

1 JOINT HEARING ON LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATIONS FROM
2 AXPOW, PVA, SVA, GSW, MOAA, FRA, IAVA

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4 TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2020

5 United States Senate,
6 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
7 House of Representatives,
8 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
9 Washington, D.C.

10 The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 2:03 p.m. in
11 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry
12 Moran and Hon. Mark Takano, Chairmen of the Committees,
13 presiding.

14 Senators Present: Moran, Boozman, Rounds, Tillis,
15 Sullivan, Tester, Brown, Blumenthal, and Sinema.

16 Representatives Present: Takano, Lamb, Levin, Rose,
17 Cunningham, Cisneros, Underwood, Roe, Bilirakis, Bost, and
18 Roy.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MORAN

20 Chairman Moran. I am unaccustomed to getting it so
21 quiet so easily. I am a married man with two daughters and
22 I can tell you it does not work that way when I go home.

23 The subcommittee hearing--I am sorry--the full
24 Committee hearing will come to order. I take this
25 opportunity to welcome our witnesses. Thank you very much

1 for your presence here today. There are seven organizations
2 who work hard on behalf of veterans every day with us for
3 this hearing. I appreciate the work that you do, and I
4 appreciate the working relationship that this committee and
5 your organizations have. It is very helpful and required.

6 I would like to extend a special welcome to those who
7 traveled here from my home state, Kansas, and to make me
8 feel good would you please stand or raise your hand.

9 Thank you, ma'am. I knew you were here.

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Moran. As you can see, I have quite a
12 following.

13 I will keep my remarks brief. We started--the House
14 has a vote that is supposed to conclude at 2:05. Chairman
15 Takano asked that we go ahead and proceed in his absence,
16 but I would expect my colleagues to be here shortly.

17 I will keep my remarks brief, and we will jump shortly
18 to the VSOs and hear their priorities in just a moment.

19 I do want to mention just a couple of things, reiterate
20 one more time my top priorities as the new Chairman of this
21 Committee. I have worked closely with Senator Tester, the
22 Ranking Member, on a comprehensive suicide prevention bill,
23 some of you mentioned it in your testimony, the Commander
24 John Scott Hannan Veterans Mental Health Care and
25 Improvement Act. That bill was reported out of our

1 committee in the Senate unanimously. It is a multifaceted
2 approach to suicide prevention, and I would like to thank
3 the VSOs for their input, work, and support on that critical
4 piece of legislation.

5 Implementation of the MISSION Act, appropriate action
6 on toxic exposure, those are things that I want to make
7 certain that we more fully address. We want to ensure that
8 the families of our fallen heroes are cared for, and you
9 have my commitment to support veterans across American, all
10 those veterans that your organizations represent.

11 I look forward to your presentations and discussion
12 today and I look forward to continuing to work with you. We
13 will recognize Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Tester and
14 Ranking Member Roe when they arrive.

15 But we will now begin hearing from witnesses.
16 Commander Certain, we will start with you and the floor is
17 now yours.

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1 STATEMENT OF ROBERT CERTAIN, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
2 AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

3 Mr. Certain. Thank you, Chairman Moran and members of
4 the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs staff, if they are
5 present. My name is Robert Certain. I am the National
6 Commander of American Ex-Prisoners of War. I was held a
7 prisoner of war in North Vietnam from 1972 and '73, and
8 served 30 years in the uniform of the United States Air
9 Force. Thank you for the opportunity to express our
10 comments today. I will briefly summarize the document you
11 have already received.

12 Our legislative agenda has been very consistent since
13 our establishment in 1942, that veterans earned benefits and
14 health care and fair compensation for sacrifices made in the
15 service of this nation.

16 We are grateful for the efforts of these Committees and
17 this Congress for passage of three important measures in
18 2019: (1) the Full Military Honors Act of 2019, ensuring
19 full military honors for prisoners of war and for recipients
20 of the Medal of Honor, regardless of military rank; (2) the
21 legislation authorizing the use of the POW-MIA flag
22 alongside the American flag throughout the year on Federal
23 property; and (3) the NDAA for fiscal year 2020, eliminating
24 the SBP-DIC offset, the so-called "widow's tax," over the
25 course of the next three years. Thank you for your efforts

1 to bring these concerns to reality.

2 During this session of the 116th Congress we urge
3 attention several continuing issues affecting former POWs,
4 other veterans, and their families or survivors. First are
5 two bills before you now, H.R. 3221 and S. 1047, the
6 Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Improvement Act. We
7 urge your Committees to report these favorably to the Senate
8 and House for action this year. Refer to our written
9 testimony for further explanation.

10 Second, I urge you to consider modifications to two
11 existing laws, Public Law 9737, the Former Prisoners of War
12 Benefits Act, and the Federal Advisory Committee Act of
13 1972, which limits volunteer citizen participation in
14 service on advisory committees to 10 years. The FACA has
15 resulted in long-serving former POWs being removed from the
16 VA Advisory Committee on Former POWs, along with their
17 corporate knowledge of work done. I believe term limits
18 should be lifted for this particular advisory committee and
19 opportunity given for former prisoners to return to service.

20 I also urge your Committees to require the Secretary of
21 the VA to place this Committee under his direct oversight.
22 In the last dozen years, it has been moved away from that
23 office and placed several layers down, under the Veterans
24 Benefit Administration. That placement has made it easy to
25 ignore its recommendation and easy to lose.

1 Third, I urge you to require the Secretary of Veterans
2 Affairs to obtain the official list of former prisoners of
3 war from the Department of Defense, and to limit VA benefits
4 to former POWs on the DoD list. I also urge you to direct
5 the Department of Veterans Affairs to locate all living POWs
6 on the DoD list, to invite those outside the VA system to
7 come in for protocol physicals to determine service-
8 connected disabilities, and to receive treatment in VA
9 medical centers and clinics.

10 In January of this year, I personally found a former
11 POW from Vietnam with 2,207 days of imprisonment, who has
12 never been approached, rated, or treated by the VA.

13 Fourth, given the small number of currently surviving
14 former prisoners of war and our ages, Congress can simplify
15 the process by directing the Department to grant 100 percent
16 service-connected disability to all verified former POWs and
17 to cease benefits to those in the VA system who cannot be
18 verified by DoD.

19 Fifth, we urge you to eliminate the veterans' means
20 test for access to health care, and to consider including
21 American civilians in the VA health care system who were
22 held as prisoners of war as a result of their contracted
23 support of our armed forces.

24 Finally, we urge the Congress and this nation to
25 continue to search for the remains of our fallen, to

1 identify those remains whenever possible, and to secure
2 their burial on American soil. Much has been accomplished
3 but much more needs to be done.

4 I thank you for your time today. Please read our
5 written testimony carefully, including addendums, and
6 continue to stand with those men and women who have stood
7 between their loved home and war's desolation and ensure
8 that the Department of Veterans Affairs lives up to its
9 charge to care for those who have borne the battle, their
10 surviving spouses, and their orphans.

11 [The prepared statement of Mr. Certain follows:]

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1 Chairman Moran. Commander Certain, thank you very much
2 for your testimony.

3 We will now recognize the National President of the
4 Paralyzed Veterans of American, David Zurfluh.

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1 STATEMENT OF DAVID ZURFLUH, NATIONAL PRESIDENT,
2 PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

3 Mr. Zurfluh. Chairman Moran, Chairman Takano, and
4 members of the Committees, I appreciate the opportunity to
5 speak with you this afternoon on behalf of the thousands of
6 veterans with spinal cord injuries and disease who depend on
7 the VA's Spinal Cord Injury System of Care. Right now,
8 advocates from our 33 chapters are in Arlington, Virginia,
9 watching this testimony live as they prepare to storm
10 Capitol Hill starting tomorrow.

11 My written statement addresses several critical issues
12 that impact catastrophically disabled veterans, and in my
13 limited time I would like to address three that are
14 particularly important: protection of the VA's Spinal Cord
15 Injury System of Care, improved access to long-term services
16 and supports, and increased access to adaptive vehicle and
17 housing assistance.

18 PVA firmly believes VA is the best provider of health
19 care for veterans with spinal cord injuries and disease.
20 The VA's SCI/D system of care provides a coordinated, life-
21 long continuum of services for veterans that have
22 significantly increased our lifespans. VA's specialized
23 system of care follows higher clinical standards than those
24 required in the private sector, but we are concerned that VA
25 continues to under staff facilities their capacity to treat

1 veterans will be diminished, and that could lead to closure
2 of VA facilities and reductions in service.

3 Staffing problems have a direct diverse impact on SCI/D
4 System of Care. PVA estimates there is a shortage of 600
5 SCI nurses. VA's ability to meet the highest standard of
6 care to our veterans, however, relies on more than just
7 having the right number of physicians and nurses. They also
8 need qualified and well-trained housekeepers.

9 Last year at some VA medical facilities staffing levels
10 for custodial employees dipped below 50 percent, which
11 heightens the health risks to veteran patients. PVA
12 strongly advocates for Congress to provide enough funding
13 for VA to reform its hiring practices and hire additional
14 personnel to meet demand for services in the SCI/D System of
15 Care, and ensure the positions, pay, and other incentives
16 they offer are competitive with the private sector.

17 We are also concerned about access to quality long-term
18 services and supports. We are proud to support the MISSION
19 Act's expansion of VA's comprehensive family caregiver
20 program to veterans who are seriously injured in service
21 prior to 9/11. VA's failure to meet congressional deadlines
22 for expansion of the program, however, means that some of
23 our members will never be able to take advantage of the
24 program because they have died during this delay. We need
25 you to provide the effective oversight to ensure that more

1 of our brothers and sisters, who have been waiting for this
2 program, are able to benefit before it is too late for them
3 too.

4 Many aging veterans with catastrophic disabilities are
5 also in need of institutional care. VA designated six
6 specialized long-term care facilities because of the unique
7 comprehensive medical needs of veterans with SCI/D.
8 However, there is only one SCI/D specific long-term care
9 facility west of the Mississippi. It is at the Long Beach
10 VA, and has a capacity of 12 inpatient beds and a long
11 waiting list. Although VA has identified the need to
12 provide more SCI/D long-term care facilities, the need
13 demands greater action on VA's part and from Congress.

