilege to present to the members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees the Commander-in-Chief for the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States from the great State of Alaska, Gary Kurpius.

**STATEMENT OF GARY KURPIUS, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, VETERANS OF  
FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES**

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you very much. It almost makes me want to stop while I am ahead. Mr. Chairman, I have asked that the complete written statement be included in the record, please.

Chairmen Filner and Akaka, Ranking Members Buyer and Craig, Members of the House and Senate Affairs Committees, distinguished comrades of the VFW and our auxiliaries, and honored guests, before I begin, I would like to say to all of you on these Committees that we look forward to working with you and your hardworking staff over the next two years to improve programs for America's true heroes, our nation's veterans and to put veterans first.

I am honored to be here before you today representing the 2.4 million men and women who make up the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

For more than 20 years, I served as the Department's Service Officer in the great State of Alaska. I helped a large number of veterans to navigate the bureaucracy of the Veterans Benefits Administration. It was a difficult job. But one with intense rewards.

As I look at the disability claims process system today, it is clear that something is broken. It takes on average six months to get a rating decision. Six months while disabled veterans wait for benefits that many of them need to care for themselves and their families. This is completely unacceptable.

Worse, VBA's accuracy rate is inexcusable. By their own measurements, they commit a serious error in over 100,000 cases in each. Delays have a real human cost. We need you to correct this.

To fix these problems, we ask your Committee to do two things. First, we need your oversight power to get to the heart of these problems. Veterans need to know that VA's plans are for managing the ever-growing claims backlog, which consists of over 800,000 compensation pension and education claims and appeals.

The second thing we ask is for proper funding. We need dedicated resources so that VA can hire sufficient staff to manage this crisis. We were pleased to see the Administration's request for about 450 new VBA raters. But this isn't nearly enough. And there is no guarantee that

this funding will be there long term.

We are also pleased to see the Senate Committee's recommendation to provide money for an additional 663 employees above the President's request. That would surely go a long way towards fixing these problems.

The VA is staffed with 235,000 employees who truly believe in their mission of caring for those who have won the battle. But they cannot do it without proper resources that are allocated on time. But they also need proper leadership, management, and true accountability.

These fixes are important, because VBA is the gateway to all of VA. Timely decisions are essential so that these men and women can get treatment for their service-connected disabilities, not to mention their eligibility for certain other VA benefits for them and their families.

As you know, we strongly oppose the legislation that allowed veterans to hire lawyers early in the disability claims process. We are greatly concerned that the Administration's budget request includes no funding for the program, which is sure to have a high administrative cost. Congress enacted the law, so you will be held accountable if

the new program makes problems worse.

For those currently wearing uniform, our future veterans, all these improvements to the benefits system are essential. Along with that, we must do more to create a truly seamless transition. What we are simply asking for is that those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have the ability to easily move back into the roles of productive members of society.

It is not just about the VA's computers speaking with DODs. We envision a system that completely tracks our servicemembers from the day they enlist, conveying their personnel and medical files along with them to wherever they are stationed.

When they are separated, we want our servicemembers' files to be automatically sent to VA, facilitating their healthcare and disability claims, making the transition smooth and flawless. This will provide easy access to needed information throughout their lives.

Achieving this goal is going to require strong leadership from both departments but also strong leadership from you. We will hold you as accountable for the results as

we do the Administration.

On a related note, I should mention our disappointment with the recent loss of veterans' sensitive data in Birmingham, Alabama. Congress made big changes last year in VA's IT programs. But without in-house accountability, America's veterans may never be able to rest easy.

Data security isn't just an IT issue. Though, as the recent events of southern Nevada have demonstrated, their medical files were discarded into a dumpster without being shredded. This cavalier attitude with sensitive data is a failure of leadership. And we need you to make it right.

Another important transition issue concerns the mental healthcare needs of our returning servicemembers. Unfortunately, as we have recently learned in the tragic suicide of a veteran in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, the system is not working as well as all of us would like or as our veterans deserve.

VA reports that they have treated over 200,000 returning servicemen and women. And that all have received screening for mental health issues. Of those, about 60,000 have been determined to have some sort of mental health issue, with

about 39,000 having been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Those numbers are staggering. And they will only go up. It is a problem that must be managed now. Proper assessments today will help to make VBA's job easier in the future. But more importantly, they will give these men and women and their families the treatment and counseling services they need to overcome these problems. No one goes into battle and returns the same person. Mental health is a serious result of war that Congress must address.

We must also do more when the wounds of war are more evident. Advances in technology are creating thousands of severely wounded warriors who have--would not have survived in previous conflicts. This means we must redouble our efforts in such areas as prosthetic research.

Further, we must ensure that VA's polytrauma centers are fully funded and that all VA facilities are able to properly care for these special patients.

VA must do more research on traumatic brain injuries. Blast injuries are the signature wound of this war. And have accounted for half of all battle injuries. VA needs to



research these injuries, especially their long-term effects. We cannot afford to let our feet drag on traumatic brain injuries as we have with other signature illnesses from previous conflicts.

The VA healthcare system is so vital, because of these unique needs of veterans. Numerous studies have singled them out as the nation's leader in high-quality healthcare. With your help, VA can continue to be a leader.

We are pleased with the increases for healthcare contained in the President's budget request. Although it falls \$2 million short of the \$36.3 billion we requested as part of the Independent Budget, it is a good first step. As in the past, we look to you to improve upon it.

I should mention that we are delighted with the views and estimates released by the Senate VA Committee last week. The \$4.8 billion increase in veterans healthcare acknowledges the challenges the system is already facing and the challenges on the horizon.

The reason we have asked for the large increase is because of the number of veterans now accessing the system, which includes over 200,000 OEF/OIF veterans and millions of

veterans from previous wars. If funding doesn't match demand, quality of care will erode.

We have got a system that is independently allotted for its success and efficiency, so the money is being well spent. We appreciate your efforts to properly fund VA in the past. And we trust that this advocacy will continue this year.

The VFW continues to oppose the enrollment fee and copayment increases proposed in this budget. We appreciate Congress' strong opposition of past increases. And we stand with you to defeat them again.

If I were to make one challenge to you, it would be to pass an on-time VA budget. We all want VA to operate efficiently. Yet, year after year, we ask the managers of the VA system to deal with a budget that comes months late, making good planning impossible.

VA must have an ensured funding process, providing the system in on-time budget that enables VA to treat all veterans who want to use it. Their current funding process doesn't allow that. It is clearly broken. And we need to fix the system to put veterans first. We look to you.

Before I conclude, there are a few other important

issues I would like to bring up. The first has been a VFW priority for a number of years. We are committed to a GI Bill for the 21st century that would pay the full cost of attendance at any college or university that a veteran chooses. Our vision is for a renewal of the World War II GI Bill, which improved the lives of veterans. And is credited with transforming society by creating the middle class. It is an opportunity to invest in America that we must make.

We must also improve upon the Guard and Reserve benefit. As the nature of their service changes, we must tailor their education benefits to acknowledge their greater contributions. We can and we must do better.

Another important aspect of that transition to a civilian life is employment opportunity. Veterans need a strong, effective, and accountable veterans' employment and training service. And they need a vocational rehabilitation program that prepares them for meaningful employment. Veterans deserve training that leads to real careers and not just a temporary job. We are adamant that all eligible veterans retain their veterans' preference rights.

This Congress must also do everything it can to ensure

that the jobs of our citizen soldiers, the Guard and Reserve, are there for them when they return from battle.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States calls on you today to use your influence to encourage corporate America to create programs that give our returning heroes real options for employment. There is the potential for a wonderful partnership there. And you can really make it happen.

I would be remiss if I didn't reaffirm the VFW's unwavering commitment to obtaining the fullest possible accounting of all our MIAs and POWs. Until every one of those missing is returned, or if they paid the ultimate price their remains are brought back, neither the VFW nor this nation's mission is truly complete.

