

JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION
OF THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS
OF THE UNITED STATES

- - -

TUESDAY, MARCH 4, 2008

United States

Senate,

Committee on Veterans'

Affairs,

Joint with

the

House of

Representatives,

Committee on Veterans'

Affairs,

Washington,

D.C.

The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:34

a.m.,

in Room 216, Hart Senate Office Building, Hon. Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and Hon. Bob Filner, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, presiding.

Present: Senators Akaka, Webb, Sanders, Burr, and Isakson; and Representatives Filner, Herseth Sandlin,

Hall,

Walz, Buyer, Boozman, and Bilbray.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN AKAKA

Chairman Akaka. Aloha and welcome to all of you. Welcome to all of you here today to our hearing on the legislative presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars

of

the United States. I am delighted to welcome all of you here today. A warm aloha to Commander George Lisicki,

all

VFW members, and Ladies Auxiliary members in the audience.

A special warm aloha to those who have come all the way

from Hawaii to this meeting, Richard Wong, the State Commander, and his colleagues Richard Haake, Norbert

Enos,

Nick Young, Lom Cramer, Rick Ferris, and Paula Kalanikau, who have traveled all the way from the State of Hawaii.

Will you please stand? Hi. Aloha.

[Applause.]

you
Chairman Akaka. I am very pleased to join all of
and all the leaders of the Veterans' Affairs Committees.
Chairman of the House Committee Bob Filner and Ranking
Member Senator Burr and Ranking Member from the House

Steve
Buyer will be here.

terms
This forum is very valuable to all of us, both in
of hearing your views on needed policy changes and in
helping us to create an appropriate budget for VA.

service.
VFW has a long and proud tradition of public
Your tireless advocacy on behalf of our nation's veterans
is
truly honorable and I applaud you for all that you have
done.

send
them
the
As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans
Affairs, I am committed to ensuring that veterans receive
the highest quality of benefits and services. When we
our troops into battle, we must be prepared to care for
when they return home. Caring for them means providing

in
best health care and rehabilitation. It means fairly
compensating veterans for their injuries. We simply must

also
this time of war ensure that VA is equipped with the
resources necessary to carry out these missions now and

into the future. The cost of veterans' benefits and
services is a cost of war and must be understood as such.

a
My majority colleagues on the Senate committee and I
just recommended that the VA health care account receive

we
\$4.6 billion increase over fiscal year 2008. The
President's budget took a meek approach to funding VA and

will.
must go even further, and I want you to know that we

As someone who knows firsthand how valuable the G.I.

Bill is, we must make sure that the value of educational assistance benefits for veterans keeps pace with the rising costs of higher education.

claims Timely and accurate adjudication of disability remains an issue. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly and without needless delay.

work Assisting veterans' families is an essential part of the successful reintegration of new veterans into their communities. Family members are often the primary caregivers for injured veterans. VA has taken steps to reach out to these families in recent years, but much still remains.

Providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for the newest generation of veterans is vital. I am proud of the Wounded Warrior provisions we enacted last year as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. I am especially proud of the

provision I authored to expand VA health care eligibility for returning veterans from two to five years. My legislation on traumatic brain injury was also recently signed into law. VA has a responsibility to be at the forefront of TBI research and treatment.

that Finally, I am hopeful that action on major bills place have not yet been considered in the Senate will take soon. I have been attempting to work with my colleagues to reach an agreement to debate these bills and expect that there will be action to complete these bills in the near future.

and In closing, I again thank Commander Lisicki and the members of VFW. You have a long, again, long and proud tradition of service and dedication to this great nation

its veterans. I look forward to your presentation today, and I want to thank you so much for being here.

And now, let me yell to--yield to Chairman Filner--
[Laughter.]

Chairman Akaka. --from the U.S. House of
Representatives. Bob?

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FILNER

Chairman Filner. Thank you, Senator. I do the
yelling
here, you do the yielding.

[Laughter.]

Chairman Filner. It is wonderful to be here with
you
and your colleagues and all of you coming in from so many
parts of the country to this presentation and your
National
Legislative Convention. It is really nice to see you.

As you know, a couple of years ago, your visits here
got cut off and one of the reasons why is because you
came

too late or something. Well, of course, it is never too
late to see you, but you are here right at the time we
are

considering our budget. You are here right at the
perfect
time and we thank you here as you will continue lobbying
for
what we owe our veterans.

You know, the President submitted his budget to the
Congress a few weeks ago. What he said about the
veterans'
budget, as you heard from Chairman Akaka, I think is dead
on

arrival. That is, he had some fundamental flaws in his
budget that we are going to correct. He again, I think

for
the seventh or eighth straight time, asked for an
increase
in copayments for certain visits and also a doubling of
the
pharmaceutical fees. We are not going to accept that, as
we
have not for the last seven years. I assure you that we
are
not going to impose these new fees on our veterans.

[Applause.]