14 Finally, PVA members seek greater access to adaptive
15 vehicle, housing, and assistance. Access to an adaptive
16 vehicle is essential to the mobility and the health of
17 catastrophically disabled veterans, who need a reliable
18 means of transportation to meet their work, family, and
19 health care needs. Because of the high cost to procure a
20 replacement vehicle, veterans may retain one that is no
21 longer reliable, which places them and those around them at
22 risk.

23 PVA asks for your support on H.R. 5761. This
24 legislation would allow eligible veterans to receive an
25 automobile allowance grant every 10 years for the purpose of

1 an adaptive vehicle.

2 We also seek greater access to housing adaptations, which
3 help catastrophically disabled veterans live in their
4 communities. To improve VA's Specially Adapted Housing
5 grant program, PVA advocates for an increase in its value
6 and the number of times it may be used, a supplemental
7 grant, and prioritization for veterans with ALS.

8 We are pleased that the House already passed H.R. 3504,
9 which would address these concerns. We also appreciate the
10 Senate companion legislation, S. 2022. We sincerely hope
11 Congress can give final approval to this legislation as
12 quickly as possible.

13 PVA's members have the same hopes and dreams as all
14 Americans: access to quality VA health care, timely,
15 benefits, and robust services that allow us to be
16 unstoppable.

17 On behalf of Paralyzed Veterans of America, I thank you
18 for your time and will answer any questions you may have.

19 [The prepared statement of Mr. Zurfluh follows:]

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1 Chairman Moran. National President Zurfluh, thank you
2 for your testimony.

3 We now recognize the National President and Chief
4 Executive Officer of the Student Veterans of America, Jared
5 Lyon. Mr. Lyon.

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1 STATEMENT OF JARED LYON, NATIONAL PRESIDENT AND
2 CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, STUDENT VETERANS OF
3 AMERICA

4 Mr. Lyon. Thank you, Chairmen Moran and Takano,
5 Ranking Members Tester and Roe, and members of the
6 Committees. Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of
7 America to present these policy priorities on behalf of our
8 community.

9 Established in 2008, SVA has a mission focused on
10 empowering student veterans, and we are committed to
11 providing an educational experience that goes beyond the
12 classroom. Through a dedicated network of more than 1,500
13 on-campus chapters, SVA aims to inspire yesterday's warriors
14 by connecting student veterans with a community of like-
15 minded chapter leaders.

16 There are over 100 student veterans, alumni, chapter
17 advisors, supporters, and our sixth annual class of VFW SVA
18 legislative fellows who are here with us today. Our SVA
19 chapters span the globe and endeavor to create a thriving,
20 on-campus community for student veterans, focused on
21 inclusivity, support, and advocating for policies and
22 resources that empower a generation.

23 Specifically, I would like to recognize our SVA chapter
24 at Colorado State University, our current National Chapter
25 of the Year, who is here today. For those of you in the

1 audience that are representing SVA, would you please stand
2 or raise your hand to be recognized.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Lyon. Thank you. Our research outlines the ways
5 in which student veterans outperform their traditional peers
6 on campus and in their communities. With higher grade point
7 averages, a greater overall success rate, and the propensity
8 to obtain degrees in high-demand fields, and better career
9 outcomes post-graduation, one fact is clear: today's
10 student veterans are worth the investment America has made
11 in them.

12 Our latest research is called the Lifecycle Atlas, and
13 it represents our effort to map the educational and career
14 journeys of student veterans from high school to the present
15 day. When complete, policymakers will be able to better
16 allocate valuable resources and transitioning servicemembers
17 will be able to make decisions informed by the aggregated
18 data of thousands of veterans who have gone before them, in
19 college and into their careers.

20 Based on our research and firsthand feedback from our
21 community, the contemporary needs of student veterans
22 directly inform our 2020 policy priorities. Most pressing,
23 we are focused on critical GI Bill improvements aimed at the
24 daily lives of student veterans, their families, survivors,
25 who are also using the GI Bill.

1 We want to bring attention to four unique improvements
2 that would substantially increase the success of the GI
3 Bill.

4 First, restoration of break pay; second, reforming
5 overseas housing allowance rates and the approval of study
6 abroad programs; third, creating greater safeguards for
7 students affected by natural disasters; and fourth,
8 affording servicemembers additional time to consider whether
9 or not the Montgomery GI Bill enrollment is the right
10 decision for them.

11 Also, we strongly support a focus on modernization
12 efforts within the VA, including designation of specific and
13 sufficient IT funding for all VBA education and training
14 modernization needs, the establishment of an Under Secretary
15 of Opportunity at VA, and an expansion of the modernization
16 of the GI Bill College Comparison tool.

17 I would like to take a moment to especially thank VA,
18 OIT, and VBA for the modernization efforts of the education
19 and loan guarantee programs. Just as student veterans
20 helped democratize higher education after World War II,
21 student veterans today are once again at the tip of the
22 spear for all post-traditional students. Today we are
23 highlighting the need for better data on student food and
24 housing insecurity, seeking increased access to childcare on
25 campus, and asking for support to better integrate health

1 and well-being services on campuses.

2 While outside the direct jurisdiction of these
3 Committees, the Higher Education Act reauthorization affects
4 major aspects of the educational opportunities, choices,
5 protections that impact student veterans. SVA will continue
6 to prioritize keeping the student veteran voice a key part
7 of the reauthorization efforts as negotiations continue.

8 Above all else, we are calling for an end to the damage
9 caused by the longstanding 90/10 loophole. Thank you to the
10 many members who have already stepped up to support us on
11 this issue over the past year. In 2019, we saw the
12 bipartisan bill in the Senate and the provision within the
13 House College Affordability Act to close the loophole.
14 Based on the growing support, we firmly believe that this
15 year the 90/10 loophole is finally closed.

16 At SVA we use the term "the best of a generation"
17 describing all veterans. In our nation's history, whether
18 they were drafted or volunteered, deployed overseas or
19 defended the home front, veterans have always been the best
20 of their generation. From the founding of our country to
21 present day, it continues to prove true that educated
22 veterans are the key to solving whatever problems our nation
23 faces. This is the legacy we know student veterans carry
24 and what our 2020 policy priorities support.

25 It is an honor to be here with you all today, and we

1 look forward to empowering this and every generation of
2 veterans with your support. Thank you, and I look forward
3 to your questions.

4 [The prepared statement of Mr. Lyons follows:]

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1 Chairman Moran. Mr. Lyon, thank you very much.

2 Now we recognize the Former National President of the

3 Gold Star Wives of America, Crystal Wenum.

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1 STATEMENT OF CRYSTAL WENUM, FORMER NATIONAL
2 PRESIDENT, GOLD STAR WIVES OF AMERICA

3 Ms. Wenum. Chairman Moran, Chairman Takano, Ranking
4 Member Tester, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished members
5 of both the Senate and House Committees on Veterans'
6 Affairs, I am pleased to be here today to testify on behalf
7 of Gold Star Wives of America to share our legislative
8 priorities. I had the honor of testifying before you last
9 year and I am honored to do so again.

10 My name is Crystal Wenum and I am the widow of Staff
11 Sergeant James O. Wenum, a Vietnam veteran who served during
12 the Tet Offensive. He died on May 8, 1982, leaving me to
13 raise our five- and three-year old children.

14 But in addition to a Gold Star Wife I am also a Gold
15 Star Daughter. My father was killed in action at the Chosin
16 Reservoir in Korea on November 29, 1950. My mother was six
17 months pregnant with me and had a one-year old son at the
18 time. My mother joined Gold Star Wives in 1951 and I have
19 literally grown up with this wonderful organization. I have
20 remained active with Gold Star Wives and I am proud to have
21 served as its National President.

22 Gold Star Wives is grateful for all the public laws
23 that have been passed in the years since 1946. These laws
24 provide much needed benefits for surviving spouses and
25 children of our military service members. In particular, I

1 would like to thank you for ending the SBP-DIC, commonly
2 known as the "widow's tax." This has been an injustice for
3 decades, and by taking action this year and eliminating this
4 unfair tax you have helped over 66,000 members of our
5 community, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

6 But there is still more work to do to help the more
7 than 400,000 Gold Star Spouses in this country. My
8 testimony today will be addressing some of the inequities
9 and concerns that currently exist.

10 Dependency and Indemnity Compensation, "to care for him
11 who have borne the battle and for his widow and orphan."
12 These words from Abraham Lincoln Second Inaugural Address in
13 1985, succinctly states the sacred promise our country has
14 made to our veterans and survivors. The VA stated, in
15 September of 2018, that there were 416,438 surviving spouses
16 who receive DIC. The flat monthly rate has not been
17 increased except for cost of living adjustments since 1993.

18 When DIC is compared to payments to surviving spouses
19 of other federal employees, DIC lags behind by 12 percent.
20 The other federal survivor benefit plans pay a surviving
21 spouse 55 percent of the spouse's salary. We are pleased
22 that legislation has been introduced in both the Senate and
23 the House of Representatives to increase DIC from 43 to 55
24 percent, which would bring parity with other federal
25 survivor programs. I urge you to support Senate 1047 and

1 H.R. 3221 to fix this inequity.

2 Eliminate the remarriage penalty for surviving spouses.
3 GSW would like your assistance in changing current law that
4 binds surviving spouses to widowhood. Under current law, if
5 the surviving spouse remarries before the age of 57, he/she
6 forfeits lifesaving benefits afforded to them. GSW has
7 realized age 57 is an arbitrary age that penalizes surviving
8 spouses.

9 Other concerns. H.R. 95 and Senate 91, the Homeless
10 Veteran and Children Act, would allow per diem payments to
11 be extended to homeless veterans' children under
12 comprehensive service programs. GSW supports these bills
13 and hopes that Congress will pass them in a timely manner so
14 that homeless veterans' children can be taken care of in the
15 same manner as the veteran.