Finally, while not falling under exclusive jurisdiction of these Committees, we must see to the well being of those who now serve in uniform as well as their families and dependents.

Last Friday, I visited Walter Reed and personally met with military leaders to express our disgust with the deplorable situation at Walter Reed. We must ensure that

nothing like this ever happens again.

Six months ago, I came before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and pointed out problems with the Military Rating Review Board and the delays in treatment that many injured servicemembers face at Walter Reed. Yet these problems linger today. We cannot allow these wounded warriors to be treated so poorly. We will and we must do better.

In the days ahead, this Congress will be debating many issues concerning the war in Iraq. The VFW urges you and your colleagues, on both sides of the aisle, to never cut funding for troops deploying or being deployed to a war zone.

Please. Please ensure those that you send to war have the best equipment and the strong support of this Congress. Give them the tools necessary to complete the mission you sent them on. The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and the American people will stand for no less.

Mr. Chairman, the VFW sincerely thanks you for the opportunity to testify today and for the restoration of these important joint hearings. Our members truly value the opportunity to present our legislative priorities. And we

appreciate the candid dialogue and the special role we have within Congress.

I would be happy to answer any question you or the members of this Committee may have.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Commander.

[The statement of Gary Kurpius appears on p. ]

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The \*Chairman.\* Although I wonder about someone who found the Minnesota winter so mild you had to move to Alaska. I can't quite understand.

I would recognize for questions, Mr. Michaud, the Chairman of our House Subcommittee.

Mr. \*Michaud.\* Thank you, Commander, for your testimony. And I want to welcome you here along with your comrades who are here with you today as well as the auxiliary. So thank you very much for participating in this process.

I would also like to welcome the folks who came down from Maine. My vision is not as good as it used to be. So if you are in the room would you please stand. Evidently they haven't made it here so. And it is not because of the snow, because they are used to the snow so. But I do want to welcome everyone here today for participating in this process.

I would like to thank the Chairman for once again establishing these joint hearings. I think they are very beneficial. And we will enjoy the comments that are made.

I also agree that Ranking Member Buyer has a good comment as far as a lot of these are after we do our views and estimates. And hopefully we will be able to also have hearings in the fall, so we can get prepared for this. I have no problems have dual hearings, because I think it is very important that we hear from our veterans' community.

I have a couple of questions. And, Commander, you had talked about the backlog. And a lot of the backlog is occurring because of what we have seen for our veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

And when you look at the number of new positions that it is going to take that all the views and estimates have required new positions, however, new positions will require time to fill those positions, and train them, and hence we will still continue to see a backlog occur.

What are your comments or what have some of the VSOs in different states think about if we put forward a program similar to what we did in Maine when we had a need for State employees. We brought back retired State employees, actually for less, because you didn't have to pay all the healthcare benefits, what have you, because they are retired.



What are your thoughts about bringing back if some of the VBA employees who retired might be willing to come back to work for a year or two years, so we can work on this backlog that we currently have? Do you have any thoughts or comments on that? Or have you heard any things from your VSOs in other States?

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* No, sir, I have not heard of that. And, I guess, I would not be opposed to that. But I think I would be looking at that as a band-aid effect.

You have to look at the workforce overall in the VBA and the VA in general. And most of those individuals are act-- getting close to the retirement age. We need to take and look into the future here. And we need to hire enough people, because these are very technical positions, the ratings specialist. And it takes them two, three, or four years to get up to speed.

And by the time you train these, you are going to have so many of the older people retiring out. We have to get some of these young Iraq/Afghanistan veterans into the system, because it is almost like the Vietnam veterans there now. And we have to look long term at this. And we need to

get some young people in there.

We need to get them trained, because the attrition of these people just retiring out, it won't--it won't help in the long term bringing these people back. It may help in the short term. And it would be worth a try. But I--the long term, you must get the young--some young employees in there and get them trained.

Mr. \*Michaud.\* No, I agree long term. But we do have a short-term problem as well. And this is one area to take--I think, take--solve some of the problems in a quick manner, because they are already trained. And during that rehiring process, at least you will have some people there who will have the experience and willing to do it.

My other question and when you look at Walter Reed, it has definitely brought to light the fact that our infrastructure is in terrible shape. And I am--what I have heard from folks on the VA side is there are a lot of capital needs.

For instance, in vision one, I have heard from employees that the total capital need, if they have the ability to do what they had to do, is well over \$600 million. They only

have \$25 million. What--have you have heard of any problems out there as far as the actual capital needs within the VA system? And how soon--

Mr. \*Wallace.\* I don't have the numbers. But I believe it was in the independent budget for the capital needs. I don't have the expertise in that in the capital budget.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you, Mr. Michaud. We don't have all the numbers with us. But we have testified recently to the fact that VA is only recapitalizing at a rate about a half a percent. You have things, the Presidential Task Force, the Booz Allen Hamilton, and other industry standards indicate that that should be happening at a rate of five to eight percent.

What VA is doing right now means the average VA building would have to be--stay effectively in use for 155 years. Obviously, that is not going to happen, so something needs to be done. And it has to start happening now.

There has also been a tendency for VA to use--it is nonrecurring maintenance monies to provide direct healthcare, because VA is in an exigency mode right now. They need to provide the healthcare, so they are tapping into their

nonrecurring maintenance funds. But, again, the capital assets deteriorate as a consequence of that.

Thank you, sir.

Mr. \*Michaud.\* But I see my time has run out. So I want to thank you for responding to my questions. And I am also very pleased to hear you, Commander, say that you were going to hold us accountable.

I know over the last four years a lot of promises were made. And I am glad you are going to hold each and every one of us accountable for what we have said over the last four years that I have been here anyways, so thank you very much.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you. Mr. Bilbray.

Mr. \*Bilbray.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, I would like to spend the next two hours introducing all the members from California.

The \*Chairman.\* You are granted the time.

Mr. \*Bilbray.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, I--Commander, I would like to just sort of have a dialogue with you. The issue that is sort of overlooked a lot of times is this issue of the GI Bill. And not only the huge

service debt to veterans with making education opportunities to a segment of our society that normally wouldn't have that access, but the huge benefit to the general population of what happened with the GI Bill.

I know for one that probably the teachers that made the most impact on me were GIs who came back from Korea, got back into education, and was able to then come into high schools and colleges and bring real-life experiences into the classroom that, I think, even the Chairman will admit, as being somebody that went from education back to education, that there was a real benefit to students of having teachers that didn't just go from college, university, back into the school. But actually had been out in real life.

Do you see that there is an opportunity for us to work together to really make an emphasis of not only the educational opportunity and bring the experience of the GI to benefit the general society by making a program available.

But also looking at the fact that there are many people--there was actually a separate program the GI's don't think about that actually creates a fund to educate people to fill gaps that are so bad and so needy in our society that we

import people from other countries to fill those gaps.

Is there a possibility we may want to work together to not only serve the GI with education, but fill those huge gaps out there that are so big that we are importing people, and using those special funds that have been acquired through those importation systems, to help serve the GI and the general population?

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* I am sure that there is something that could be worked out. And we would be willing to work with the Committee on and whatever suggestions they had. Or we could form some people here and to work with you.

In general, that helps--let's say if it is--even the--are you suggesting the non-veterans, people from other countries here, that we are going to be educating? I didn't quite understand that.

Mr. \*Bilbray.\* No. What I am saying is that we actually have policies in this country that import engineers, different type of--

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Okay.

Mr. \*Bilbray.\* --personnel. Medical personnel.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Right.

Mr. \*Bilbray.\* And because we don't have them in this country. And, in fact, you will hear again and again, and rightfully so, money is a major determining factor. And everybody knows it is always great to promise something. But you have to pay for it.

