

## CHAIRMAN PATTY MURRAY

### OPENING STATEMENT

#### Joint Hearing to Hear the Legislative Presentation of Veterans of Foreign Wars

March 8, 2011

I welcome the Veterans of Foreign Wars here today to present their views and insights. I also want to thank the Ladies' Auxiliary for joining us. I know how important a woman's voice is on these issues, and I thank you for coming to share your perspective. I also want to mention those VFW members who have traveled the 2,500 miles from my personal favorite Washington—Washington State. Those with us today are: Jerry Herker, Richard Whipple, Carlos Almeda, Diana Small, and John Rust.

Just about two weeks ago I held a listening session at VFW post 51 in Spokane, Washington. It was my very first public event back home as Chairman and I was there to hear from local veterans and to bring their concerns back to Washington, D.C. I've got to tell you all, not only did those VFW members show up – they packed the hall. But to tell you the truth, it didn't surprise me one bit. Time and again I've seen how engaged and personally vested VFW members are in the issues facing veterans, not only here on Capitol Hill, but also back home at their local VA medical centers. It's the work of those VFW members—and all volunteers—that strengthen local communities, keep the VA accountable, and help us move forward. And for that, I thank all of you.

As the new Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I am ready to continue my work partnering with you to hold VA to the standard our nation's veterans deserve. It's something I have been personally committed to during my 16 years as a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and even before that, from my family experiences as the daughter of a WWII veteran and purple heart recipient, and from my work as an intern helping to care for wounded Vietnam veterans in Seattle. I know that when we send our young people off to fight a war, the last thing they should have to do is fight for the care they deserve when they return home.

I know that ensuring the VA is working for our veterans, and not against them, often begins with the VA budget. Now, let me say that on balance, and given that other agencies are facing budget cuts, the VA's 2012 budget is a very good starting place from which to work. The President has requested an overall increase of \$5.9 billion in discretionary spending over last year. But that being said—and while health care spending is in good shape—there are some weaker points in the budget. As your testimony notes, the proposed cuts in spending for construction and non-recurring maintenance are very troubling. I agree with you that we cannot reduce our commitment to the facilities that make up the VA health care system and I look forward to working with VFW more on this issue. I also wanted to note that you make some very good points about making cuts to programs that are wasteful and aren't working for veterans and taxpayers.

As discussion continues here in Congress about where to reduce funding, we must remember that like all budgets, the VA budget is a reflection of our values, and that it impacts the lives of millions of our veterans and their families. One of the things we are working on right now that has a direct impact on so many veterans and their recovery from the visible and invisible wounds of war is the caregivers' program and ensuring that it is put in place quickly and as Congress intended. I am heartened to see that you have identified this as one of your priorities as well. As many of you know, when the caregivers bill was voted on in Congress, not a single “no” vote was cast against it. Let me repeat that—in an environment that as we all know is too often overly partisan, every voting member agreed to this new benefit. Yet, we are now seeing delays and questions about who is eligible. That’s unacceptable and I am committed to working with Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Filner, and Senator Burr to change it. Once the caregiver program gets up and running, and in a manner consistent with the intent of Congress, we will be in a better position to think about ways to expand the benefits to veterans of earlier wars. I thank VFW for your support and work on the caregivers’ law, and on so many other initiatives passed in the last Congress.

I also look forward to working with VFW to address many of the other issues facing our veterans, whether it’s ensuring women veterans have the facilities and care they need as they come to VA in higher and higher numbers, fighting to once and for all end the epidemic of veterans homelessness, addressing our broken claims system, or ensuring that veterans who have all the skills and discipline to succeed in the civilian workforce get their shot. We’ve got to do more, and we’ve got to work together at every step.

As I mentioned before, two weeks ago, I sat down with many of the veterans whose lives will be impacted by this budget back in my home state. I heard from a Vietnam veteran with PTSD whose son, a National Guard member, just recently committed suicide after returning from the battlefield with PTSD. I heard from a female Iraq veteran who told me that when she calls the VA she continually gets asked if she’s calling for her husband. I heard from veterans about the claims backlog, barriers to employment, access to care, holes in the education benefit, and unfortunately, much more. Our work is not done—these veterans deserve better.

I look forward to working with you to care for all of our nation’s veterans.

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