Chairman Filner. In addition, he raised the health care part of the budget a little bit over the inflation rate that medical care sees, but to pay for that, he decreased every other part of the budget that veterans rely on, for example, major construction, maintenance. Things that you need to have the VA working properly, he decreased. In fact, he gave a five-year decrease. We are not going to accept those decreases in this Congress. We are going to, in fact, try to beat once again the Independent Budget that VFW and its brother and sister organizations have adopted.

This Independent Budget is a professionally put-together document. For the first time in our history, I think we went above the Independent Budget last year. In fact, we added--

[Applause.]

Chairman Filner. I should say, in the current fiscal year. We added over \$13 billion of new funding for the VA health care. That is a 30 percent increase, and we are not going to do as well this year, I don't think, Mr. Akaka, but we are going to try to match the Independent Budget, at least. The Democratic majority of the House committee submitted our proposals to our Budget Committee and we went almost \$1 billion above the Independent Budget and restored all the cuts that the President had done.

By the way, the increase of fees that the President proposed, they estimate not only to get a little more revenue, but it would cut a couple hundred thousand people who couldn't afford the fees from the VA. The way to run the VA, especially in a time of war, is not to decrease the amount of veterans served, we ought to be increasing it. And, in fact, our budget proposal said that Priority 8

VA. veterans should be back and receiving health care at the
Priority 8s should be there, not taken away.

[Applause.]

Chairman Filner. So we are going, I think, to give
a

better budget. At a time of war, this is absolutely
best. necessary. George Washington, Senator Akaka, said it

The biggest factor in the morale of our fighting troops
is the sense of how they are going to be treated when they
come home. So we have to do a job for our veterans that does
the job for our active duty troops who are sacrificing so
much overseas.

Lastly, Mr. Chairman, our priorities for this year,
I think match yours, Commander, and many of the other
groups.

First and foremost, we have to update the G.I. Bill for
the 21st century.

[Applause.]

Chairman Filner. You know, the present bill does
not meet the real cost of college for those who want to go.
It does not meet the real cost of a home purchase or of

refinancing. The VA Home Loan Program is almost
irrelevant

in the crisis we are facing now and we have to make those
home loan levels, Mr. Chairman, and the amount of
refinancing and the closing costs reasonable so veterans
can, in fact, not get foreclosed on in a time of crisis.

In addition, and I think many of you feel this
personally, we have got to cut through this backlog on
disability claims. I mean, there are over 600,000
backlogged claims. That is unacceptable in a highly
technical society like we live in.

We have put in the budget hiring for more than 1,000

take
this year of new hirees, but that process is going to
years to work itself out. I think we have to do
something
radical--can I use that word here, Mr. Chairman?--to cut
through this backlog. You know, many of you are working
on
your taxes now. If you have a tax refund coming, the IRS
used to not even get your checks back within a year. But
now, when you file a return, you get your check in three
weeks. That is because they accept your return and then
audit it later.

Why not such a system for the VA? Why not such a
system for the VA?

[Applause.]

Chairman Filner. That is, if your claim has the
medical documentation and has been worked on with the
help

of a certified veterans' service officer, I say, accept
it.

We will audit you. If it takes two, three, five years
like
they take for some claims, so be it, but we should start
giving people who deserve a check.

How many of you are Vietnam veterans?

[Show of hands.]

Chairman Filner. And by the way, we have a lot to
make
up for for all of you. When you came home, you did not
get
the honor and recognition that you deserved and we are
paying a heavy price for that in social costs. Many of
you
have claims pending for decades.

You know, I don't care if your boots were on the
ground
in Vietnam, your boat was off the shore, your plane was
up
in the air, we ought to accept the Agent Orange claims
and
get those off our books right now. We just ought to
accept
them and get them off.

[Applause.]

Chairman Filner. You know, you were there and we should care about that health care. So that would break through hundreds of thousands of claims right away.

sure
is
Your
that when the fiscal year starts October 1, the VA budget is in place. It hasn't for the last couple of years. That means lack of planning. That is lack of health care.

quality of care goes down. We have to address that, Mr. Chairman. We either with the mandatory funding that makes some continuity in place.
some
continuity
in
place.

we
we
coming
they
has.
the
So as we progress on the budget and other items, as we think about our fighting forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have got to make sure that every young man and woman coming back from Iraq gets all the care, love, attention that they can get, and all of the older kids--all of you--continue getting high-quality care at every facility that the VA has. We have got to get out of the minds of many people that the VA means Veterans' Adversary. We should not be fighting veterans, we should be serving you. Thanks so much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Filner.

And now we will hear from our Ranking Member of the Senate, Senator Burr.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Chairman Filner. Bob, it is great to see you serving in

this capacity, our colleague and good member of the Congress. Commander Lisicki, welcome, and gentlemen who

have joined you.

It is a privilege to be in the presence of those who have offered so much in the defense of America. The members

of the Veterans of Foreign Wars have each left our country's

shores to serve in a time of need, and you truly understand

the meaning of the word "sacrifice." We are grateful for your service and we are humbled by your sacrifice for the benefits of others.