We actually have large pools of funds set aside specifically to train Americans for certain type of professions, because we don't have enough Americans doing it now that we are importing.

That fund could be made available specifically for veterans, to give veterans the first shot. And encourage them to fill gaps that are so huge that we have to modify our immigration policy to accommodate the private sector that goes onto it.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* I believe we would support that all the way, you know, in training veterans. And a select few like that, you know, that would be just wonderful. You could work on different vocational rehabilitation training programs I'm sure. Different things with businesses.

I just testified that there are many opportunities, different roads, different avenues that we can go down to

provide training for our--for our servicepeople.

And the GI Bill, where--what we are looking for basically is that for all tuition, books, everything to be paid like it was in the World War II one.

Mr. \*Bilbray.\* Well, Commander, let me just say, because I don't know where he is today, but I would like to thank you and all of you in the name of Mr. Ross, my eighth grade history teacher. Because I don't think I would be in Congress today if it wasn't for that veteran coming back and teaching me what I needed to know. And I needed to learn in eighth grade. Thank you very much for the privilege of serving.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Bilbray. Mr. Hall.

Mr. \*Hall.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Commander, and officers of the VFW, Ladies Auxiliary, everybody, and our honored guests assemblage. I would like to thank you for being here and thank the Chairman for restarting these joint hearings. I thank Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Buyer, and Craig.

As a new member of the Committee, I found last week's



hearing to be very informative. And I am learning a lot from your comments today. And I would like to take a minute to welcome those members who came from my home State of New York, James Longendyke, National District Council Member from Kingston, New York; New York Department Commander Donald Doell; New York State Legislative Director Carl Rhode; and anyone else who I am neglecting, I am sorry. But I welcome you all. I appreciate your work. I look forward to working with you in the future.

I won't comment more on Walter Reed. We all know that this is unacceptable. The public overwhelmingly rejects this kind of treatment of our soldiers. Whether they are fresh back from the battlefield or whether they have joined the ranks of veterans who are under VA care, it is not acceptable. And it is a national disgrace.

As is the homeless rate in West Chester County, which is in my district. One of the most--I think five most affluent counties in the country and the most affluent in New York State, where 20 percent of the homeless are veterans. And it is an embarrassment and a disgrace that any member of the military who serves our country in uniform has to deal with

these problems without the help that they need.

Whether that help comes by the way of vocational training, transitional housing, bankruptcy protection, we--I as a member of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, will be doing my best to make sure that the help is provided.

And also as Chair and I am humbled to be--as a freshman, to be Chair of the Subcommittee on Disability Benefits and Memorial Services, we are going to make it our top priority to reduce the backlog of 540,000 or 600,000 or whatever the latest figure I have seen floating around. It is too many. If it is up in the hundreds of thousands, it is too many backlog claims, not to mention the time lag that an appeal can take is another disgrace.

So, you know, if it is money to hire claims processors, if it is improving the technological handoff from one side of the VA to the other, or from DOD to VA, we need to do that. We need to be as good at doing that as we are at dropping a smart bomb on a target.

It is a--you know, it is something what--we have proven this country can excel when we put our minds to it in some areas. And this is an area we now need to excel in. And we

will be working hard to make sure that happens.

Commander, I want to ask you what the VFW thinks is necessary to better diagnosis and treat PTSD? What you believe are the long-term costs of not treating the condition early? And how can you change people's mind-set and make them realize that brain injuries are just as serious as physical injuries. And get our young men and women returning from service to recognize the need for examination for brain injuries when they return.

I am talking about the ones that aren't obvious. There are a lot of low-grade concussions and brain injuries that masquerade as--sometimes as PTSD. And so those are my questions to you. Thank you.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* I think that was a multiple one. Let me try to go to the first one here.

Mr. \*Hall.\* Would you like me to repeat them one at a time?

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Long-term effects on the PTSD and what it costs to society, I think, you know, is something that wasn't recognized for a long time. And it has cost society a lot of money. It has cost families a lot of money. The

personal loss within families of the effects of PTSD and what it has cost society.

And the traumatic brain injury, we don't know what that is going to be. And that is why we are asking that you push that the Veterans' Administration gets on top of that immediately, so we don't have an instant replay of PTSD.

PTSD is still costing this society. You don't even want to measure it in a monetary amount. What about in personal loss to families and so forth. And it was caused to these veterans for serving this country, affording us our freedom. And then they come back and them and their families had to pay such a terrible price and are still paying it today, so many of them.

So I just urge and ask you that we stay on top of the post traumatic--stay on top of the post traumatic stress disorder. But we also take a very, very hard look at the traumatic brain injury one. And really stay on top of that one.

Mr. \*Hall.\* Thank you, sir.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Hall. Mr. Boozman.

Mr. \*Boozman.\* Thank you, sir. Thank you for your

testimony. And thank you for being here. I especially want to thank the people from Arkansas that are here. I am not going to have you call the hogs. But I do appreciate you being here.

Let me just go through, Ruben Tamariz, Mike Nuckles, Victor Kehr, Bud Kelly, A.M. Armstrong, Wes King, and my right-hand man, Lieutenant Colonel Steve Gray. We really do appreciate you all being here. Yes, stand up guys.

But I--but I want to thank all of you all. You know, I know that for many of you this is a tough trip. But it is so important for you to come and literally us have a standing-room-only crowd here. You know, it makes a statement. And it really does show support for your Commander.

As you make your visits today, look your Congressman in the eye and your Senator saying, you know, this is important to us. This is what we expect you to do. That really does make a difference.

I appreciate in your opening statement, Commander, you mentioned, you know, right now we are going through kind of an unprecedented deal. We are getting ready to vote on a supplemental bill that authorizes the funding for our troops.

We have a group right now that would like to basically not authorize that money, you know, to go to fund the war. And I don't think that is going to happen because of groups like you that are being so vocal. And the American people are not going to stand for that.

Another route is being bandied about though to try and basically put things in place, such that it is very difficult for our commanders to reinforce our troops, you know, through various maneuvers. But I think, you know--I think the one thing that we learned in Vietnam is is that you don't politicize war. You don't make it such that Congress micromanages these situations. Can you comment a little bit more about that? And just be very clear about what you all feel about it.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Well, one thing we know, I believe, as the war is going on over there, that is kind of the center of where terrorism is. And I am afraid if we don't contain it and stop it over there, it probably will be back on our shores again.

They killed almost 3,000 Americans. And it would have been 30,000 or 300,000 or 3,000,000 if they would have had

the means. Those people do not like us. And if we can stop it over there, I think it would be so much better for America.

Mr. \*Boozman.\* Thank you. Okay. And I would really encourage you, as you visit with your Congressman, again--you know, this maneuvering through funding. Look them in the eye. And tell them that that is totally inappropriate.

Like I say, Congress does lots of things. And it needs to be involved in lots of things. And we are the funders. But as far as micromanaging and placing obstacles in front of our commanders and stuff, again, to me and it sounds like to you, that is totally inappropriate.

You mentioned the GI Bill. And in the Subcommittee that I am the Ranking Member on, and with Ms. Herseth's leadership as Chairman, we are going to work really hard to look at that and go forward. And I think we have an excellent chance of doing something in that regard. So that certainly is a priority of mine. And I know that in visiting with the Chairman, that is a priority of hers.

The other thing is that we worked hard last year. We are going to work hard this year, again, through the

leadership of our Chairman to put veterans to work. I know how important that is.

You know, these individuals that are coming back severely disabled to not just give them a job, but to get a career for them. And we do that, I think, for a number of different reasons. You know, it is the right thing to do.

Also, though, if we can provide men and women as they come back with a job and the ability to make a living, support their family through education in the workplace, we are going to have a lot less trouble down the line. So, again, I appreciate your leadership in that regard too.

Thank you very much.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you. Mr. Hare is next, followed by Mr. Walz.