16 Being intimately familiar with the devastation of
17 death, GSW is extremely concerned with the overwhelming
18 number of veterans and active duty servicemembers who die by
19 suicide every year. GSW supports any effort to reduce the
20 rate of service-connected deaths by suicide.

21 In conclusion, Gold Star Wives of America is
22 appreciative for existing laws that provide vital benefits
23 and support for surviving spouses and children of our
24 military members who gave their lives in service to our
25 country. With every flag-draped casket that is flown home,

1 another family suffers devastating loss. We honor their
2 memories by asking for your help in rectifying the
3 inequities we have presented. Our benefits are not
4 entitlements but have been earned through service and
5 sacrifice that never goes away.

6 Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify on
7 behalf of Gold Star Wives of America. I am available for
8 any questions you might have.

9 [The prepared statement of Ms. Wenum follows:]

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1 Chairman Moran. Mrs. Wenum, thank you for your
2 testimony and thank you for your and your family's service
3 and sacrifice to our country.

4 We now recognize the Senior Director of Governmental
5 Relations for the Veterans-Wounded Warrior Care, Military
6 Officers Association of America, Rene Campos.

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1 STATEMENT OF RENE CAMPOS, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF
2 GOVERNMENT RELATIONS FOR VETERANS-WOUNDED WARRIOR
3 CARE, MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

4 Ms. Campos. Chairmen Moran and Takano, Ranking Members
5 Tester and Roe, and Committee members, thank you for the
6 opportunity to share MOAA's legislative priorities for
7 veterans.

8 Three of our top priorities today are suicide
9 prevention and mental health, service-connected health
10 conditions and toxic exposures, and women veterans'
11 programs.

12 I will begin by painting a picture of three individuals
13 engaging with the VA across the spectrum, stories indicating
14 our work is not done. On one end is a VA employee whose
15 workload has quadrupled since the MISSION Act, saying it is
16 taking longer to get veterans care and there is no budget or
17 staff to do the work. Morale is the lowest it has ever
18 been.

19 Then there is a 63-year-old veteran admitted to his VA
20 medical center, threatening suicide, and in a diabetic
21 emergency. He left the hospital disoriented with 11
22 different medications, unsure how he was going to remember
23 to take all those medications. His family had to press VA
24 for help in assisting him.

25 At the other end of the spectrum is an honorably

1 discharged Special Forces veteran who ends up being charged
2 with a felony as a civilian. Fortunately, he was enrolled
3 in the Veterans treatment courts program where VA diagnosed
4 and treated him for PTSD and TBI. Without VTC, he would not
5 have received treatment or become a fully functioning
6 citizen.

7 At the center of MOAA's priorities and these stories is
8 VHA's transformation. MOAA greatly appreciates the
9 difficulty and the impressive progress that VA has made in
10 implementing the MISSION Act. It took hard work and
11 unrelenting communication and openness to collaboration to
12 get the measure signed into law. It will take no less
13 effort to successfully implement the law.

14 Sadly, we are frustrated and disappointed by the
15 limited updates that VSOs have received since the MISSION
16 Act implementation. We urge VA to use stakeholders as a
17 resource in implementing these massive reforms.

18 One important priority area is suicide prevention and
19 mental health programs. While VHA has made substantial
20 progress in enhancing these programs, more must be done to
21 strengthen the relationships between veterans and community
22 partners. Veterans like myself still struggle with
23 understanding the system and how to navigate the complex VA
24 systems. Change is slow, and many facilities still deliver
25 one-off care, or more veterans are pushed out of care before

1 they are ready, as I mentioned with the 63-year-old veteran.

2 MOAA believes many of the suicide and mental health

3 bills before the Committees can really make a difference.

4 However, these efforts should be synchronized and

5 coordinated, and if not, VA will be tasked with just

6 delivering another program to its already full plate. MOAA

7 urges the Committees to continue making suicide prevention

8 and access to mental health care a top priority, ensuring

9 efforts are integrated with the President's PREVENTS

10 roadmap.

11 Our second priority area is service-connected

12 conditions and toxic exposures. MOAA truly appreciates the

13 Committees championing the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans

14 Act. However, each day, new exposures are illnesses

15 surface, while VA continues to struggle to collect data and

16 records to connect exposures to health conditions, critical

17 information really only DoD can provide. It is time for

18 Congress to establish a legislative framework to address

19 these and future exposures.

20 MOAA, in our close partnership with United Health

21 Foundation, has produced a series of America's Health

22 Rankings and Health of Those Who Serve reports like this

23 one. It shows the unique demands of military service and

24 how it can affect long-term health. Our next report will be

25 published in May, and we look forward to meeting with the

1 Committees to share our findings. MOAA asks the Committees
2 to assure veterans that they will receive the appropriate
3 health care and benefits that they earned through their
4 service-connected conditions.

5 Finally, each year, VA chips away at increasing funding
6 and outreach programs to serve women veterans, yet gaps
7 persist in delivering their care and benefits. Recently, a
8 number of VSOs gathered to talk about these gaps and our
9 priorities this year for women. Issues such as removing
10 cultural and safety barriers and increasing funding and
11 services for infertility, research, mental health,
12 transitional programs, and childcare. MOAA urges the
13 Committees to reach an agreement on the provisions in the
14 Deborah Sampson Act and get it signed into law, so women
15 will have equal access to earned benefits and health care.

16 In closing, the next two years are pivotal for VHA
17 transformation, and it will take a village of stakeholders
18 to help implement these mandates. I would like to recognize
19 the members of MOAA in the audience to stand, and then share
20 with you that we look forward to working together with the
21 Committees and VA to successfully implement these mandates.

22 Thank you and I look forward to your questions.

23 [The prepared statement of Ms. Campos follows:]

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1 Chairman Moran. Would you like your MOAA members to
2 stand?

3 [Applause.]

4 Chairman Moran. Ms. Campos, thank you very much.

5 Now our National President of Fleet Reserve
6 Association, Donna Jansky. Donna, welcome.

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1 STATEMENT OF DONNA JANSKY, NATIONAL PRESIDENT,
2 FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION

3 Ms. Jansky. Chairman Takano, Chairman Moran, Ranking
4 Members, and members of the Committees, good afternoon. My
5 name is Donna Jansky, National President of the Fleet
6 Reserve Association, the first woman to hold this position.
7 I served on active duty in the U.S. Navy for 8 years, and
8 then completed 16 years as a reservist, include 1 year
9 activation in Desert Shield/Desert Storm. I received an
10 honorable discharge in September 1999 at the rank of
11 aviation structural mechanic, chief petty office. I am a
12 resident of Peabody, Massachusetts, and a life member of the
13 FRA.

14 I am here today representing the concerns of the oldest
15 sea service association that has been around for 95 years.
16 FRA is thankful that the VA is finally adjudicating Blue
17 Water Navy claims since January 1, 2020. This change was
18 required by FRA-supported legislation, sponsored by Chairman
19 Takano and Ranking Member Roe, and by federal court mandate.

20 Prior to these measures, only Vietnam war veterans who
21 served on the ground or within Vietnam's inland waterways
22 were eligible to receive disability compensation and other
23 benefits based on the presumption of herbicide exposure.
24 FRA is grateful to Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Roe
25 for their efforts to help sink Blue Water Navy veterans to

1 finally get their benefits they earned.

2 We hope both Committees will provide adequate oversight
3 to ensure that the VA adjudicates these claims promptly and
4 fairly. FRA is supporting the Fair Care for Vietnam
5 Veterans Act that would increase by four the presumptive
6 conditions linked to exposure of the Agent Orange herbicide.

7 FRA is deeply concerned about veteran suicide, and that
8 is why FRA is supporting the Commander John Scott Hannon
9 Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act, sponsored by
10 Senators Jerry Moran and Jon Tester, Chairman and Ranking
11 Member, respectively. The bill is a comprehensive and
12 aggressive approach to connect more veterans with the mental
13 health care that they need and earned. Their bill seeks to
14 improve VA care by bolstering the VA's mental health
15 workforce and increasing rural or hard-to-reach veterans'
16 access to VA care, while making sure veterans have access to
17 alternative and local treatment options, like animal
18 therapy, outdoor sports and activity, yoga, and acupuncture.

19 FRA hopes that this legislation will be fast-tracked to
20 ensure passage as soon as possible.

21 The Association also applauds VA launching the Solid
22 Start program, to inform new veterans about benefits and
23 support services at VA in an effort to ease transition
24 issues. The VA believes this will help with suicide
25 prevention. These veterans will get three phone calls from

1 the VA. The importance of the phone calls to new veterans
2 should not be understated in eliminating the sense of
3 loneliness and isolation for these new veterans.

4 Last year, the FRA welcomed Chairman Takano's creation
5 of the congressional task force to address barriers that
6 women veterans face when trying to obtain VA benefits and
7 health care. The Association supports efforts to increase
8 access to gender-specific medical and mental health care to
9 meet unique needs of women servicemembers and transitioning
10 women veterans.

11 Congresswoman Julia Brownley serves as the chairman of
12 the task force which endorsed the FRA-supported Deborah
13 Sampson Act that passed the House in November 2019, and sent
14 to the Senate for further consideration. FRA strongly urges
15 the Senate to pass this important legislation.

16 FRA believes congressional oversight of ongoing
17 implementation of VA technology upgrades is vital to
18 ensuring improvements to the system. FRA wants to ensure
19 adequate funding for DoD and VA health care resource sharing
20 in delivering seamless, cost-effective, quality services to
21 personnel wounded in combat and other veterans and their
22 families.

23 In closing, we would like to thank the administration
24 for offering a robust VA 2021 budget with more than a 10
25 percent increase for our veterans. Thank you.

1 [The prepared statement of Ms. Jansky follows:]
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1 Chairman Moran. Ms. Jansky, thank you very much.

2 Now Jeremy Butler, the Chief Executive Officer of Iraq

3 and Afghanistan Veterans of America. Mr. Butler.

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1 STATEMENT OF JEREMY BUTLER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE
2 OFFICER, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA

3 Mr. Butler. Thank you, Chairman Moran, Chairman
4 Takano, Ranking Member Tester, Ranking Member Roe, and
5 distinguished members of the Committees. On behalf of IAVA
6 and our more than 425,000 members, many of whom are with us
7 today, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you.

