

Ranking Member Richard Burr

Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr
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Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to you and to the witnesses who have joined us today to look at the on-going efforts to improve the disability evaluation system for our nation's injured servicemembers.

For any servicemembers whose medical conditions keep them from continuing to serve in the military, there must be an effective, hassle-free process to get them the benefits and services they need and help them smoothly transition to civilian life. But, several years ago, it became very clear that the disability system at the Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs was not living up that standard.

In 2007, news reports -- as well as several panels of experts -- detailed how injured servicemembers had to go through a long, bureaucratic process at DoD, followed by a similar process at VA, to find out what disability benefits they would receive. Wounded servicemembers and their families were becoming frustrated, confused, and disappointed.

Since then, DoD and VA have joined efforts to improve this process by piloting an "Integrated Disability Evaluation System." This allows injured servicemembers to find out what benefits they will get from both agencies before being discharged from the military. A single set of medical examinations are used by both agencies, and VA assigns the disability ratings that govern what benefits are provided by both VA and DoD.

Our witnesses will testify today that this joint process has shown the potential to reduce delays and confusion in getting benefits from both agencies. In fact, DoD and VA believe the pilot was a success and plan to roll out the pilot process to sites worldwide, including several military bases in North Carolina.

But, as we'll discuss today, this pilot program did have a number of significant challenges. Pilot sites ran into logistical problems, staffing shortages, surges in caseloads, and other issues that led to long delays for some servicemembers. On top of that, servicemembers have expressed concerns about the quality of their lives while going through this process.

Some have pointed out that they are not given meaningful work to do or spend too much time being idle. Others are frustrated that they cannot accept civilian jobs, enroll in school, or otherwise plan for civilian lives, because they don't know how long the process will take. As one Marine from Camp Lejeune put it, DoD and VA should "set a time and date so we can plan our lives."

Mr. Chairman, I realize DoD and VA are taking steps to address many of these challenges, and I look forward to hearing about those efforts today. Particularly now, as these agencies plan to expand this process to more sites, we need to be sure those sites would be ready -- with the

staffs, facilities, and other tools they would need -- to provide wounded servicemembers with the high level of service they earned and deserve.

More importantly, we must make sure that whatever system is in place will meet the needs of wounded servicemembers and their families and actually help to improve their lives.

With that in mind, Mr. Chairman, I hope we can have a candid discussion today about how best to move forward with improving the disability evaluation system for our nation's injured servicemembers.

I thank the Chair and again thank our witnesses for being here.