Mr. \*Hare.\* Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you Commander and all of you today for being here. The one good thing about being a freshman member of Congress--and there are a few good things. You don't get a very good office. But one of the things you do get is you get the opportunity sometimes to say things. And some people would



say I don't know if that is appropriate. And you learn by making mistakes.

This morning I am going to just say a few things. And I want you all to know that when I ran for this position, I ran on veterans, and the healthcare, and the benefits.

I am appalled at the way this country has treated our nation's veterans. I think it is sad. I for one cannot fathom raising deductibles, you know, Commander. I can't see that. I can't see upping to \$750 that you talked about.

I sat at one hearing in the--and we were talking about a different bill on Filipino veterans. And one of my colleagues said, "Well, do you think we can afford it?" My opinion with veterans is that is not a question to ask whether we can afford it. The statement is--and you are absolutely right to hold our feet to the first. For every member of this House, irregardless of what side of the aisle you sit on, it is not a question of can we afford it. The statement is we cannot afford not to do this.

I am--I may be new. But I am a veteran myself. And I took over, as you know, for a member of this Committee named Wayne Evans who spent a great deal of time--and I want to--

helping veterans out. And I said to him that I may be sitting farther down the road than he did, but I have a big mouth. And you probably today all have had a chance to hear a little bit of that.

But let me just suggest this to you. Whether it is Walter Reed, or whether it is 600,000 backed up claims, or whether it is the ongoing treatment of veterans when they come back and not having the facilities for them, or the total disregard of the service that they have done, or whether it is on post traumatic stress.

I have three outpatient clinics in my district and a Vet Center. I have to tell you every single one of those clinics are completely full. And thank God for each and every one of them that we have. But we need more of those across this country, not less. We need more.

I also want--so before--I guess after I am done making my three-and-a-half minute statement, I want you to know that when you come to see me, I want you to all know I am going to be an easy lobby on these issues, because to me this is--this is a no-brainer for veterans.

I just also want to--if I can, and then ask a question.

I want to say something about--you know, Bob Wallace is here today. I have had a chance to meet him. He does a wonderful job representing the organization, he and his staff. And, Bob, I am just honored that you are here today. And I look forward to working with you in the months to come.

Let me just say--ask you one quick question here if I could, Commander. You said--you talked about meaningful health evaluations and real counseling, in your written testimony, for our returning veterans.

If you could, what are your recommendations for improving mental healthcare access for returning veterans? Because, again, it would seem to me we are woefully unprepared for the numbers of people that we have coming back as it is. So I am anxious to hear from you what you think we can do with what we need to be doing.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* I think DOD probably has to step up to the plate and take a little bigger bite before they take and release our veterans and have eye-to-eye contact with these individuals when they come back.

Not only that. The problems that our warriors have. We have to look at our whole family, I think. A lot of times

there are problems there with the spouse or with the children. You know, and they are all paying the price because of that veteran's time during his deployment. And we should take a look at the whole family and put that into the whole system. Set down one-on-one professionals, and see if there is a problem there.

DOD takes and looks at these people, I think, when they come back. And if they know they are close to discharge time, they are trying to put them over into the VA system in a hurry. And I think DOD has to step up and take a bigger bite of the apple here.

Mr. \*Hare.\* Would you support, Commander, every person that is coming back being tested for post traumatic stress so that people are not singled out? In other words, and some of these don't occur until later on. So that the person doesn't feel that somehow they have done something wrong or that--or that--so that we could identify the problem and be able to help them and their families as you said.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* When you say "test" I am not too sure. But I think if a professional can take and just set down during an interview and--

Mr. \*Hare.\* Right.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* --be able to take and detect that pretty well. And I think that would be advisable, yes.

Mr. \*Hare.\* Thank you. I yield back.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you. Mr. Wallace.

Mr. \*Wallace.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman and thank you Commander and all your staff for being here. It is good to have an iron ranger here. Thank you, Madam President for all you do. And to the Minnesota delegation, thank you for bringing this Minnesota summer weather here. It makes me feel at home today, the blustery wind. So we sure appreciate that. And to every one of you here, as a member of the VSOs and as the highest ranking enlisted soldier, as a Command Sergeant Major to ever serve in Congress, your presence here is--it feels good. It feels right. And it is very humbling to have all of you here. Those three little letters, VFW, speak loud and clear. So each of you sitting here and seeing you throughout the Capitol, it is truly a pleasure. Your input is absolutely critical.

This Independent Budget, I said I think you sum it up just right, a document by veterans for veterans. This is

much more than a suggestion. This is the advice that this body needs to take a take a look at.

And I said as a dues-paying member of a VSO for many years, I always wanted to make sure that I was sending my commanders here, sending my representatives here, to make sure they were delivering a message that the people sitting right here would here. So please trust me, I do hear that.

And a special thank you. Three years ago when I was deployed, I used Operation Uplink to call my three-year-old daughter. So I thank you for that on a personal note.

I have to think if we had listened a little hard and took some of the suggestions that have been printed out for the last couple of decades by you, we may not be having those hearings across town at Walter Reed now. Part of what we have to do is we have to anticipate. And we have to plan ahead for treating. As we all know, every soldier will one day be a veteran. And when I hear that there is no connection between Walter Reed and the VA, I don't buy it. I know that that transition has to be there.

So dealing with this is not only a moral issue and the right thing to do, it is a national security issue. We have

to have the issue of making sure we keep our promises to our veterans, making we are securing this force, and making sure that we are recruiting in our best and brightest to defend this nation. That is absolutely critical.

And part of that is making sure the promises are being upheld. And that our young people aren't seeing the images that have been seeing this week of Walter Reed. What they are seeing is the pride that this nation has in its veterans. And that there is a pride that will follow through with taking care of them.

You as an organization, must stand at the tip of the spear and on guard for rhetoric without action. I am new to this. This is my first elected office. I sat where you sat for many years. And I hear a lot of people will say the right things. It doesn't mean anything unless it translates into vote and action. You must be on guard.

When it comes to this issue of national security and veterans' issues, there is no time for political ideology. Please understand when this supplemental comes forward, I will spend every waking hour tearing over that. And you can rest assured that as a former Command Sergeant Major, I will

never do anything to take away from support of our troops in the field.

But I am going to ask some questions. I am going to ask how come \$10 billion has been lost to private contractors that didn't provide one bit of security for this nation. When this supplemental comes forward, those are the questions we have to ask.

And the question that I have to you, Commander, is something that--I think that you understand this keenly and your organization understands it keenly. This seamless transition from soldier and warrior to veteran and how do we go about doing that?

My question to you is maybe this, if you could give--and I know you have listed some in your testimony. In your mind, what are a few things we should be doing? I know you talked about job training and a little of that. How can we make the transition as seamless as possible?

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* I think my cohort wants to answer.

Mr. \*Wallace.\* Congressman, I would suggest that you get a copy of the Presidential Task Force Report that was published in 2003. Seamlessly, it should turn over the VA.



They should rate me. They should continue to keep my record. And when I die, they should bury me and give my family my due rights. It is very simply laid out in that Task Force Report. And nobody has ever looked at it in all sincerity.

Mr. \*Walz.\* Well, I will guarantee you that at least one person is going to read it now. So thank you for that. And please know that this Committee support is absolutely unwavering.

And the work that you are doing, I would say for soldiers that I have worked with, soldiers I trained, those that are in Iraq and those that are back, thank you for all you are doing. And thank you for coming today.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you. Sir, I would almost wish that term "seamless transition" would go away, because it is thrown around so much and has been for the last few years. I think it has kind of lost the meaning. You almost break it down step by step instead of using a broad brush of seamless transition, because it doesn't mean much anymore it seems like.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, sir. Mr. Bilirakis.

Mr. \*Bilirakis.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Commander

Kurpius, I appreciated hearing your testimony on the priorities of VFW.