Many of you have traveled great distances to carry on the tradition of participating in these joint hearings each

year. Your presence here today is evidence of your continued strong commitment to America's veterans. I welcome all of you.

I would like to, in good North Carolina fashion, take the opportunity to recognize some North Carolinians, and I

have worn my Carolina blue tie today: Gary Barringer, John

Shelander, Tommy Warren, Bruce Edwards, Ray Yamrus, Helen Carter, Billy Statton. I thank all of you for your willingness to be here and to represent those in North Carolina with the VFW.

Commander, it is extremely good to have you here today and I thank you for coming to testify.

I would also like to offer a special welcome to Virginia Carman, the National President of the Ladies Auxiliary, and I thank her for making this trip.

As a Senator from North Carolina, issues affecting those who have served in war are extremely important to me.

My State supports a huge military population. We have active duty military bases representing each branch of the

the Armed Forces. Fort Bragg alone can claim the title of
the Pentagon of the Army by its sheer population, with over
is 64,000 active duty and reserve component soldiers. That
the not even counting the more than 98,000 Army retirees in
the Fayetteville area, alone.

the Many of these troops deployed overseas to support
the Global War on Terror. Upon their return, they are
eligible to become members of your very well-respected
organization.

It is then up to you to speak for them on their behalf in
one voice. That is the reason I always look forward to
hearing what you have to say at this joint session.

over Commander, as you know, VA has made great strides
the last few years in both health care delivery and
benefit

services. In fact, VA's health care system has been
nationally recognized for its quality and for its
innovation. However, the Global War on Terror has
presented

and VA with new challenges, such as how to most effectively
provide mental health services to men and women in need
and how to streamline and simplify VA's outdated benefit
delivery system for our veterans.

We have wounded warriors returning from Iraq and
Afghanistan who rightfully expect that their serious
injuries should not prevent them from living productive

and fulfilling lives. To meet these heroes' expectations, I
believe VA needs to make some fundamental changes in how
things are done.

Commander, before we turn the floor over to you, I
would like to briefly touch on some of the challenges I

see VA facing and some of the ways I hope we can work
together together to meet these challenges.

the First is coordination among groups administered by
the VA. Although VA has had a world-class health
organization,
a comprehensive vocational rehabilitation and employment
not program and a disability compensation program, it does
and use their resources collectively to improve the lives of
veterans. In fact, as the Institute of Medicine found,
and I quote, "VA has the services needed to maximize the
potential of veterans with disabilities, but are not
actively coordinated and thus are not effective as they
could be," unquote.

disconnect This problem is exemplified by the apparent
the between the Veterans Health Administration, the arm of
the VA that provides medical treatment, and the arm of the VA
that provides disability compensation, the Veterans'
Benefits Administration. Take, for example, those
veterans
who suffer from mental health conditions. One would
expect
that the medical treatment would improve many of their
conditions. However, the evidence suggests that is
rarely
the case.

receiving In 1995, there were just over 44,000 veterans
Also compensation for PTSD. Today, there are over 300,000.
IG's in 2005, the VA Inspector General conducted a review of
PTSD those veterans receiving disability pay for PTSD. The
PTSD report concluded, and I quote, "Based on our review of
was claims, we observed that the rating evaluation levels
was typically increase over time, indicating the veteran's
condition has worsened. Generally, once a PTSD rating
was assigned, it was increased over time until the veteran
was

paid 100 percent," end quote. Thus, we have a trend towards not only increasing sickness over time, but also permanent sickness.

Another area in need of attention concerns the longstanding fundamental problems with the disability rating system. The current system is one that is lengthy, duplicative, and bureaucratic. Today, an injured service member who is found unfit for further military duty may have to go through a lengthy, complex process at DOD to get a disability rating that determines what benefits that service member receives from DOD. Then the veteran must go through a similar process at VA to obtain a disability rating based upon the same outdated rating schedule. Also, there are

rules governing how much of the benefit from DOD and VA the veteran may receive at the same time.

It sounds confusing, quite frankly, because it is confusing, but this is not a new issue. Since 1956, we have had reports telling us that we need to update, simplify, and modernize the disability system. Similar recommendations were made again this year by the Dole-Shalala Commission and the Veterans Disability Benefits Commission. Despite the fact that the disability system was already outdated more than five decades ago, there have been no fundamental reforms, and I can understand why. It is very difficult to do. But what I don't want to do is to add two more reports to the shelves that will collect dust. It is, quite frankly, time that we take action.

Finally, Commander, before I conclude, I would like to personally tell you how much I appreciate the VFW's unwavering support of our troops in the field. You have

been a supporter of the surge and in giving our men and women in uniform the time they need to complete their mission. You understand what is at stake and you know

how

important it is that we don't leave until the job is done.

You have said that, and I quote, "The bottom line is a nation doesn't go to war to lose," unquote. Commander, I completely agree with you. We are in this to win.

[Applause.]