8 Our 2020 priorities remain the same as when I testified
9 before this panel last year. These are the six issues that
10 our members tell us are the most pressing. The big six
11 contain the challenges and the opportunities for progress
12 that IAVA members care about most, and see as areas where we
13 can uniquely make an impact.

14 They include mental health and suicide prevention, VA
15 reform, burn pits and toxic exposures, defense of the post-
16 9/11 GI Bill and education benefits, support for women
17 veterans, and empowering veterans who want to use medical
18 cannabis.

19 I am incredibly proud of what we all accomplished
20 together this past year on these and other priorities.
21 Because of the bipartisan work of so many, the Burn Pits
22 Accountability Act was signed into law, DoD's attempt to
23 limit the transferability of the GI Bill benefit was
24 reversed, the Deborah Sampson Act passed in the House, and
25 the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care

1 Improvement Act unanimously passed through the Senate VA
2 Committee.

3 But as is too often the case we are now in a situation
4 where there is an urgent need for additional movement but a
5 completely unacceptable lack of coordinated, timely, whole-
6 of-government action to address these priorities and
7 implement long-term solutions. Admittedly, the issues are
8 complex and there will always be disagreement on the
9 details, but inaction is guaranteed to be a failing
10 strategy. There are less than 10 months left in the 116th
11 Congress and with much of the country and our government
12 focused on the presidential election, there is little time
13 left to make substantive advancements on these priorities.

14 Fortunately, we have bipartisan policies that address
15 many of the issues facing our veteran community. But if
16 they are not treated with the urgency they require, if this
17 body does not work with the VA and the administration to
18 take collective action to advance these pieces of
19 legislation to the President's desk, then we will find
20 ourselves, one year from now, having to explain to the
21 country why we failed to turn a collective desire to help
22 into substantive legislative action and the delivery of real
23 results for veterans.

24 As mentioned, some of our members are with us today.
25 All of them have amazing stories. Most include front line

1 contact in the battle to stop the suicide crisis, either
2 directly through their own struggles or from seeing their
3 battle buddies lose their own fights and die by suicide. I
4 encourage you and your staff to meet with them and hear
5 their stories.

6 Most continue to win their fight not because of the VA
7 but in spite of it. They do it by exchanging the
8 traditional medications prescribed to them and trying
9 alternative therapies, often cannabis. They do it by
10 finding others who know what they are going through and help
11 them find a path out.

12 That is why we are here today in support of the
13 Commander John Scott Hannon Act. It will allow the country
14 to make real progress in the fight to end veteran suicide.
15 It needs to be brought to the full Senate for a vote, it
16 needs a champion to sponsor it in the House, and it needs to
17 land on the President's desk for signature as soon as
18 possible. We have heard the talk of ending the suicide
19 crisis for too long. We need action.

20 Similarly, every day women veterans enter VA facilities
21 around the country and are not recognized for their service,
22 or worse. According to VA, in April 2019, a shocking one in
23 four women reported being harassed at a VA facility. Every
24 day women veterans are looked past in favor of the familiar
25 image of a man serving in uniform. Until women veterans are

1 as recognized and supported as their male counterparts, our
2 work will not be done.

3 Again, time is short. 2020 is the year the Deborah
4 Sampson Act must be passed into law. We must ensure that
5 women veterans are receiving care equal to their male
6 counterparts, and we must ensure that VA is a safe place for
7 all veterans.

8 IAVA is extremely supportive of the provisions in the
9 House-passed Deborah Sampson Act to address sexual
10 harassment and assault at VA facilities, and urges the
11 Senate to adopt similar language. This can be on the
12 President's desk this month.

13 We also believe that the culture at VA will not change
14 overnight and the current VA motto, which excludes women
15 veterans must also be changed. In 2020, IAVA will continue
16 to fight for the passage of the Honoring All Veterans Act,
17 which will create a VA motto representative of all veterans.

18 I urge you to take action now on these and all of the
19 policy and legislative measures detailed in IAVA's submitted
20 written testimony. This will ensure that veterans are not
21 forced to continue to wait for the support and care they
22 earned. The amazing reality is that we have an incredible
23 opportunity to make real progress on every one of the big
24 six, but the window of opportunity for action is short. If
25 Congress does not act now, we will back in this chamber one

1 year from now asking why.

2 Members of both Committees, thank you again for the
3 opportunity to share IAVA's views with you today. I look
4 forward to answering any questions you may have and working
5 with the Committees in the future. Thank you.

6 [The prepared statement of Mr. Butler follows:]

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1 Chairman Moran. Mr. Butler, thank you very much.
2 Chairman Takano has joined us. The House vote has
3 apparently concluded. And I would recognize him and then
4 the two Ranking Members for their opening statements and
5 then we will proceed to questions of our witnesses.

6 Chairman Takano, my colleague and counterpart, welcome.

7 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TAKANO

8 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Chairman Moran, and good
9 afternoon everyone. I am again honored to be here with
10 Chairman Moran, Senator Tester, Ranking Member Roe, and all
11 the members of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans'
12 Affairs.

13 Today we have already heard testimony from several
14 veteran service organizations, and I want to thank and
15 welcome the American Ex-Prisoners of War, Paralyzed Veterans
16 of America, Student Veterans of America, Gold Star Wives of
17 America, Military Officers Association of America, Fleet
18 Reserve Association, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of
19 America. It is a pleasure to hear from each one of you--it
20 is a pleasure to have heard from each one of you this
21 afternoon. I did miss the Ex-Prisoners of War, and the
22 Paralyzed Veterans of America, I heard part of your
23 testimony. I will be sure to go over the written testimony,
24 and I apologize that we had votes coinciding with this
25 hearing.

1 These hearings are critical so that Congress can hear
2 directly from the organization that work with and support
3 veterans and their families every day. This work provides
4 insights into the challenges faced by veterans and
5 opportunities for improving VA's policies and programs.

6 I did appreciate the testimony we heard today from the
7 entirety of VA's jurisdiction, from health care to
8 disability assistance to educational benefits and housing to
9 Guard and Reserve parity and supporting the families of
10 servicemembers.

11 As we work to address these issues, it is important
12 that we maintain open lines of communication with all of you
13 so we can work collaborative to support veterans and their
14 families. The testimony you have all provided will serve as
15 a framework for our Committees' efforts this year.

16 I am very pleased that many of the priorities that have
17 already been shared today have been drafted into legislation
18 that this Committee has passed and already sent over to the
19 Senate--hint, hint. Together we have passed legislation to
20 expand specially adaptive housing, make improvements to the
21 GI Bill comparison tool, and create VA's fourth
22 administration and support families of homeless veterans.

23 Now I am committed to working with Chairman Moran and
24 the entire Senate to see that these important priorities go
25 to the President and be signed into law, but much work

1 remains, and I am confident that by working in a bipartisan
2 manner we can accomplish even more of our VSOs' priorities.

3 I want to especially thank Student Veterans of America
4 for highlighting one of my top priorities--closing the 90/10
5 loophole, and I want to thank all of you here today. As an
6 educator, ensuring our veterans receive a quality education
7 is paramount.

8 The existing 90/10 loophole has encouraged bad actors
9 to exploit America's veterans for their own gain, leaving
10 student veterans with worthless diplomas, and often
11 sometimes in debt. While taking care of veterans is my
12 priority, we must also ensure that we are good fiduciaries
13 of taxpayer funds by no longer enabling these bad actors to
14 commit fraud, waste, and abuse.

15 I am encouraged by the work the House and Senate has
16 done to finally fix this technicality. You have my
17 commitment that I will do all I can as Chairman and as a
18 member of the House Education and Labor Committee to see
19 this loophole finally closed once and for all this year.

20 Now we depend on our veteran service organizations to
21 provide this Committee with your expertise and advocacy to
22 hold the administration accountable and work to fulfill the
23 promises that we have made to our veterans. I want to thank
24 each of you for the great service you do for our veterans
25 and their families, and I certainly did appreciate the

1 testimony you already gave.

2 Mr. Chairman, before I yield back my time I wish to
3 express to my colleague, Dr. Roe, and all the Tennesseans
4 affected by the tornado. My thoughts and prayers are with
5 you, your families, and your friends.

6 Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back the balance of
7 my time.

8 Chairman Moran. Chairman Takano, thank you very much.
9 Let me know recognize the Ranking Member, my colleague,
10 Senator Tester.

11 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

12 Senator Tester. Thank you, Chairman Moran, and good
13 afternoon. I want to welcome all the folks in the seven
14 veteran organizations that are here today. It is an honor
15 to have you with us. I want to thank you for your work and
16 the work that you do for the veterans and families across
17 this country and especially in Montana.

18 I have said it before. We are here because Congress
19 should take its cues from you. The members of your
20 organizations are beneficiaries of the VA health care and
21 benefits and they utilize those programs daily. You know
22 better than any of us how the VA is performing nationwide
23 and the improvements that should be made on behalf of
24 veterans and their families. We hold these hearings because
25 only VSOs can help Congress focus on what veterans need and

1 how to make sure that the VA is equipped to deliver on those
2 needs.

3 I need to hear from your organizations whether the VA--
4 and I have--is operating in a transparent manner as they
5 execute the largest overhaul of veterans' health care in a
6 generation, and that is the implementation of the MISSION
7 Act. I need to know your view--and I have--on gender
8 disparity at the VA and what Congress can do to push the VA
9 to provide more equitable treatment to our women veterans.
10 I want to know how toxic exposure impacts your veterans,
11 from Blue Water Navy to Agent Orange presumptions to burn
12 pits. And when it comes to mental health treatment and
13 suicide prevention, I need to know where the VA is doing a
14 good job and where they need to improve.