As a new member, I specifically requested membership on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, because I wanted to be an advocate in Congress for the men and women who served our nation in the Armed Forces. And I want to work on your behalf.

It may interest you to know that the very first piece of legislation that I introduced in January was H.R. 303, the Retirement Pay Restoration Act. As you probably know, my father, Mike Bilirakis, championed this piece of legislation for 20 years.

It is an honor for me to be able to continue to work on the concurrent receipt issue in the 110th Congress. In that regard, I was very pleased to read in your written testimony that the concurrent receipt issue remains one of the VFW's top legislative priorities. I look forward to working with you and your fellow VFW members on this important issue.

I was also encouraged to see in your written testimony that your organization supports allowing widows who remarry at age 55 or later to retain the dependency and indemnity

compensation benefits.

I have also introduced H.R. 704, which would accomplish this important goal. And I hope that VFW and my Congressional colleagues will consider the DIC Remarriage Legislation.

A large contingent of VFW members from Florida usually travel to Washington, DC. And this year is no exception. I would like to introduce them. Larry Stover, who is the State Commander, would you please stand? Jack McDermott; David Harris, please stand. Denny Badshand; Steven Surface; William Kersaw; J. Douglas Morris; Sidney Holme; Gene Leshore; Harvey Eckoff; Joe Gold, who I worked in Tallahassee with on legislation; Gene Hall; John Hamilton; Patrick Love; Michael White; Lee Kitchen, I always work with Lee as well in Tallahassee. Bill Bloomquist; John Crain; Mitch McPherson; John Nelson; Bill Russell; and Lawrence Shatz. And thank you very much for your service to our country and our members.

I appreciate it very much, Mr. Chairman, thank you.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, sir. Ms. Berkley.

Ms. \*Berkley.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I also want to mention how pleased I am that we have reinstated

these joint hearings. It is a pleasure and an honor to have you back in our nation's Capitol.

I want to welcome our panelists, particularly the Commander. And thank you very much for your very insightful testimony. We all appreciate it. And we know how much effort it takes to put something like that together.

I want to introduce my Veterans of Foreign Wars members here from the great State of Nevada. I was looking for them earlier. And I finally spotted them. Let me introduce to you Mike Downey, John Stroud, Gail Hernandez, Jerry Adams, John Edwards. Gentlemen, if you could please stand so we can acknowledge you it would be great. Jerry, thanks.

I don't mean to be the skunk at the town picnic. But as far as I am concerned, this budget would be a joke if it wasn't so insulting to our veterans. I cannot--it is incomprehensible to me that during a time of war, when we talk about supporting our troops, that the President and the VA can submit to Congress and budget that is so pitifully inadequate to take care of the needs of our veterans as to be worthless.

When--I will not stand up here--sit up here and defend

the indefensible. But when I get a budget that cuts money from prosthetic devices--last year's Presidential budget cut \$13 million. We put the money back in.

This year it wasn't as bad. But it is a \$2.5 million cut. There are 50,000 wounded from the Afghani/Iraqi theater of war. Many of those are catastrophically injured. Many are coming back without arms and legs. I go to Walter Reed. I visit these soldiers. I see what is going on. And there is no way in God's green earth that we should be cutting money from prosthetic research.

As long as there is breath in my body, we will not be doubling the copay for prescription medication for veterans. It is shameful that it is even suggested by the Administration that we have an enrollment fee for veterans to access the healthcare system of this nation when we have promised our veterans that we would take care of their healthcare needs. And now we are going to charge them? I don't think so. That is not going to happen.

We all know--and there is nothing we can tell you up here that all of you that are accessing our VA system don't know better than we do. But when we know that the claims

backlog is so beyond comprehension that it will take years to clean up. And we probably should be doubling the amount of money we spend so that we can get these claims cleared up. That the Administration presents to Congress a budget that cuts the claims division by \$9 million. How are we going to catch up with a cut? That is unacceptable to me.

Forty percent of the veterans--I'm sorry. Forty percent of the homeless in southern Nevada, the area I represent, are veterans, mostly from my era, from the Vietnam era. How we are allowing this to continue in a country of great abundance is unforgivable and shameful.

PTSD, we know--we know that our brave men and women are coming back with emotional problems. You cannot see your friends, your fellow countrymen blown up around you without having some emotional impact. We should be funding this fully.

There should be an exit interview when people get out. Then 30 days later, 60 days later, 90 days later, 120 days later, and keep in touch with these veterans, because we know they are going to have post traumatic stress disorder. And we ought not be taking this so lightly.

Overall healthcare, it is an embarrassment to me. And I don't care if Walter Reed is an Army hospital or veterans' hospital. It is not an isolated incident. It was just the most outrageous. We know the problems are going on. We know we don't put enough money into our VA healthcare system. This is the time to do it. And if now, when. If not when, whenever. We got to do it now.

As far as I am concerned, funding the VA and providing quality healthcare for our veterans is the cost of waging war. You want to talk about being a patriot, you want to talk about supporting our troops, well let us support our troops when they get home after they have done service to this nation. That is the cost of doing war.

You shouldn't be asking for another \$100 billion supplemental if you are not willing to back it up on the VA end, because we know that with a surge--we know with the 150,000 people that are there already, they are coming home. And we better be prepared to bring them home and take care of these people, because right now they are busy taking care of us.

Now, I know that there is a saying that what happens in

Vegas stays in Vegas. But I kind of bring Vegas back to Washington, D.C. So let me tell you about Vegas. I have 200,000 veterans and growing. It is the fastest growing veterans population in the United States in southern Nevada.

I have no VA hospital. I have no outpatient clinic. We have no long-term care facility. I don't have a national cemetery. Now, the President has put funding in for the last couple of years to take care of--remedy this situation. But my veterans are suffering. We are not talking about fixing up their facilities. They don't have any facilities. And we have 1,500 people back from this latest military operation. And they have limited healthcare, limited ability to get their healthcare needs met. And I suspect that Vegas must be the most glaring example. But it is not the only one. And we better start taking care of our vets.

One thing that you mentioned, Commander, that I would like to just address briefly. I would be remiss if I didn't. I am very aware of the situation with the old medical records being thrown into a garbage bin without being shredded. That is unacceptable. But I understand that the Inspector General's report, which will be coming out--and I have kept



in very, very close touch with our VA people on the ground. It is going to say that that was an individual lapse of judgment, not something that is systemwide--a systemwide problem. And I am very hopeful that what I have heard is going to be in the report, will be in the report. And I thank you very much for bringing that up.

Thank you, again, for being here. You have every right to be holding us accountable. But let us not kid ourselves. We are going through a little dance right now with the Administration. Congress' responsibility should not be adding to it. I can't believe the President doesn't know we are at war. And that we have to take care of our troops. And we have to take care of our veterans. Thank you very much.

The \*Chairman.\* You go, girl. Mr. Rodriguez from Texas.

Mr. \*Rodriguez.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And also I want to take this opportunity, Mr. Chairman, to thank you for allowing us to visit with VFW. And, Commander, let me also thank you for your candor.

And let me initially take this opportunity to recognize

some of the Texans that are out there. I know I have--and ask you to stand up as I call your name. Kenneth Burton, John Fair, Arthur Richards, and if there are any other Texans, can you please stand up? There we go. Let us give them a big hand. Thank you very much.

Let me first of all indicate, Commander, I was gone for two years after the redistricting. I was defeated. Well, I--and I--then I got back. I got a different district now that is even worse in terms of access to healthcare than I had before. I got 600 miles going through west Texas. A lot of--you know, difficulty in terms of getting access.