Senator Burr. The VFW and its members have not stumbled in their support, and for that, we are grateful. I thank the Chair and I yield the floor.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

House

Now we will hear from the Ranking Member on the

side, Congressman Buyer.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. BUYER

Mr. Buyer. Thank you very much. Commander, I also would like to welcome you and thank you for your service

to

country. I have reviewed your testimony last night and I look forward to your further thoughts during the Q and A.

We are also graced this morning by the presence of Virginia Carman, who is the National President of the

Ladies

Auxiliary to the VFW. Ms. Carman, welcome, and we thank you. The VFW Ladies Auxiliary and its 600,000 members provide a great service to our nation's veterans and

their

local communities through many programs, including the Americanism Activities, grants for cancer aid and

research,

and their world famous Buddy Poppies and the countless

hours

they volunteer at our VA hospitals.

I would also especially like to take a moment to recognize and welcome the VFW delegates and fellow

Hoosiers

from my State this morning, the State Commander, Jesse Morando, from Whiting, and his wife, Laura; the Senior

Vice

Commander, Richard Falk, from Indianapolis, and his wife,

Clay Gloria; the Junior Vice Commander, Harley Andrews, from
Paul City, and his wife Thelma; the State Service Officer,
David Curtis, from Martinsville; the Past State Commander,
Patrick Lance, from LaPorte; Voice of Democracy Chairman Donald
Springer from Greenwood; Community Service Chairman
Chairman, Ridge from Jeffersonville; the Veterans Employment
John Michael Lovatt, from Gas City; the Past State Chairman,
Eric Damon, my friend from Fort Wayne; the Past State Chairman
Chandler Larry Shaw from Marion; the Past State Commander, Roger
Baker, from Lowell; the Fire, Police, and EMT Chairman,
to Bilman, from Fortville; Membership Chairman Roger
before from Madison; and the Past National Commander in Chief,
Arthur Fellwock, from Booneville. Is there anybody left
to turn out the lights? Did you get all the bills paid
before you came?

[Laughter.]

Mr. Buyer. That is wonderful. Thank you for being
here. I note that you have got a meeting in my office at
2:30. I meet with the DAV at 2:00. If I am not able to
see you, I leave you in able hands with Tim Welter. He is an
Air Force Academy graduate.

staff To let you know, I have had eight members of my
who have been called to active duty in OIF and OEF. The
gentleman that you will meet with, he works for me during
the week, and on the weekends he goes up to Andrews and

flies to Dover, whereby he has a C-5A that is waiting for
him and he flies a C-5A to Baghdad. He then waits. It
turns around and is then loaded with America's most
precious cargo, and those are flag-draped coffins, and he brings
them

back to a precious ceremony at Dover, at which time he returns to my office for work on Monday morning. That is an extraordinary service, but also is an example of how we have operationalized our Reserve forces in the Total Force concept, and I think that is an American hero.

[Applause.]

Mr. Buyer. The VFW, of which I am also a member, has a long tradition of being a strong and effective voice for your members. Commander, you and your members have much to be proud of. Thousands of veterans have been helped by many programs which you offer. I have been especially impressed with VFW's efforts regarding the Military Assistance Program, the Unmet Needs Project, and Operation Uplink.

All three programs provide valuable service to military members and their families, such as funding farewell and welcome home gatherings, providing free prepaid phone cards to service members, and assisting military families experiencing financial hardship.

Commander, your testimony touches on key issues of interest to all of us. I welcome the views of your membership. I appreciate VFW's willingness to praise the

VA

system when and give credit when it is due and constructively criticize it when it falls short of its promise.

The committee has just finished submitting our separate

budget views and estimates and the numbers tell an important story. In the first year, Secretary James B. Peake requested a record \$93.7 billion to fund veterans' programs

next year, and I appreciate his efforts. I also, Chairman

Akaka, I want to thank you on how quickly you moved to approve that nomination of the President. You did that

rather quickly, and I know that you have known General Peake over the years and I want to express my appreciation to you.

On the House side, the committee Republicans, we turned in our budget views and estimates and we recommended \$3.8 billion over the President's request in discretionary funding, and I will have you note that is a higher number than my House Democratic colleagues. This includes increases in construction, information technology, medical research, medical services, and other program accounts that will directly impact the lives of our comrades. Our views and estimates reflect the priorities of a nation at war and our recognition that the care of veterans is one of the most important costs of war. Between the majority and the minority, there is just over \$2 million in difference in recommended discretionary funding, so we are pretty close.

This shows a common recognition of the importance of many of these programs for which we are in agreement.

Commander, I am also sure you will agree that the claims backlog, you know, we have continually talked about it, but we are going to have to--I am tired and exhausted of the talk. I am going to recommend that the VA institute a program to send some of the VA's best mid-level managers to private industry to see how companies that deliver compensation, pension, education, and vocational rehabilitation, and loan guaranteed benefits to their customers, and I think there is some value added that we can learn.

