

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
**U.S. House and Senate Conference Committee on Veterans' Affairs**  
**June 24, 2014**

- I want to thank Chairmen Sanders and Miller, and Ranking Members Burr and Michaud for convening the conference.
- Montanans enlist in high numbers, and our state has the second highest per capita number of veterans in the country.
- This is a very personal issue for me, and it's why I serve on this Committee.
- Access to health care issues for veterans didn't pop up overnight. It's a topic many of us have been trying to address for years. And we're not going to fix all of these problems with this bill. But we should try our best.
- And we should commit to a long-term engagement and focus on these issues moving forward. We certainly have a long ways to go.
- Given my close association with veterans' issues, I'm approached by veterans every time I go home – in the airport, in the grocery store or when I'm filling up gas. And I go home almost every weekend.
- I get my best ideas directly from veterans. They are very direct. And they're not shy about expressing their opinions. I appreciate that.
- In fact, these last two weekends, I have held veterans listening sessions back home — one Kalispell and one in Missoula. They're tired of words and they're ready for action.
- All of us here have an opportunity to put veterans first. I think the two bills we have here are a step in the right direction.
- We need a final bill that strengthens and brings more accountability to the VA while helping veterans get the care they need now.
- And this bill must address the critical access issue: staffing shortages. We need to get more doctors and nurses into the VA. We have to provide more resources and authority for the VA to bring in these folks now.
- We should look at provisions that reauthorize critical programs that provide tuition assistance to students pursuing education and training that leads to employment with VA.
- And we should look at ways to increase the cap on student loan repayments for prospective employees so the VA is more capable of competing with other agencies or the private sector for skilled medical personnel.

- While we're at it, let's not make it harder for the VA to hire and retain quality men and women by demonizing or politicizing the VA. And while we're strengthening accountability at the VA, we should not throw employee rights and due process completely out the window.
- I also hope that our final bill makes it easier for rural veterans to get care closer to home. During my listening tours in Montana, I've heard from rural vets who are anxious about the expiration of a pilot program, Project ARCH, that allows them to see private healthcare providers in their communities.
- The ARCH model has been successful in helping rural and highly rural veterans access care. It's proven. We know it works and we know how to make it better.
- A couple weeks ago in the Senate Appropriations Committee, we unanimously included funding for this program for Fiscal Year 2015.
- So the funding is there, we just need the authorization. I know Ranking Member Michaud and Senator McCain have a similar interest in this program. Hopefully we can make the right call and get this successful program reauthorized.
- Finally, a couple things on veterans having access to private care on the VA's dime.
- First, this is not new. The VA is already authorized to send veterans to non-VA providers to ensure they are provided with timely and accessible care. But as the GAO just pointed out, however, we don't know how long veterans receiving care outside VA have to wait for treatment from private providers.

We know a lot about the VA's statistics because it has an Inspector General, two Congressional Committees of jurisdiction and public disclosure requirements. That's not the case with the private sector.

I agree that we need to explore any and every avenue through which we can connect veterans to the timely and quality care they have earned. That's particularly the case in rural areas where the options are limited. I just think we need to be realistic.

- Second, we need to be mindful of the potential issues that could accompany sending an influx of veterans into the private sector for care. We need to look at the reimbursement process, we need to look at the impact it will have on VA efforts to maintain updated and accurate patient health records, and we need to look at how it will ultimately impact the VA's capacity to provide the timely and quality care veterans have earned.
- I look forward to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle.
- Veterans deserve our best. Let's demonstrate our best by having a productive and constructive conversation today.