I do want to thank you for your comments. I want to thank you for reaching out. And I know we are going to reauthorize the higher education bill. And maybe this is a time to look at that GI Bill on the higher education, because this country is in--not only do the veterans need this assistance, but this country needs you. We need people in the area of healthcare. We need people in the area of education. We need people in a lot of the professional areas. As indicated before, prior to 9/11 and even up to now, we were bringing in 300,000 professionals from abroad

when we have an opportunity to allow our veterans to get prepared in higher education. And not only in the higher education, but in the skills.

Right now, I have been told that most our--you know, we need--you know, our skilled people are retiring. We need plumbers, we need electricians, we need carpenters, down the line mechanics, and we don't have them in this country. And there is a need and an opportunity for us to allow those, you know, individuals that are coming back to be able to be trained in those areas.

And so I look forward to working with you and pushing that agenda in allowing Americans to be able to have the opportunity to serve this country at home in the skilled labor force.

I also want to thank you for pushing the issue of families in--as it deals with not only post traumatic stress disorder, because I am convinced that we have to wait six months or a year and then bring them in also. Because I know when they--you know, as soon as they come back they are gung-ho. I have been to Walter Reed. And they are--some of those young people are ready to go out there and defend us. Some

of that doesn't set in until a year later. And they realize that they have some difficulty and some problems. We need to almost require them to come back a year after they--they have left service to come back for some training. I mean, for assessment in terms of post traumatic stress disorders and the need for our families.

The other thing that frustrates me is we just did a round of black. We are closing down Wilford Hall, the only hospital outside--in the country for the Air Force. And we are closing some of those facilities. It doesn't make any sense whatsoever. We ought to be pushing the agenda right now that--just like we have a college for every--you know, for the Army, for the Navy, for the--you know, the Air Force. We ought to have a hospital for each of them. And we don't have them. And that ought to be pushed now and not later.

The--we just had a hearing on--with the VA on the data. And I am convinced that the staff there is trying to do the right thing. I am convinced that they are trying to work with what they have. But I am also convinced that they can't pull it off on their own. We almost need an external task force to come in on the cyber stuff--security that is needed,

so that--you know, because other information is--continues to be leaked out, you know. And we don't have the whole--and the staff doesn't--and the bureaucracy doesn't have the whole on it in terms of what needs to happen there. And so there is almost a need for. And I want you to comment on that, a need for an external task force to come in and look at how we computerize everything. Look at our security there in terms of that cyber security that is needed to take care of our veterans' data that is not being taken care of now.

And so I would ask you to comment on those issues. And just in addition, I was gone for two years, come back, and I look at the figure that the Administration is giving. It is the same figure that was there when I started in this Committee.

So your recommendation in terms of establishing legislation that allows us to fund the VA on the regular basis so that they can operate. You know, if I am working for the VA and I don't know what I am going to get next year, I can understand why I would be worried and maybe not do a good job in terms of what--you know. And so if you could comment on those areas I would appreciate it. And thank you,

Commander, for your comments also.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* We certainly share your concerns. And we are--we have been very disappointed about the continual loss of all the data.

To have all the answers, I certainly don't have those. I can assure you that we would certainly work with you on trying to remedy this problem. But, you know, a true, secure system of records, the way it is going right now, if it keeps happening in the claim process and the medical loss, that could bring our whole system to a complete halt if we don't correct that soon. And that is where we are really concerned. Not all about all--and let alone the personal data that is going out on our veterans. It could just bring everything to a stop so quickly. And we do need a remedy in a hurry.

Unfortunately, I guess it is above my pay grade. I don't have the answer for what the system is. But I know one thing we will gladly sit down and work with you to try to remedy that. And if there is--one of my--my staffer that has been more involved with that, I would certainly turn that over to them. Bob or Dennis?

Mr. \*Cullinan.\* Thank you, Commander-in-Chief. Mr. Rodriguez, the only thing I would add is last year this Congress did pass some very significant IT legislation, which has not been fully implemented yet. It is still in the processing stage. We believe that that probably would be the best idea to see how that works out.

Additionally, the other thing that we would point to, if you start bringing in private contractors to review VA's data security needs, that could possibly lead to more problems than cures. So we believe at this time the best thing to do is to allow the legislation that was enacted last Congress to work. And then we will proceed from there.

Mr. \*Wallace.\* One of the basic problems, and let us all admit it, is leadership, management, and accountability. We saw what happened at Walter Reed. And we saw the actions taken at the highest levels immediately. We didn't see that at VA. We saw a lower-level person being blamed, and this and that, and so forth and so on.

So leadership, management, and accountability. And it is a total mind set of the VA employees. And that is not going to be easy. Jim Nicholson isn't going to be able to do

that. Houdini won't be able to do that totally.

But if they get the leadership to do it, then they are going to start managing. And if they start holding the leadership and the managers accountable for their actions and what happens, I think we will see some improvements, just as we are seeing at Walter Reed.

There was no-holds-barred by the Secretary of Defense. He moved. He put a four-star general and a three-star general in charge of cleaning that place up and cleaning up the military healthcare system. That is what VA needs, leadership, management, and accountability.

Mr. \*Rodriguez.\* My time has expired. But I do want to thank you for what you do for all our veterans. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* You are welcome.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Rodriguez. Ms. Herseth who is the Chair of the Economic Opportunities Subcommittee of this Committee.

Ms. \*Herseth.\* Well, thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Buyer. Thank you Commander. And we appreciate seeing you and hearing your testimony. We appreciate all the folks



that have gathered here with you today. I want to thank the VFW Auxiliary President Linda Meader for her leadership.

And I do want to acknowledge the South Dakotans. We may not have quite as few as California and Texas. But we did have one of our worst winter storms. But I know that we have at least three people here if not more. Bill Serney, who is on the National Legislative Committee, Gary Knudsen and Dave Calley. If the three of you and any other South Dakotans who weathered the storm and made it here, terrific. Thank you for being here.

And I want to thank all of you. Your staff commander does a terrific job of working with our staff, both on the Committee and our personal offices. And we appreciate all of the hard work they do, so that we are in a position to work together and make a difference in achieving our common objectives.

Congressman Boozman and I have--in my opinion, and I think he shares it. And I think those of you that have worked with us on the Economic Opportunities Subcommittee in the last Congress, know that we have a very good working relationship. And we are both committed to building on the

work that we did in the last Congress and in doing what we can in this new Congress to continue to make progress on issues that I deem so important to all of our veterans from each generation, including those who are returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to the serious medical needs that many will require treatment for and some of the questions posed earlier have addressed those.

We know that there are a number of active duty service members as well as National Guard and Reservists who come home from the war. And decide perhaps from active duty to make the transition to civilian life or from National Guard and Reserve to stay in the Guard and Reserve but maybe to do something different than what they were doing before they were deployed, because they come back and they are changed by their experiences. And it may not be that they don't want to continue to work with the people they were working with when they came home. But they want to do something different.

And that is why the area of jurisdiction of our Subcommittee is so important, not just with education benefits, but with the veterans' employment and training services you mentioned, vocational rehabilitation. So many

other areas that we have addressed with regard to the flexibility of allowing service members to use the different skills that they brought to their service. And that they are bringing back home to use in ways that make a difference for them, their families, and their communities.

As you know, Congressman Boozman, Congressman Snyder, others of us, have recently introduced legislation to do exactly what I think many have talked about today. And that is modernizing the Montgomery GI Bill.

And I have a very straightforward question for you, because part of the Bill--a very important provision in this Bill would move much of the jurisdiction for Guard and Reserve educational benefits from the Department of Defense. And does the VFW support specifically the provision that would move from DOD over to the VA?

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* I would say yes. The system is not fair to our National Guard and Reserve.

Ms. \*Herseth.\* And does the VFW support specifically the provision that would move from DOD over to the VA, the administration of the education benefits for Guard and Reserve?

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* I would say yes.