15 As you know, a lot was accomplished for the veterans
16 last Congress, including passage of that VA MISSION Act, the
17 Appeals Modernization, the Colmery GI Bill. That list goes
18 on. It is imperative that the VA provide regular
19 opportunities to hear from veteran organization such as
20 yours and others about implementing these laws. VA needs to
21 better understand how the decisions it makes affects the
22 veterans receiving benefits and health care from the VA, and
23 VA cannot gain that understanding unless it does, as my
24 parents say, "You have one mouth and two ears. Act
25 accordingly." In other words, listen.

1 We are here to listen to you. Your voice and your
2 members provide an important source of information as we
3 attempt to do right by all veterans. I want to welcome you
4 all again. Thank you for your testimony and thank you for
5 what you and your originations do on behalf of all veterans
6 and their families.

7 Chairman Moran. Thank you, Senator Tester. Now
8 Congressman Roe, the Ranking Member of the House.

9 OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

10 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank all of you
11 all for being here today. It is a pleasure to be here with
12 my colleagues. And caring for those who have returned home,
13 bearing the wounds of war is no easy or simple task. No
14 less importantly and equally challenging is the need to care
15 for those families who are left to grieve and recover after
16 the loss of a family member due to military service, and
17 that was an incredibly compelling story that you did not get
18 to know your father, and your husband died with you to lead
19 two small children. Those children that you have area also
20 part of the sacrifice that this country has made, so thank
21 you so very much for that. And yet every day the men and
22 women of your organizations work diligently to empower
23 veterans and their families to do just that.

24 Before I continue with my opening remarks I would like
25 to take a moment to personally thank each of you for service

1 and sacrifice. I also want to welcome your national
2 leadership teams and members of your state chapters, and I
3 also want to say a special hello and thank you to folks from
4 my home state of Tennessee who are in the audience today.
5 If you are here, those from Tennessee, please stand and
6 raise your hand to be recognized.

7 [Applause.]

8 Dr. Roe. And Mr. Lyon, I understand that you and your
9 wife have recently welcomed your first child, a baby boy,
10 into the world. As an obstetrician I thank you for that.

11 [Laughter.]

12 Dr. Roe. And congratulations to you and your family,
13 and enjoy this time because I promise you it will not seem
14 like it but it will go very fast.

15 As many of you know, I have decided to retire at the
16 end of this Congress, and usually when a member decides to
17 retire they have done a poll and they are 20 points behind.
18 That is not my case. I actually do want to retire and be
19 home with my family. But it has been an incredible honor
20 and privilege for me to attend these hearings throughout my
21 nearly 12 years in the U.S. Congress, and I appreciate the
22 work your organizations do every single day to keep us
23 focused on the true needs of our veterans. And I know I
24 will be leaving Washington, D.C. in great hands.

25 With your support and guidance, there have been

1 transformative changes in the VA over the last few years.
2 Veterans have greater access to care, greater control over
3 their health care decisions than ever before, and that has
4 led to veterans seeking more VA care and express a greater
5 trust in VA services.

6 For the first time in history, veterans can use their
7 GI Bill benefits whenever they come. Mr. Lyons, I remember
8 very carefully, and I saw the student veterans here, how
9 many hours we sat and talked and debated the GI Bill. And
10 long after we are all gone and anyone knows our names, you
11 are absolutely correct--young people will be changing the
12 direction of this country because of the GI Bill, and I
13 thank you for that.

14 Veteran unemployment has reached near all-time lows.
15 Fewer veterans are sleeping on the streets. Fewer veterans
16 are dependent on opioids. Veterans are getting their
17 appeals for disability compensation decided faster and more
18 efficiently. And after decades of work, this was mentioned,
19 the Blue Water Navy Vietnam veterans are finally beginning
20 to receive the benefits they have earned, and I am very
21 pleased with that. We have repealed, as has been mentioned,
22 the "widow's tax" on dependents and indemnity compensation
23 benefits. This success is due to sustained bipartisan
24 congressional commitment to prioritize veterans' needs, the
25 veteran-first focus of this administration, and the

1 continued advocacy of organizations just like yours.

2 There is still much work ahead of us. Supporting
3 returning veterans and their families to build productive,
4 rewarding lives following military service is one of
5 Congress' highest callings. We need your feedback to know
6 what is working and what is not, and what veterans and their
7 survivors actually need to achieve their full potential.

8 Looking ahead, we must remain steadfast in our efforts
9 to combat the suicide crisis, as has been mentioned, empower
10 veterans to utilize their earned benefits to succeed in
11 their civilian lives, realign VA medical centers to better
12 serve veterans for generations to come, oversee the
13 implementation of the expanded caregiver program, care for
14 those that have been exposed to toxins in service, and set
15 high expectations so that every VA medical center, clinical
16 benefits offices, cemeteries, provides the highest quality
17 service.

18 I am hopeful that our Committee works with the Senate
19 and your organizations so we can build on the successes of
20 the past three years and serve our nation's veterans and
21 their families just as you have served us.

22 With that I yield back.

23 Chairman Moran. Thank you, Dr. Roe. Thank you very
24 much. Let's now begin questions. Each member will be
25 allowed three minutes on the clock. I will try to start the

1 standard--do not start the clock yet until I ask my
2 question--I will try to create the standard that we all can
3 abide by.

4 Mr. Certain, you caught my attention with the story of
5 the POW serving so many days in imprisonment who yet never
6 had any dealings with the VA, never enrolled, never received
7 any benefits. It continues to dismay me but amaze me at the
8 number of veterans who do not know what they are entitled to
9 and never enroll in the VA.

10 My best understanding of this issue, for a solution, is
11 that we need to have a better and thorough cooperation
12 between the Department of Defense and the Department of
13 Veterans Affairs so that when someone leaves military
14 service, at their choice, but almost automatically they
15 become certainly knowledgeable, if not involved in the
16 Department of Veterans Affairs and the benefits that it
17 provides.

18 Any thoughts that I should know about that theory, or
19 anything else you would like for me to know about that
20 point?

21 Mr. Certain. Yes, sir. I served as the VA Advisory
22 Committee on Former Prisoners of War for several years, and
23 our committee continuously urged the VA to get the DoD list
24 and to reach out to anybody that was not in their system.
25 And so far as I can tell that has never been done. And so

1 that is why I say we must insist that the VA follow through
2 with the DoD list.

3 We are old people, you know. We came home 47 years
4 ago. And so any improvements being made are now being made
5 with the currently serving as they leave active duty, but
6 there are a lot of out there in the world who either chose
7 not to engage with the VA or did not know to engage with the
8 VA when we came home. But if we retired, the DoD knows
9 where we are because they send us a monthly paycheck.

10 Chairman Moran. Thank you for that. Ms. Campos, you
11 mentioned implementation of the MISSION Act. First of all,
12 I would tell you that I too share your view that we need
13 more communications. The implementation--that the
14 information has been handed to the VISNs and local hospital
15 officials to meet and to have conversations with veterans.
16 We need to make certain that that occurs. We need to make
17 certain that you and other organizations are included in
18 that conversation.

19 MISSION, in my view, is a great opportunity to enhance
20 the benefits and care and treatment of our veterans, but if
21 we do not get it right we are making a huge mistake for our
22 veterans and the future. This is not something that if we
23 get it wrong it is easily corrected, and we need to have it
24 right from the beginning. I will encourage the VA to reach
25 out to all VSOs to have those conversations. As I am

1 reaching out to them, we continue to discover that people
2 are talking to us, as a member of this Committee, as my
3 staff who deals with veterans, so many people do not know,
4 not just veterans but also the providers. If this does not
5 work we are missing a great opportunity.

6 But what you said that was most compelling to me was an
7 indication that the VA continues to chip away on programs
8 for women. And I was slow in writing down your comments,
9 but that is approximately what you were indicating. And Ms.
10 Jansky also talked about this topic. Mr. Butler did as
11 well. Perhaps all of you.

12 But the three over here made this point, and it
13 troubles me that if it is really true that we are chipping
14 away--I suppose I am more understanding if we are not
15 getting where we need to be, but if we are moving in the
16 opposite direction, your words "chipping away" caught my
17 attention. And I would be interested in knowing what you
18 are seeing that we need to know about.

19 Ms. Campos. I appreciate that question, and I guess I
20 could say that having worked in this space for 14 years at
21 MOAA, and being a user of VA health care while I was on
22 active duty and post retirement, we have been working for
23 years to get ahead of this bow wave of women that are
24 leaving military service, coming in in larger numbers. Dr.
25 Patty Hayes has talked about it over the years, about, you

1 know, needing to get ahead of this. And the bow wave has
2 been here, but we are still not seeing things moving as
3 quickly, you know, in terms of facilities and
4 infrastructure, you know, getting up to speed as quickly as
5 it needs to be.

6 I can actually say, in my own VA here in D.C.,
7 somewhere between the MISSION Act being implemented there
8 was like a communication breakdown. I have not even
9 received any information from my VA. I am the one that is
10 having to go out and get information, connect. And I have a
11 great provider. And there's been great things, you know,
12 the women's pavilion at the VA medical center, but it still
13 seems to be the veteran and women having to make, you know,
14 that connection. That is why I mentioned the relationships
15 between VA, the veterans, and then community partners.

16 But things are happening but they are not happening
17 fast enough to get this bow wave that, oh, by the way, is
18 already here.

19 Chairman Moran. Thank you very much for that insight.
20 Chairman Takano.

21 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Chairman Moran. To Mr.
22 Zurfluh of PVA, in your testimony, PVA highlighted the need
23 of severely disabled veterans to have additional adaptive
24 housing grants. You are correct that we should prioritize
25 the most vulnerable veterans in our communities. I also

1 agree that providing these veterans with additional housing
2 grants will ensure that the younger veterans who qualify for
3 the grants maintain a higher quality of life.

4 Can you speak on why Congress must hasten to put a
5 specially adaptive housing bill before the President, and
6 how many individuals this bill would help today?

7 Mr. Zurfluh. Thank you, Chairman Takano. Yes, when it
8 comes to adaptive housing for military members technology
9 plays a huge factor, and it is ever evolving. And some of
10 the technology breakthroughs could strengthen and improve
11 the lives of a lot of our members, and as they initially use
12 these adaptive housing grants they do not have that
13 opportunity as technology evolves. And they similarly run
14 short and the chances to improve the quality of their life,
15 the burden tends to come on them and the costs tend to come
16 on them. And if we can give them the access to kind of
17 align as technology advances happen, we can hopefully
18 improve their lives and eventually maybe lessen the cost
19 that they will face in the future.