In reading your testimony, Commander, I note and concur

with your concern over seamless transition issues that directly impact our newest veterans. For too long, the current disability system in DOD and VA has been failing to meet the needs of today's veteran personnel and the veterans by further burdening them with a process that is overly complex. Our veterans should be concentrating on getting well, taking care of their families, and transitioning back into civilian life rather than suffering through the bureaucratic disability system.

In your written statement, you said seamless transition is a problem that is talked about much but with little result. Well, I am here to tell you that Senator Burr and I

are going to try to change that, not only in reality, but perception. Just last week, I introduced H.R. 5509, the Noble Warrior Act, and Senator Burr introduced S. 2674, America's Wounded Warrior Act. These are two very similar bills which aim to reform and modernize the DOD-VA disability system to create a smooth and as seamless transition process as possible. These important pieces of legislation are based on recommendations from both the President's Commission on Care for America's Wounded Warriors, otherwise known as the Dole-Shalala Commission, and the Veterans Disability Commission, which Congress asked for their input.

As you know, Commander, I was able to include several recommendations of the Dole-Shalala Commission in the Wounded Warrior Act of 2007 and they were eventually rolled into the National Defense Authorization Act of 2007. The Noble Warrior Act builds on this success and includes several more recommendations from both Commissions. The Noble Warrior Act would establish a new disability retirement system for those deemed unfit for service and finally end the current needless duplicative system.

Rather, a single examination and a single determination will suffice for both VA and military purposes. The Act would also pay a lifetime annuity to those rated unfit for service due to a line-of-duty injury. This annuity would not be

offset by VA disability payments, thus avoiding the current problem we have with concurrent receipt. Furthermore, the Act would modernize the disability compensation system by directing the VA to conduct a study to determine appropriate amounts of compensation under a new system which would reflect both average loss of earning and the loss of quality of life.

It has been not only mine, but also Mr. Burr's longstanding view that we must modernize this system and establish a transition process that is seamless in its efficiency. If we do not promptly address the problems that were identified by the Commissions, we are merely passing off these challenges to future generations. That is why I ask you, Commander, to join myself and Senator Burr and others in urging the House and Congress on both sides of the aisle to consider this legislation at the earliest opportunity.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to conclude my priorities with sharing with you my guide. The guide is that I believe in consideration of the issues that are before us we should always think and provide our care to veterans with service-connected disabilities and those with special needs and the indigent. We should also ensure that a seamless transition for these soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines from military to VA, and we should provide veterans every

and opportunity to live full and healthy lives. These are
will continue to be my priorities and I look forward to
hearing from you.

At this time, I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Congressman
Buyer.

[Applause.]

our Chairman Akaka. My colleague, good friend, and on
side one who is making his mark in the Senate, Senator
Robert Menendez, is here this morning to introduce George
Lisicki, Commander in Chief of VFW. Senator Menendez?
Senator Menendez. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Aloha

to you, as well--
Chairman Akaka. Aloha.
Senator Menendez. and to Ranking Member Burr--my

son would appreciate seeing your North Carolina blue since he
just graduated from Chapel Hill--Chairman Filner, as well
as Ranking Member Buyer.

to It is a pleasure to appear before you and an honor
introduce fellow New Jerseyan George J. Lisicki, the
Commander in Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the
United States. Commander Lisicki is a decorated Army
veteran who fought bravely in Vietnam. He served there
with the Second Battalion, 35th Infantry, Fourth Infantry
Division in the Central Highlands near Pleiku. He was

awarded the Bronze Star, the Vietnam Service Medal, the
Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, and the
National Defense Service Medal, among others.

to Commander Lisicki has devoted his entire adult life
helping our nation's heroes. He joined the VFW Post in
Carteret, New Jersey, which I had the privilege of
formerly representing in the House, in 1971, and he was a life
member

by 1976. He became the first Vietnam veteran to be elected the Post Commander in Carteret. Today, as the Commander in Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, he marshals the lessons of what he has seen in combat so that others may heal in peace. Today, he advocates for those who learned about honor and brotherhood on the battlefield so that they have the chance to learn chemistry or finance in the classroom. And today, he tries to make sure that when soldiers risk their lives for their country, Mr. Chairman, their country will in return bring some measure of security to their lives.

These young men and women, young and old, are facing major challenges here in the country they fought to defend.

Many are struggling with wounds from their service, both physical as well as mental. They are struggling to find quality, affordable health care, struggling to find a good job, struggling to pay for an education. And around 200,000 of them don't have a home to go back to at night.

No matter what we think of the wars they fought in, we owe these brave men and women not just words, but deeds of thanks for their service. A grateful nation not only goes to a Veterans' Day observance or marches in a Memorial Day parade, as we should, a grateful nation shows its gratitude in the health care we provide our veterans, in how we take care of their disabilities, and how we take care of their survivors for those who make the ultimate sacrifice. That is the work of the Commander and of the VFW.