Ms. \*Herseth.\* Thank you. One last question. In your testimony, you touched upon the need for Congress to pass VA appropriation bills on time. Because we know that there is a negative impact of not doing so particularly on the planning for VA medical centers, and our administrators, and staff and personnel of those centers. And I agree that we need to look at ways to assure VA health funding to alleviate this problem. But I think sometimes we tend to forget that it is not just a lack of planning, but further on the impact that this has on real people when we don't finish the budget process on time.

So can you offer some real-world examples, or perhaps your colleagues at the table, about what happens at the VA medical centers when Congress fails to pass a VA appropriations bill before the end of the fiscal year? And the impact that has on the members, your members, who are receiving care at these VA medical centers.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Bill, do you want to take that one, as working in the VA system all the time?

Mr. \*Bradshaw.\* Yes, ma'am. One of the things we know

that do happen is employees. As any employer, it is hard to get employees for the next year if you don't know what the money is going to be.

So, therefore, you must delay employers. If you delay employers, the quality of care must suffer some, because you don't have a total quality staff. So that is one of the big things that happens when the budget comes four, five, six months later.

Ms. \*Herseth.\* Thank you. And my time is expired. So thank you, Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity to pose some questions to our panel here today.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Ms. Herseth. Mr. Space.

Mr. \*Space.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you and thanks to the Ranking Member for the fine leadership displayed in this Committee. Commander, I would like to thank you as well as your members for your service and the important work that you do.

I am the son of a Korean War veteran, the grandson of a World War II veteran, and the grandson of another World War I veteran. While not a veteran myself, I come to this Congress during this my first term with a full appreciation for not

just the sacrifice that you and your members have made for this country, but the obligation as well that we as a nation have.

And while I have no questions, I just want to assure you and your members that I am anxious to go to bat for you. And to ensure that our government lives up to the promises that we have made to you and your members over the years.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you.

Mr. \*Space.\* Thank you. I yield back the balance of my time, Mr. Chairman.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Space. Mr. Turner.

Mr. \*Turner.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Space and I are both from Ohio. And someone may have done this earlier. But I am sorry that I was late in time, so he may have had the opportunity to see the members who are here from Ohio. But if we could have the people who are here from Ohio to stand, I would appreciate it. Great. I knew there had to be more.

Well, first off, I too, like Mr. Space, want to thank you for your service, because for each of you in being here, you are a voice that makes certain that we are responsive in

Washington. And it is not just for yourselves. You are once again serving for many. For each of you, there are people from your community. There are people from all over the country that are benefitted by the work that you do, the information that you bring to us, the dialogue that we are able to have.

Earlier you had mentioned leadership, management, and accountability. Well, you cannot have any of those unless you have that loop of conversation, of people who have information and knowledge about what is going on in the organizations, and what is going on in the institutions. What is going on in the--in the programs. And I know this is an important part of that.

Now, I serve in the Armed Services Committee. I also serve on the National Security Subcommittee and, of course, the Veterans' Affairs Committee that you are before today. And as a result of my work on the National Security Subcommittee, yesterday I was at Walter Reed as part of the hearing that occurred there and as part of the process of holding leadership accountable.

And we--of course, we heard many disturbing things. We

heard about the dreadful conditions of Building 18 that should not have had our men and women in uniform there. We heard issues about the care level of people who were being transferred from in-patient to out-patient. And that there wasn't the sense that they were being cared for properly. We heard about caseworkers that were making decisions and reversing decisions that doctors had made of care or tests that needed to occur.

And we heard about the important issue of the transition between DOD and the VA. And that is certainly part of your testimony today. And that is something that I want to ask you a question on. Many members of the VA serve on the Armed Services Committee and this Committee. So you are raising the issue of a seamless transition is very important.

Because at Walter Reed yesterday, we heard that even just in one institution on one campus, they weren't making a seamless transition between one caregiver to another.

And then we hear of the issue of--from that facility of the transitions from DOD to the VA. And probably the most important statement that was made at that hearing yesterday, was that--you know, why did this come to light about Walter



Reed now? And they said, "Well, because Building 18 was so visible." You could take a picture of it. Someone else could look at it and say something is going wrong there. And it needs to be addressed.

But so many times when people aren't given appropriate care or when systems aren't working, there is not visual. There is nothing that you can take a picture of and then just show everyone that this is wrong. So we have to hear and both in anecdotal stories and in issues of what is important and needs to be fixed.

And clearly there is not a seamless transition between DOD and the VA. And we have many of our men and women who have made sacrifices in Iraq and Afghanistan and the War on Terror that are coming home that need to make that transition.

And I was wondering if you could speak--comment more on the issue of what we need to do to ensure that those who have fought for us are cared for in that transition?

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* We addressed this a little bit earlier. And it is a real concern of ours. I believe it has been a concern of this Committee for years. And there is--I think

of common sense playing a role in here of getting DOD and the VA to work together. Just simple things such as exams for example, so they wouldn't have to be duplicated when the individual is discharged from DOD.

It goes to the VA. They have two different rating systems, which is very obvious when they do they Army Physical Evaluation Board. You talk about a real hangup there. It is so different from the VA. You get a 20 percent rating from the Army. You can go over to the VA and get a 90 percent rating or a 100 percent rating.

You know, these systems are so opposite of one another. And if they could combine work together, DOD and VA, just on simple things like that.

We talk about the computers. It is speaking together in the seamless transition of records. And they are working on that. But I am afraid that is years away. But there are so many simple things out there. If there was a committee formed, I believe, probably with part of DOD, VA, and probably some of the service officers that work out in the field in this. They could all get together and put their heads together. Throw a bunch of stuff at the wall, and see

what really sticks and comes off for the benefit of these people that are trying to make that transition.

Mr. \*Turner.\* I appreciate you speaking about that. I also know that information sharing, there is some concern about that--about HIPAA might be an impediment. And I understand that they are working that out.

Yesterday, we heard from leadership of the Army that they believe that they have an agreement soon that will address that. I know it is an issue that we are going to have to continue to monitor. I appreciate you raising it and continuing to be diligent, and giving us the information we need to fix the coordination between these two systems. Thank you.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you. Mr. Buyer, you are recognized for five minutes.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* Well, I do believe that we are going to end here with the Chairman and myself. So I will move rapidly as sort of a wrap up.

Please extend to the editor of your VFW magazine, I thought this month's issue was very good. I will admit to you I don't always read it. I flip through it. I check out

the articles that I like. But this one was very good. And-- so please extend that to them.

With regard to--I will continue to focus on the National Shrine Programs, so I invite your involvement into the program. You can tell a lot about a country by the individuals with whom we choose to honor. And your men and women do so much for our comrades at their last call.

And I am concerned about the cemeteries that are located in the Department of Interior. There are two national cemeteries that are presently in utilization, one in Andersonville in Georgia and the other one at Little Big Horn. And I am going to make sure that these cemeteries are brought up to the standards in which these men rightly deserve.

With regard to seamless transition, this may be a term for--Commander, that you don't care for. But, I think, it is part of the best umbrella terminology that we have. And you are right, there are multiple definitions that come under that. You could ask somebody in DOD what a seamless transition mean. Ask somebody in VA, and you are going to get different definitions.

In the last Congress, the 109th, this Committee held over ten hearings and had over fifteen site visits on seamless transition issues.

And, Mr. Chairman, yesterday I sent you a letter requesting that the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Hearing on Seamless Transition be elevated to a full Committee hearing. Would you have a response for me, please?

The \*Chairman.\* Their Committee is going forward with their agenda. And those issues will be discussed at a later date in this full Committee.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* So I am to interpret that you decline? Do you decline that this be elevated to a full Committee hearing on Thursday?

The \*Chairman.\* This Committee is going to be fully discussing the seamless transition and the funding issues involved with that. The Subcommittee had scheduled its hearing. And it will go forward as planned.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* All right, thank you. With regard to CIO, the purpose here--Major General Howard was to empower him. And so Mr. Cullinan, your answer I appreciate it. It was candid. And I agree with it.