20 Chairman Takano. And how many veterans are we talking
21 about here?

22 Mr. Zurfluh. I do not have the exact number but I can
23 talk to you offline and get that information.

24 Chairman Takano. Okay. Great. Thank you. Ms.
25 Campos, in your written testimony you talked about the 90/10

1 loophole. Specifically you mentioned that Congress should
2 pass S. 2857, the Protect Vets Act of 2019. I know that
3 closing the loophole was a longstanding priority for most
4 veteran service organizations. Can you quickly--including
5 the SVA, but can you quickly speak to why this loophole
6 needs to be closed and how the loophole is related to the
7 quality of education?

8 Ms. Campos. As we have seen over the years there has
9 been a lot of differences between student veterans and
10 taking advantage of these veterans that are becoming, you
11 know, that are going through and getting their degrees. And
12 we have seen that there is a need for more protections, and
13 to end up having schools comply and be more forthcoming is
14 that we need to close this loop so that there is not an
15 opportunity to take care of veterans, or take advantage of
16 veterans without, you know, having those protections in
17 place.

18 I would actually like to turn it over to my colleague.
19 My expertise is a little more in veterans' health care. But
20 we work with many of the organizations here because we
21 believe strongly that needs to be taken care of.

22 Chairman Takano. Great. Thank you.

23 Mr. Lyon. Thank you. Look, it is pretty
24 straightforward. The 90/10 loophole is really on there
25 because we ironically tried to put protections in the

1 original Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. So this is
2 an issue for a longstanding period of time.

3 Generally speaking, we want to ensure that no
4 proprietary institution, whether it be an education
5 institution or otherwise, is wholly subsidized by federal
6 dollars, and thus, it should be a relatively easy benchmark
7 for organizations to meet at least 10 percent of their
8 revenue coming from people who pay out of pocket versus
9 utilizing federal tuition funds.

10 All that is to say is the loophole does not treat VA
11 dollars, so the GI Bill, or DoD dollars, so tuition
12 assistance, the same way that it does the litmus test for
13 all others. And really, with that loophole being open, it
14 opens a wider door to have really a target on the back of
15 veterans and active duty servicemembers for their tuition
16 dollars, because they are not counted the same way.

17 So by closing the loophole we really just make sure
18 that all federal dollars are treated the same way and that
19 the standard is adhered to universally, across the board, in
20 the intent of the law.

21 And, sir, we thank you terribly for all the efforts
22 that you have made to lead this, because it is really
23 important, and we are on the precipice of being able to
24 actually close it this year.

25 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Lyon. I yield back,

1 Mr. Chairman.

2 Chairman Moran. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

3 Ranking Member Roe.

4 Dr. Roe. Thank you. What I have heard from all of you
5 all in your testimony has been the four things that you
6 really have scoped and an eye on are mental health and
7 suicide, with various alternative therapies, oversight of
8 the programs that we have initiated, and that would include
9 the VA MISSION Act and women's health care.

10 We have made--I think the VA has done a reasonable job
11 in increasing access for women's health care, which was
12 surprising to me that 41 percent of eligible women now use
13 VA for health care, 48 percent of men. They have ways to go
14 yet, but still that is much better than it was five or six
15 years ago.

16 A couple of questions, and Mr. Butler, I will start
17 with you, just very briefly. About 85 percent of the IAVA
18 members who use the VA report an average or above average
19 experience, and they prefer VA care. Sixteen percent of
20 members have utilized the community care program. Given
21 your members' satisfaction with VA, does IAVA have an
22 understanding about why its members choose community care
23 over VA care? Is it convenience or closer to home, or what
24 is it?

25 Mr. Butler. Yeah, thank you, sir, for the question,

1 and thank you for all your service. You have been a great
2 ally of IAVA, so I would like to say that, out of the gate.
3 You have always given us good access to yourself and your
4 staff, and so we appreciate you taking the time to meet with
5 us. I want to also thank you for quoting our member survey,
6 which we are releasing tomorrow, so a little sneak peek on
7 some of the stats there.

8 To answer your question in a little bit more detail, in
9 the survey is a number of reasons and some of it is that
10 veterans do not know that they are eligible for care at the
11 VA. I know that was the case for me when I came off active
12 duty. I did not understand how one was eligible for VA
13 care. So that is a big one. Another one is distance to VA
14 care facilities. Another is preferring their private sector
15 provider.

16 But I think a lot of this gets to a lack of
17 communication and understanding between not just the VA but
18 also the Department of Defense and active duty members when
19 they are transitioning out, and then veterans once they are
20 out of the service, to understand how you get access to VA
21 care, who is eligible, how you receive it, how you start the
22 process. It is confusing from start to finish. I know that
23 from first-hand experience, and we hear that repeatedly.

24 Dr. Roe. I think one of the things we did when we
25 wrote the MISSION Act was when I was in Oregon, out in Greg

1 Walden's district, he explained to me, he said, "My
2 congressional district has more square miles than the state
3 of Tennessee does," and he was right. It is 20,000 square
4 miles bigger. So we had to try to put a bill together where
5 a veteran who might--you know, if you live close to a VA
6 medical center, where I live, the veterans have good access.
7 But if you live in rural Oregon, you have to drive hours to
8 get somewhere.

9 So that was the idea, and I just--it will be
10 interesting to see what the rest of your survey shows.

11 My time is about expired, but I want to just thank each
12 and every one of you for the input that you have given me
13 over the last dozen or so years that I have been here. And
14 Ms. Jansky, I am from Tennessee and I am very sorry we did
15 not provide a translator for you today, since you are from
16 Massachusetts. Okay? I yield back.

17 [Laughter.]

18 Chairman Moran. Senator Tester.

19 Senator Tester. I just want the record to show that
20 Donna, I loved your testimony.

21 Look, I think it is important to point out right now,
22 before start, because some of you mentioned the Fair Care
23 Act, which deals with the four presumptives on Agent Orange.
24 The Secretary could make those presumptives real tomorrow,
25 today. And so my question to each of you, very briefly,

1 raise your hand if your organization has sent a letter to
2 the Secretary, asked him to have the three presumptives--
3 bladder cancer, parkinsonism, hyperthyroidism--make those
4 covered by the VA?

5 [Show of hands.]

6 Senator Tester. Okay. Four out of the seven have. I
7 would just recommend that the ones that did not, please do
8 if you believe in that. I think it is an important thing to
9 do.

10 For the ones that did send a letter, did the Secretary
11 or anybody within the VA get back to you and ask you any
12 questions about that letter? No. None.

13 And so I would just say that we have got some work to
14 do. As I said in my opening statement, you guys represent
15 the people that are on the ground, that did service to this
16 country, and we need to listen to you. And whether it is
17 this or--I am curious, as long as your pipes are warmed up,
18 Rene, could you tell me, what happened to that 63-year-old
19 person that had suicidal thoughts and diabetes and was sent
20 home with 11 meds?

21 Ms. Campos. Well, thank you, sir, for asking that
22 question. That happens to be my brother, and interestingly
23 enough, fortunately I had access to his psychiatrist, and
24 the psychiatrist was the one that actually gained, you know,
25 actually helped me with getting him help.

1 Senator Tester. Good.

2 Ms. Campos. But while he was in the VA hospital, not
3 once did he see his primary care person, communication. I
4 tried to communicate with them, the patient advocate. And
5 so it's difficult.

6 Senator Tester. Thank you. I hope--can they get the
7 feed for this? Can the VA get the feed for this, because I
8 hope they are watching. Because the truth is we have got a
9 veteran dying at one a day--I mean, one an hour, I am sorry
10 about--and if we do not have folks that come in and ask for
11 help, get help, what is supposed to happen? I mean, it is
12 crazy.

13 I am just going to ask one real quick question, and you
14 have got to answer it very quickly, Jeremy, and that is the
15 EHR, Cerner EHR. Could you give me any input on whether the
16 VA has proactively approached you about input into that?

17 Mr. Butler. No, I would not say proactively. In fact,
18 we recently reached out to them directly because we heard
19 about the pilot program and how it was going to result in
20 reduced access to electronic health records. And so we went
21 a letter to the VA saying we really need more information.

22 Senator Tester. So if you were in a position of power
23 within the VA, what would you do to prepare veterans for the
24 new EHR, to ensure that the veterans have all the
25 information they need?

1 Mr. Butler. I think the answer is the same with a lot
2 of things--more communication. It is something I think that
3 the community just does not understand the changes that are
4 coming, how it is going to affect their access to their
5 records, what they need to do to prepare, et cetera. So
6 more communication from the VA.

7 Senator Tester. Okay. I want to thank you all for
8 your testimony. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 Chairman Moran. Thank you, Senator Tester.
10 Representative Bost.

11 Mr. Bost. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First off, thank
12 you all for being here and thank you for your service.

13 Hey, I am just going to throw this out to the whole
14 panel and if it is applicable please answer. You know, as
15 we passed the Blue Water Navy finally, last year--finally,
16 last year--and now it is being implemented, what are you
17 hearing from your members on what they are hearing and how
18 quickly the process is moving along, for them to start
19 receiving their benefit?

20 Mr. Butler. For lack of a better answer, not something
21 that is very well known amongst our members, just simply due
22 to demographics. And so not a whole lot of feedback from
23 our membership.

24 Mr. Bost. Anybody else? Okay. The concern we have is
25 we want to make sure it is being rolled out. Now I heard

1 some very good news the other day, from a person I did not
2 even know was Blue Water, from his son, that he was actually
3 reached out to. But we have got to make sure, when we pass
4 these bills, and that is what we have run into, is then the
5 implementation is a slow, slow process, and it was slow
6 enough just getting the bills passed.

7 So in the same questioning here, the Modernization Act.
8 It was a massive overhaul of the department, the processing
9 of appeals. As with any reform initiatives, regardless of
10 how successful it has been, implementation and further
11 improvement can likely be made. Do any of you have any
12 recommendations on that?