As the government of this grateful nation, we should

not hesitate to fully fund the Veterans Affairs budget
and
bring forward a new G.I. Bill robust enough to reflect
the
strength of those whom the bill will benefit. When
soldiers
ship off to war, Mr. Chairman, if we can look them in the
eye and tell them there is a good reason we are waving
good
bye, we had better be able to look them in the eye when
they
come back and tell them we mean it when we say, welcome
home.

Veterans Commander Lisicki represents everything I
think that embodies the Veterans of Foreign Wars. I
certainly hope and I am sure, as is evidenced by some of
the
opening statements, that we will listen closely to what
they
have to say and act upon it.

And finally, Mr. Chairman, as a member of the Budget
Committee in the Senate, I am happy to have worked with
you

and others to have a historical high in last year's
budget
and I look forward again to achieving--being able to look
our men and women in the eye and saying thank you on
behalf
of a grateful nation.

With that, Mr. Chairman, and excusing myself for
other
hearings, I leave you with the Commander in Chief of the
Veterans of Foreign Wars, Commander Lisicki.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Thank you very much,
Senator Menendez.

And now we will hear from Commander Lisicki. We
look
forward to your testimony. Commander Lisicki?

STATEMENT OF GEORGE LISICKI, COMMANDER IN
CHIEF,
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES;

ACCOMPANIED BY WILLIAM BRADSHAW, DIRECTOR,
NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE; ROBERT E. WALLACE,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR; DENNIS CULLINAN, DIRECTOR,
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE; AND RICHARD

DeNOYER,

CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE

Mr. Lisicki. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. With your
permission, I would like to call on the Executive
Director

of our Washington Office, Mr. Bob Wallace, for the
introduction of some of our VFW guests and our Ladies
Auxiliary.

Mr. Wallace. Members of the Senate and House
Veterans'

Affairs Committees, I am honored to have the privilege of
introducing the National Officers of the Veterans of

Foreign

Wars of the United States and our Ladies Auxiliary and
the

past VFW Commanders in Chief.

Members of the committee, you can be assured that
these

are the individuals leading our organization and they are
also the most politically involved in our organization.

We

now boast almost 1.7 million members in our VFW and more
than 600,000 in our Ladies Auxiliary.

Before I start, I want to make a personal note of
privilege and thank your staffs, compliment each and

every

one of them for their hard work and their willingness to

work on issues with us. A phone call is never not
returned.

A meeting is never not held. The door is always open.

We

may not always agree, but we have the ability to have
access

and that is a compliment to you, Mr. Chairman, and every
member of this committee, for the outstanding staff that

you

have and I thank you for that, and I thank each and every
one of them for their hard work.

Mr. Chairman, please allow me to ask those to be

introduced to please remain standing, and I wish to request the audience to hold its applause until I have introduced all.

I will note, though, for the record that because of the turnout that we have this morning, about 200 people have been transferred to another room, so when you introduce somebody from your States, they may not stand because they may not have been able to get into the room, and I think that is a good thing for the VFW and for the Congress of the United States.

I would first like to start with the ladies. The National President of our Ladies Auxiliary, Virginia Carman from the State of Washington. The Junior Vice President of the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, Jan Tittle from the State of South Carolina. The National Secretary-Treasurer of the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, Connie Atkinson from Arkansas. The Commander in Chief's wife, Gloria Lisicki from New Jersey.

From Wisconsin, the Junior Vice Commander in Chief's wife, Sharon Tradewell. The Adjutant General's wife, Becky Kent from Arizona. And the Quartermaster General's wife, Judy Maher from Missouri.

Our National VFW Officers: Senior Vice Commander in Chief Glen Gardner from Texas. Junior Vice Commander in Chief Tommy Tradewell from Wisconsin. The Adjutant General from Arizona, Allen "Gunner" Kent. The Quartermaster General, Larry Maher from Missouri. The Judge Advocate General, Matt Mihelcic. The Surgeon General, Dr. Curtis Bohlman from Oklahoma. The National Chaplain, Thomas Darling from the State of Washington. The National Chief of Staff, Pierre Lamereaux from New Jersey. The Inspector General, Paul Chevalier from New Hampshire. The Chairman of

the National VFW Legislative Committee from the State of Massachusetts, Richard Denoyer. The Director of the VFW National Legislative Service, Dennis Cullinan from Virginia.

The Director of the VFW National Veterans Service, William Bradshaw from Maryland.

Past Commanders in Chief of the VFW: From Connecticut, Ed Banas. From Florida, John M. Carney. George Cramer from Illinois. Arthur Fellwock from Indiana. James Goldsmith from Michigan. From Georgia, John Gwizdak. Walter Hogan from Wisconsin. Gary Kurpius from Alaska. John Mahan from Montana. James Mueller from Missouri. James Nier from

Texas. From Montana, Tom Pouliot. From Louisiana, Larry Rivers. From New Hampshire, John Smart. R.D. "Bulldog" Smith from the State of Georgia. Paul Spera from Massachusetts. Norm Staab from Kansas. John Staum from Minnesota. And Dr. John Wasylik from Ohio.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. Chairmen Akaka and Filner, Ranking Members Burr and Buyer, my fellow VFW comrades, and honored guests, it is an honor to be here today to represent the 2.3 million men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and our Ladies Auxiliary. We are this nation's largest organization of combat veterans and we are this nation's oldest major veterans' organization.