With regard to the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, I created this Subcommittee. And I appreciate the Chairman kept this as a Subcommittee, because I am as equally disturbed as many of you of whom you know someone who--for whatever reason decided to define their quality of life based on a check that they get from the government. And they seek satisfaction from a bottle. And that is not what they deserve. So we are to give these individuals every opportunity to live full and complete lives.

And Dr. Boozman and Stephanie Herseht work excellent together. And they have reached out into the communities and the hiring practices. And Dr. Boozman's association with Wal-Mart, they are proceeding, and they are hiring disabled veterans. So I want to thank you for your work.

With regard to Walter Reed, let me just share this. When I chaired the Personnel Committee on Armed Services for four years and responsible for the military health delivery system, I remember very well in the 1990s that as we went through the first round and second round of the BRAC, under the health--military health, they said we are going to have three centers of excellence at Brooke, Walter Reed, and

Bethesda.

So if you remember when you--those of you who were either injured or wounded at war, you returned and some of you came back to the military hospital at the installation from which you had come from. But we went to these three centers of excellence.

I left the Armed Services Committee so there is a little void here in my intel, but I--when Walter Reed came out on the BRAC, I was really sort of dumbfounded on what were we doing BRACing one of the centers of excellence during a time of war.

And so, Mr. Wallace, when you talked about management, and accountability, and leadership, and chain of command, we also put some unrealistic stressors on these individuals that command BRAC facilities. What are you doing investing in a building, which you are going to then tear down or leave behind? And we put these individuals in an unrealistic and untenable position.

With regard to these soldiers in Building 18, they were the single soldiers. So with regard to the married that are at the Malone House and other--I mean, it is remarkable and

wonderful how they are being treated in their care. But it is all being whitewashed here. And that concerns me. These soldiers should have never been in that building.

With regard to TBI, your comments on TBI and polytrauma, Congress responded by creating these Polytrauma Centers and now have gone to level II. But you are right, there is so much for us to learn about TBI. And I will work with the Chairman and other members of the Committee to do that, especially Mr. Michaud.

Mr. Michaud and Mr. Brown, I also have an excellent working relationship. And Mr. Michaud is Chairman of Health. I want to work with you. And I just want you to know we have a very studious individual at the helm.

The last is your comments about not cutting off funds. I want to thank you for stepping into the political fray and allowing your voice to be heard. The--I finish with this, because it is challenging for me. And now I will also speak candidly. I will never forget the Vietnam Veteran who worked up on the Board when I was a cadet at the Citadel. Upset with his cadets that day, he wrote a statement on the blackboard. And he had been a captain in Vietnam--company



commander. And he wouldn't share his experiences with us. But what he wrote on the blackboard that day, he demanded for us to memorize this statement. And he let--and he forced us to sit there one hour in silence. What he wrote on the blackboard that day was that, "Those who serve their country on a distance battlefield, see life in a dimension for which the protected may never know."

Now, I memorized it. I--you don't under--you do not have an opportunity to understand the dimension until you have walked that walk, which means all of us have a tremendous responsibility. And you accepted the responsibility. And you stepped in to help define and help a country. And for that you have my deep respect and admiration. It is not just you, but it is the members behind you that said, "Do this."

So I appreciate that. And I came to the Congress here as a young man, age 32, same time Mr. Filner did 15 years ago. And I will never forget. I used to park next to a Congresswoman who had a bumper sticker on her car. And I would read the bumper sticker every day, and say, "Steve, you are going to go to work today with people that not--don't

necessarily believe the same things you believe or share your dimension." It would help me refocus--it would help me focus and say that dissent is extremely important in our country. And the bumper sticker said, "It would be a great day in America when schools have all the money they want, and the Air Force has to hold a bake sale to buy a bomber."

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Buyer. I appreciate, Commander, and your staff, all of whom help us so much in our day-to-day understanding of the issues. And we thank your staff. And I want the membership to know how great a job they do for them in Washington.

I do--I would be amiss if I didn't ask the Californians to finally rise, stretch your legs for a second. All the Californians here. Wow, thank you very much. I am partial to San Diegans. And I have to thank Al Kovech, Paul Danielsey, Sherman Givens, and Kelly Price from San Diego. I appreciate all that you have taught me and worked with me over the years, so thank you VFW members from San Diego.

Let me just say as we conclude the hearing, Mr. Chair, and you can have a final wrap-up if you would like, we may have differences up here about the current war. But we are

united in saying that every one of these kids who come home shall be embraced, welcomed, given the best care possible, hugged by this nation, and given every care worthy of the sacrifice that they made. And we are going to do that.

And although I say "kids," I extend that to the kids from the first Persian Gulf War, Vietnam, Korea, World War II, and if there are any kids from World War I the same.

We still have issues. We still have not fulfilled our contract with those kids, whether it is the atomic veterans of World War II, whether it is the agent orange and homeless, battered veterans of Vietnam, Persian Gulf War illness, we still have an obligation. And we need the funds to do that. And we are going to make the argument on your behalf that--as several people have said, treating our veterans is a cost of war. We are spending a billion dollars every two and a half days in Iraq. So when--if we ask for \$5 billion as a supplemental, that is not asking too much. That is asking what we need to serve our veterans.

And as you all take leave of this hearing and visit Congresspeople, I want you to know how important it is for you to be here, especially during this time when these issues

are on everybody's mind.

But when you go home, you have a lot of work to do there. Congresspeople get elected and know what people are thinking in a lot of different ways. And if you are going to influence public opinion, you have to sort of make sure that trail is covered by you. Whether it is going to service clubs and talking, just telling your story, whether it is going to church groups, PTAs, union groups, ethnic minority activist groups, schools, writing letters to the editors, getting on talk shows, sitting down with editorial boards, all of those are very important to influence public opinion.

We have a volunteer Army in Iraq. It is influencing a very small part of the population. But you all can influence the other part of the population that may not understand through going--making sure they understand what it is to be a veteran. What it is to see combat, and what our responsibilities are. You can do a tremendous job with public opinion on that.

Now is the time to do it. Everybody is listening. We have reporters who did a fantastic job in unearthing some of this stuff that needed to be unearthed. But you need to tell

the story of what we owe to our veterans. And we are counting on you to do it. And we look forward to working with you as we fulfill our contract and make our promise.

We had a meeting several weeks ago with your staff and the staff of most of the other VSOs. And we set an agenda for the year, most of which are on your list today, Commander. So we have--and we will publish that and distribute that. Members of both sides of the aisle were there with all the VSOs. And I think we came up with a common agenda for this year. So we will get that around. And we thank you for your input. And, Commander, we are giving to give you the last word or words as much as--thank you for your being here and for your very eloquent statement.

Mr. \*Kurpius.\* Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today. And to express the views of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I guess, we are at difficult times as a country. We are at war again. And I just think back to being a Vietnam veteran and during the Vietnam war. And when we got the Monday morning quarterbacks involved in it, it hurt the cause, it hurt the veterans, and it hurt the people that were left home, the families that are really involved.

And I am kind of seeing an instant replay here. The only people that really seem to be--not caring, but that are being hurt when these discussions are going on are the veterans and the families that are associated with that, because it is all volunteer. Not everybody is serving.

And I just want to express please use extreme caution when these discussions go on, because when I talk to the active-duty people and when I travel this great country of ours and go overseas and talk to our troops, they believe in the mission. That is what they are telling me. They say they are doing the right things. They are doing great things. Unfortunately, the news media doesn't publish all the good--great stories that they are doing and the accomplishments that are going on. And when we come out negative sometimes, it really hurts our troops. It hurts the cause.

So I just in closing, ask that the people that we elect, send here to Washington, to keep that in mind when they make these decisions. Thank you so very much.

The \*Chairman.\* We will take that to heart. This hearing is adjourned. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:55 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]