13 Mr. Lyon. Sir, happy to make mention of it. When we
14 talk about IT modernization specifically, it is making sure
15 that we both allocate the direct amount of funds and ensure
16 they go to the right place. As a for instance, when we look
17 at education benefits disbursement, we pass laws that make
18 sure that there is funds available, they go to VA, but they
19 might not wind up in the right part of the VA, such as
20 Veterans Benefits Administration, to make sure that they are
21 administered.

22 So it is the step that includes allocating the funds
23 and then the accountability that goes the right place could
24 do wonders to ensure that the VA is properly resourced to
25 actually execute the laws that this body passes.

1 Mr. Bost. Thank you. Anyone else?

2 Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

3 Chairman Moran. Thank you very much. Mr. Levin.

4 Mr. Levin. Thank you, Chairman Moran and Chairman
5 Takano, for bringing our Committees together again today to
6 hear from many of our esteemed veteran service
7 organizations. I particularly always want to thank
8 everybody here from California. I have the honor to
9 represent Camp Pendleton, so grateful to all our Marines in
10 the House.

11 Ms. Campos, you noted that one of MOAA's legislative
12 priorities is to safeguards veterans' education benefits
13 from institutions of higher learning that conduct deceptive
14 or fraudulent practices. In the House we have worked in a
15 bipartisan manner to pass H.R. 4625, the Protect the GI Bill
16 Act, and I thank Ranking Members Roe and Bilirakis for
17 working with me on that bill.

18 Could you take a minute to speak to the need for
19 legislation and explain the urgency with which we need to
20 hold bad actor schools accountable?

21 Ms. Campos. Thank you for the question. I think that
22 the protection--I mean, this is a very important piece of
23 legislation, and I think that it is appropriately focused.
24 We, again, as I mentioned, wanting to level the playing
25 field for student veterans as well and giving them the same

1 rights and protections that non-student veterans have.

2 This provides a number of provisions, and most
3 importantly, that we appreciate too, is that it would fully
4 restore GI benefits that, you know, have been taken away
5 because of a school closure.

6 So there are a number of provisions in your bill, and I
7 think they address. We are pleased to, you know, support
8 it, and we are appreciative that we get at these issues.
9 And so we look forward to supporting--you know, seeing it
10 through to implementation.

11 Mr. Levin. Thank you. We do too. Hopefully we will
12 get it through over here on the Senate side.

13 I wanted to follow up with you and also Mr. Lyon. You
14 both highlighted the importance of strong funding for
15 education services IT in your testimonies. The Economic
16 Opportunity Subcommittee that I chair made several visits
17 this year, or last year, to the GI Bill call center and
18 regional processing offices, and the repeated theme we heard
19 was the need for funding to improve the IT systems that
20 support GI Bill payments.

21 One such system is now over 50 years old, yet is now
22 still in operation, and I was disappointed that the budget
23 request did not request the dire need for comprehensive
24 system upgrades. So if you could both just spend a second--
25 I know I am out of time--just to discuss the consequences

1 that student veterans face when we have such antiquated IT
2 systems.

3 Mr. Lyon. Thank you very much, sir, and the continued
4 leadership on this very challenging issue. We continue to
5 talk about access to VA and we look for the opportunity to
6 have the most recently transitioned generation have access
7 to the VA, and generally speaking they are going to use some
8 element of technology, and the VA is still using technology
9 that was created before they were born, right? So the
10 legacy systems are a terrible challenge in being able to
11 provide adequate access and timely distribution of benefits
12 hard earned.

13 And so when we look at it, it is even sometimes less a
14 resources issue. Congress is allocating the right amount of
15 funds. It is the actual implementation of it, making sure
16 that those funds make it to the Veterans Benefits
17 Administration so that we can actually put them to work
18 where the law meant for them to go, to improve legacy
19 systems and provide better care and delivery of those
20 benefits to the veterans that have earned them, particularly
21 student veterans.

22 Ms. Campos. The other challenge is IT is a problem
23 across the entire VA system, and it is reflective of all the
24 other, you know, health care, HR, the finance systems, all
25 of that. It really comes down to the commitment of the VA,

1 the commitment of Congress. And you can allocate the money,
2 like you said, but if it is not--and you are not able to
3 track the dollars and see where it actually lands, and then
4 hold VA accountable.

5 And the consequences of that are, like one of my
6 colleagues in the office, Corey, who was not able to get his
7 housing stipend for two months, what that does is veterans--
8 it forces veterans to have to relook at where they are going
9 to get the money, you know, to pay for those, you know,
10 school responsibilities. Then that creates financial
11 problems for the veterans, and then it could, at some point,
12 you know, cause problems with credit.

13 Mr. Levin. Thank you. I know I am over time but I
14 appreciate that, and I will yield back.

15 Chairman Moran. Senator Boozman.

16 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
17 all of you all for being here. I look out and see all the
18 organizations that I have enjoyed working with so much
19 through the years, and thank you for your efforts. Also
20 looking out and seeing the big crowd in the audience. There
21 is a long history of the committees in the House and the
22 Senate--I was fortunate enough to be part of both--working
23 together in a very bipartisan way, trying to make sure that
24 everybody remembers that these are not gimmes. These are
25 earned benefits. But we can do that. We can press, but it

1 simply does not work without the grassroots, so thank you
2 all for your efforts. A special thanks to the Auxiliary.
3 We know of all of your organizations, we know who does all
4 the work, so that is important.

5 But I would like to really ask about a couple of things
6 that we are working hard on, and I know it has come up and
7 it will continue to come up, and I want it to come up--
8 veteran suicide, and then again, making sure that we are
9 taking care of our women veterans.

10 Tell me, we are trying to do a better job. We have got
11 the VA taking care of a very small percentage of actually
12 the people that are committing suicide. Ms. Campos, how do
13 we get the rest of the community involved so that the six
14 veterans that are committing suicide are part of the VA, but
15 the vast majority are outside of the VA, how do we do a
16 better job of outreach in that regard?

17 Ms. Campos. Well, I guess I would like to refer to my
18 comments, that that will not happen until VA strengthens its
19 relationship, first with veterans, which is most important,
20 and then from there with the community partners that they
21 have.

22 But they also need to strengthen their relationship
23 with the Department of Defense, because there needs to be
24 that relationship because those women servicemembers are
25 going to leave service, and DoD knows some of those folks,

1 and they need to do a better job of those warm handoffs to
2 making sure that they get, you know, at least given a warm
3 handoff and followed through.

4 There are a lot of, as I mentioned, one-off programs,
5 and VA does a good job, maybe initially. But it is
6 following through, and it really comes down to the
7 relationships with the veterans, because veterans talk to
8 other veterans. And again, you know, we can have bills. We
9 can have some of the bills that are being looked at by the
10 Committees, and VA do more outreach, but they are already
11 being tasked in a lot of programs across VHA, to do
12 outreach, and it is not happening.

13 Senator Boozman. Yeah, no, I agree totally. So what
14 we are trying to do is work with the Committees in the House
15 and the Senate and through legislation, and we appreciate
16 the leadership on both sides, trying to make it such that
17 some of these other entities that are doing a very, very
18 good job in this area, that are outside of the VA, that we
19 are able to give them some support.

20 The other part that is so important is we need metrics.
21 Right now, we are measuring the success of these programs
22 based on giving them money and access, you know, if veterans
23 have access. What we want to do is shift to where we really
24 have some metrics that really do account for whether or not
25 the programs are doing what we would like for them to do,

1 improving the veterans' mental health and preventing
2 suicide.

3 I have run out of time, but again, the other thing that
4 is so important is women's ability to have the same access,
5 the same as the others. So we are working hard on that and
6 we do appreciate your help in that regard.

7 So thank you very much for being here. Thank you, Mr.
8 Chairman.

9 Chairman Moran. Representative Lamb.

10 Mr. Lamb. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to
11 especially thank SVA and IAVA for endorsing and helping us
12 push forward the Federally Requiring Earned Education-debt
13 Discharges for Veterans Act, otherwise known as the FREED
14 Vets Act. This is an example of the kind of bill we should
15 be able to pass easily in Washington, and for some reason it
16 has been a little slow. But I think we are going to get
17 there with your support.

18 Not a lot of people outside this room know this, but I
19 think many of you do, which is that 100 percent disabled
20 veterans are eligible for the full discharge of their
21 federal student loans. But we found that 42,000 veterans
22 owed more than \$1 billion in student debt, and only 20
23 percent of those eligible have actually applied for this
24 program. So 80 percent of the 100 percent disabled veterans
25 eligible to have their student loans discharge have not

1 taken us up on that offer. Why is that? Burdensome?
2 Paperwork? Again, lack of communication, which several of
3 you have raised?

4 And so the way to fix that in this instance is just
5 shift the burden. The forgiveness of the loan should happen
6 automatically when you get your 100 percent disability
7 rating, and then if there is some problem with it it is on
8 the government to correct it, not on the veteran.

9 So that is what our bill would do. We have gotten
10 great support on both sides of the aisle and from SVA and
11 IAVA, and I know there is some action on it in the Senate as
12 well. We hope to see passage this year.

13 But I just wanted to throw it open particularly for
14 Jared or Jeremy, if you could talk about maybe what some of
15 your members have gone through, have onerous student debt
16 burdens, and what the bureaucracy is like when you go to try
17 to get, again, the benefit that you earned.

18 Go ahead, Jared.

19 Mr. Lyon. Yes, sir. Well, first off thank you so much
20 for your support on this important issue that prior to was
21 not getting the attention that it deserves. When you look
22 at a veteran who is totally permanently disabled and is also
23 carrying the debt that is quite burdensome with regard to
24 student loans, the onus, as you point out, should be on the
25 government to fix that versus the veteran to seek it out.

1 The burden is heavy. Student debt in this country is
2 reaching near crisis levels for all Americans, but very
3 particularly for veterans that might not also be fully
4 participating in the economic opportunity provided in the
5 workforce. And they did not receive that 100 percent
6 disability rating for no reason. And so adding to the
7 notion of struggles with regard to otherwise available
8 economic opportunity and what hangs over your shoulders with
9 regard to that debt is heavy.