As we sit here today in safety, there are over 180,000 brave men and women in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan, and many more in far-off lands. They are fighting on behalf in a war to which this Congress sent them. Make no mistake, the VFW supports their mission and we are behind each and every one of them 100 percent.

[Applause.]

in
the
women

Mr. Lisicki. For many of us, the sacrifice we face
this war are few. However, for a great many Americans,
families and friends of and the million or so men and
who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the millions

more who have worn the uniform around the globe, the
sacrifices are numerous and real. The struggles are
real.

The fears, the difficulties, the stresses and strains are
real.

These are things that we at the VFW deeply
understand.

Although today's mission might be different, the emotions
and sheer sacrifice are the same. Whether it is on the
beaches of Normandy, the frozen mountains of Korea, the
jungles of Vietnam, or the blistering sand of Kuwait,
wherever we have served, all of us who have worn the
uniform

at a time of conflict feel that deep bond, that sacred
emotion that unites us as brothers and sisters. It is
that

bond that brings us here today, a bond that grows
throughout

our lives and with the successive generations. We
represent

not just our members, but our brothers and sisters in
uniform, both past, present, and future.

Today, we urge Congress to fulfill this nation's
obligation to her defenders to ensure that all of our
veterans receive every benefit and all the health care
they

have earned through their service to this country. The
VFW

and America will stand for no less.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. One of the highest priorities for this
nation is to ensure sick and disabled veterans receive

the
of

best possible health care. The VFW applauds the efforts

you in Congress over these past years to increase funding for veterans' health care. You have recognized that the treatment of our former defenders at home is connected to the wars of today. You have helped millions of veterans

to

live healthier lives and deal with their disabilities.

We

at the VFW salute you.

As is the case every year, you have received a budget

from the President that does not meet the needs of veterans.

We look to you, as we have in the past, to correct the shortfalls and to follow the recommendations we have laid out in the Independent Budget.

Overall, we find that the VA budget is \$3 billion short. Within that, veterans' health care is \$1.6 billion

below what is needed to provide timely access to high-quality health care. Waiting lines are growing again. Secretary Peake testified at recent budget hearings that there are nearly 70,000 veterans forced to wait months

for

their earned health care. This is unacceptable. Neither you nor I would stand for it, so why should America's

sick

and disabled veterans? This is why we need you to again bridge the gap and provide full funding for VA health

care.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. I should note that the administration has

again proposed increasing prescription drug copayments and

creating an annual enrollment fee. The VFW is strongly

opposed to these unjust fees. We earned our health care when we put on our uniform. The VFW calls on you to again

defeat them.

The additional \$1.6 billion we are asking for in health

care will go a long way towards paying the ongoing costs of

war. We have all seen the horrific stories about PTSD and other mental health care issues our newest veterans face. The battles are mostly hidden from public view, but they are real for those on the front lines. Nobody goes into battle and returns the same person. We are all affected. Some of us just handle it differently. These brave men and women must have proper mental health care services. They need to deal with their emotions so that all can have the peace of mind to live a normal life. You must use your oversight power so that the VA does what is right. The VFW expects no less.

The President's budget request is also a step backwards on construction. VA needs more money to build more hospitals and clinics so that all our veterans, especially those in rural areas, have convenient access to care.

The VFW certainly appreciates the dramatic increase in VA funding over the last few years, but it has been nine years since the VA had a budget on time. VA simply cannot effectively spend more money or properly plan with a budget that is consistently late. Late budgets make VA's already

tough job in attracting physicians and specialists even more difficult. Veterans demand and expect an assured funding stream that is sufficient, timely, and predictable. To actually care for our sick and our disabled veterans, we must reform the budget process.

VA must also focus more on those who have fought on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan, our wounded warriors.

them. We must work hard on the ranges of issues confronting

TBI, PTSD, amputations, blindness, whatever their condition,

we have a sacred obligation to heal them and care for their

disabilities. VA must have more funding for research into

these essential issues. Our wounded warriors must receive

every advantage we can give them, to include specialty care

outside VA when appropriate. We cannot let this generation

down. Our heroes deserve the best.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. In this regard, we were pleased to see the best parts of the Dole-Shalala report included in the defense bill. The VFW strongly believes that the transition

benefit that becomes law will make a meaningful impact in thousands of young lives.

The VFW is greatly concerned, however, with the Dole-

Shalala recommendation to recklessly overhaul the disability

compensation system. Let me be clear. The VFW will not support a separate disability system that compensates

veterans with similar wounds differently based on when they served.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. There is no difference between a 22-year-

old shot in the leg on Iwo Jima 63 years ago and a 22-year-

old shot in the leg yesterday in Fallujah. One generation

of veterans is not more deserving than another. Separate systems would clearly be unfair and the VFW will not

stand

for it.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. We are not here to be nay-sayers or

obstacles to progress. We have called on Congress to look closely at the compensation reports of the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission, a study that was over three years in the making. We don't agree with everything in that report, but the amount of time and energy that went into it on the serious and complex issues of compensation are worthy of closer study.