10 Beyond that, if you are looking for the opportunity to
11 provide your own care, often that debt comes with risks to
12 your own personal credit that prevents you from having the
13 ability to secure housing, whether that be rent or the
14 ability for home ownership. So we have seen it with student
15 veterans be quite burdensome.

16 Mr. Lamb. Exactly. Thank you. I think I am out of
17 time so Jeremy, another time. Thank you very much for your
18 support and we will look forward to pushing that one
19 through.

20 Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

21 Chairman Moran. Thank you, Representative. Now
22 Representative Bilirakis.

23 Mr. Bilirakis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate
24 it so much.

25 Mr. Zurfluh of the Paralyzed Veterans, thank you for

1 your service. All of you, really. We could not do our job
2 without you. Thanks for being here.

3 I believe that we can come together and make important
4 changes to the Specially Adapted Housing grant program in a
5 bipartisan, bicameral manner. Can you please expand on your
6 recommendations for the Specially Adapted Housing program
7 and the need to enact H.R. 3504, the Ryan Kules Specially
8 Adaptive Housing Improvement Act, or the Chairman's bill,
9 and I appreciate the Chairman leading this in the Senate,
10 the companion bill is 2022. And I think this is a top
11 priority of mine, and I believe it is for the severely
12 disabled vets as well. If you could elaborate I would
13 appreciate it so much.

14 Mr. Zurfluh. Sure. We are in support of it,
15 obviously. But a lot of our members, like I explained to
16 Chairman Takano earlier, the opportunity to take advantage
17 of technology is it improves one's lives, with an example
18 like with voice-controlled commands for a severely disabled
19 veteran. People that used the adaptive housing grant maybe
20 10 years or 15 years ago, or longer, are coming into a very
21 unique period, I think, in technology, where things seem to
22 be evolving every three years. And if they could get, I
23 believe, the 10-year period that we are talking about,
24 getting to use this grant every 10 years, the technology
25 they can buy in their lives with technology is great, and it

1 would mean the difference to a lot of our members and a lot
2 of disabled veterans.

3 And I think of the one example, there is Dr. Rory
4 Cooper who is an Army veteran at the HERL Institute at
5 University of Pittsburgh. The robotic designs that he is
6 coming up with, and the kitchen designs and housing designs,
7 that he is making great strides almost every day up there.
8 These are the technologies that could align with these bills
9 and this grant opportunity in the future to improve a
10 veteran's life.

11 Mr. Bilirakis. Well, thank you very much. I
12 appreciate that. And, Mr. Chairman, anything I can do
13 please do not hesitate, because we have got to get this done
14 for our heroes.

15 I have one question for Mr. Jared Lyon. Keeping in
16 mind that studies have shown that the GI bill is the second
17 most common reason for servicemembers to enlist in the
18 military, a few members of Congress have stated support for
19 a proposal that would make every citizen eligible for the
20 GI-style education benefits, even if they did not serve in
21 the armed forces. What is the panel's opinion of this
22 proposal, and what message would Congress be sending to
23 those who have signed up to defend our country if it were
24 enacted?

25 I think it would be disastrous to do this, but I want

1 to hear from the panel. Let's start with Jared, if that is
2 okay.

3 Mr. Lyon. I appreciate the question, sir. I mean, the
4 general notion of the GI Bill is that it is an earned
5 benefit, of course. The notion that it could be provided
6 for everyone operates on a basic assumption that all
7 veterans are eligible for the GI Bill. I think starting
8 there might be the better approach, because not all veterans
9 are eligible for the GI Bill, for a variety of reasons. And
10 so taking a comprehensive look at the ability to apply an
11 earned benefit to everyone that has earned it might be a
12 good place to start.

13 Chairman Moran. Let me turn to Senator Sinema. Thank
14 you.

15 Mr. Bilirakis. Yes sir, Mr. Chairman.

16 Chairman Moran. Senator Sinema.

17 Senator Sinema. Thank you to our witnesses for being
18 here and for all the work that you do to support veterans.
19 Your organizations are vital partners to the work that we do
20 here in Congress to ensure that veterans have the services
21 and the benefits they have earned. And I want to give a
22 special welcome to all the Arizona veterans who are here
23 today. I apologize for the weather.

24 [Laughter.]

25 Senator Sinema. My first question, Ms. Campos, as you

1 mentioned in your testimony, a skilled VA workforce is
2 crucial to the delivery of care and services to veterans.
3 Since fiscal year 201, the VA Office of the Inspector
4 General has listed human resources management in the top 10
5 non-clinical occupational shortage areas across the VHA.
6 How do you think this shortage impacts VA's ability to
7 provide timely, quality care to veterans?

8 Ms. Campos. Thank you. I think it is important to
9 remember that the VA workforce is the core of who VA is, and
10 it is how VA has earned its reputation for quality care.
11 The OIG and the GAO, you know, have talked about that the
12 staffing and human resources management, it hampers the
13 VA to be able to do what it needs to do, but also to fill
14 other severe occupational shortages.

15 So VA's ability or inability to manage and sustain a
16 viable workforce creates more stress on the workforce.
17 People leave and then what happens is it forces more care
18 out into the community. And what that does then, it thereby
19 erodes--it becomes a domino effect and starts eroding the
20 foundational services and missions of the VA health care
21 system. It creates higher cost, impacts quality, erodes,
22 again, the VA's foundational programs. And it causes the VA
23 to lose sight and coordination oversight of that veteran's
24 care, which could ultimately lead to, you know, less than
25 quality care for the veteran who would be the individual

1 that would suffer.

2 Senator Sinema. So what could Congress do to address
3 this shortage and some of the other personnel challenges at
4 the VA?

5 Ms. Campos. Well, I think that the recommendations
6 that OIG and GAO have been making for years are certainly
7 more than reasonable. I think they have to start first with
8 having VA collect good data on their vacancies and having a
9 system to do that, looking at a staffing model that is a
10 national staffing model. They have been looking at, you
11 know, trying to get VA to do that for years. But that
12 staffing model needs to go down, you know, to the facility
13 level so they can look at it across the organization.

14 And then they need to look at alternative ways to work
15 with the workforce, and that is maybe alternative schedules,
16 instead of teleworking and things like that that might be
17 able to play, and make a better workforce work-life balance.

18 Senator Sinema. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 Chairman Moran. You are very welcome. Now Senator
20 Blumenthal.

21 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want
22 to welcome all of you and especially folks from Connecticut.
23 And I don't apologize for the weather because it is a lot
24 worse up there. Let me just thank all of the members of the
25 panel who are here today for your service and all of the men

1 and women who you represent.

2 I want to begin by just reiterating to the VA my
3 concern, and it is shared by a number of us on this
4 Committee who have written to the executive in charge of the
5 Veterans Health Administration about the vulnerability of
6 our VA health facilities to the coronavirus. We wrote to
7 the VA, seven of us on this Committee, back in February, the
8 beginning of February, about this issue. We have heard
9 nothing in response.

10 I do not need to tell anyone here that VA health
11 facilities provide care to exactly the demographic or the
12 cohort who may be most vulnerable, particularly people who
13 are more senior in years, people who may have medical
14 conditions that make them more susceptible, and we very
15 simply asked questions about what the VA is doing
16 preventively to safeguard their facilities and their
17 patients against coronavirus, where the spread of this
18 disease could be most dangerous.

19 So I want to put that on the record. Anyone on the
20 panel who wants to comment on it is welcome to do so. But I
21 also want to ask Mr. Lyons, very specifically, about
22 education, and thank you for your very helpful comments so
23 far.

24 I am very concerned about the use of VA education
25 benefits by members of their families, and want to make

1 sure, and I have introduced a bill on this issue, the Post-
2 9/11 GI Bill Transferability Act, S. 2327, that would fix
3 the presently unfair broken policy of limiting when
4 servicemembers and veterans can transfer their unused
5 education benefits to their children. They may be fine on
6 their education but their children should have a chance at
7 the American dream and education as well.

8 So I am continuing to advocate for this measure and I
9 want to ask you, Mr. Lyons, if I may, are DoD and VA doing
10 enough to ensure that those servicemembers and veterans are
11 in a position to take full advantage of their education
12 benefits?

13 Mr. Lyon. Thank you, Senator, and when you look at the
14 opportunity to transfer an earned benefit to a dependent,
15 specifically a spouse or a child, if this is the intent of
16 that opportunity it should be available at any time during
17 the service, whether still on active duty for the purposes
18 of retention or if we shift our thinking to hey, after
19 service if I still have unused benefit to be able to do
20 that.

21 Ultimately, we look at the Forever GI Bill as removing
22 the delimiting date of the opportunity to use an earned
23 benefit for education specifically for the veteran or the
24 transferred dependent, from 2013 on you now have a lifetime
25 to use it. I think that there is likely good sense to

1 looking into the viability as well as the impact of being
2 able to transfer that benefit at various times beyond what
3 is currently done.

4 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, because we all know
5 that when our men and women in uniform serve, their families
6 serve and sacrifice too, and they ought to have the benefit
7 of those education benefits. Thank you.

8 Chairman Moran. Senator Blumenthal, thank you. We
9 have--I do not know if we have concluded the questions but
10 we have concluded the members, and I thank all of you, all
11 the VSOs who delivered their thoughtful presentations today.
12 Again, as my colleagues have all expressed, thank you for
13 your ongoing, everyday effort to see that those who served
14 our country needs are met, that our commitments are kept,
15 and we look forward to you holding our feet to the fire and
16 us together holding the Department of Veterans Affairs' feet
17 to the fire, to see that the right things happen.

18 I thank all my colleagues for their participation today
19 and asking their question. I would ask unanimous consent
20 that the members have five legislative days to revise and
21 extend their remarks and include an extraneous material. Is
22 there about? Without, it is so ordered, and with that the
23 hearing is adjourned.

24 [Whereupon, at 3:37 p.m., the Committees were
25 adjourned.]