VA's disability compensation system clearly has issues, but these issues run deep. With over 800,000 veterans waiting month after month for a decision, and with decisions very often wrong, there is no easy fix. We need strong leadership and training from VA managers. We need innovative solutions and new approaches. But we also need some patience, patience for thousands of newly-hired VA

rating employees to learn the difficult job and then to begin reducing the backlog.

Patience, however, is difficult for those of us on the other side of bureaucracy. Patience is difficult for a disabled veteran who has been waiting months for a check to help put food on his table for his or her family. And patience is difficult for the wounded warrior who has been waiting months for an accurate decision after having been blown up on the battlefield.

But there is no easy solution to this problem. There is no grand fix. Any change that we make to the system must truly be beneficial to all disabled veterans and not just a temporary quick action. We owe all of those who were injured by serving this country no less.

Compensation is just one part of the transition benefit

provided to help our soldiers become citizens again.
Chief among these is the G.I. Bill. We salute the efforts of
in Senator Jim Webb, who has done so much in his short time
Congress to advance this essential issue.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. His goal is a G.I. Bill modeled on the
World War II version that pays for the true costs of
college. Those on the front line have an experience that
to fortunately most Americans will never have. We want them
G.I. be our future leaders. Accordingly, they must have a

Bill that gives them a true opportunity for success.
Just

as important, his bill also recognizes the value and
contributions of America's Guard and Reserve Forces. The
VFW urges swift action on this important bill.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. We need meaningful employment programs
so that our veterans can have high-quality jobs to
dramatically reduce the veterans' unemployment rate. We need a
strong, effective, and accountable Veterans' Employment and
Training Service and a vocational rehabilitation program that
leads to meaningful careers, not temporary jobs.

But before we get into this stage in a veteran's
life, we need to ensure that there is a smooth transition from
active duty to veteran status, a truly seamless
transition.

The VFW envisions a system with a single medical and
personnel file created the day someone enlists. We want
this file to follow them wherever they are stationed and
shift with them to the VA once they separate or retire.
This will improve their health care and accelerate the
disability claim process.

We must ensure that veterans have access to all the

separation and transition services available to them.

This

is especially true of those in the Guard and Reserves who live in rural areas. They often come home far away from other members of the unit, thrust immediately into a very

difficult transition with limited access to the essential transition services this government provides.

through

We need leadership from all involved to battle

do the turf wars of these essential issues. We need you to

what is right. Taking care of America's veterans and military personnel is not a partisan issue, it is an American issue.

[Applause.]

critical

Mr. Lisicki. All these transition issues are

the because they can help forestall the national tragedy of

growing numbers of homeless veterans, especially among

our OEF and OIF veterans. We must do everything we can to

give them a hand up to get back on their feet.

debt Although not under the purview of your committees, I would be remiss if I did not say a few words about the

currently that we owe the tremendously brave men and women

families. fighting on our behalf around the world and their

recognition We must improve the benefits provided to them in

of their continued service. We must increase their pay, ensure that housing options are plentiful, especially for the hundreds of thousands trying to raise families while volunteering for this country. We must have outreach and benefit targeted to their spouses and children,

especially

at the length and frequency of deployment issues. And

for

our military retirees, we must continue to oppose TRICARE

fee increases.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. We need to let our servicemen and women

know that the VFW stands with all of America in supporting their dedication and we appreciate the sacrifices they are making.

Before I conclude, I should also make mention of an issue very important to me. The VFW's unwavering

commitment to obtaining the fullest accounting for those warriors still missing. The POW-MIA mission is most sacred and none of us

will rest until we know the whereabouts of every one of our men and women who have served in uniform and paid a heavy price. We urge full funding for this vital mission and a renewal of obligations. This is our duty to our brothers and sisters.

Mr. Chairman, that obligation to our brothers and sisters did not end once we traded our uniform for a business suit or dress or some blue jeans. That unique

bond forged in combat by shared experience filled us with the need to serve. I know those of you who were in the military

understand that desire, that pull that brings me here today.

All of us are veterans forever serving.

[Applause.]

Mr. Lisicki. We now ask all of you to serve on our behalf. Provide this nation's veterans with the full

range of benefits and services all of us have earned. The fighting might end when the last bullet is fired, but this

nation's obligations do not. We ask for you to ensure that

this nation meets its sacred obligation to those who have borne the battle. The VFW and this entire country

expects

no less.

with
us
Mr. Chairman, we sincerely look forward to working
you and your excellent and dedicated staffs on these
important issues. I would like to thank you for allowing
to testify today, and I would be pleased to answer any
questions that you or the members of these two great
committees may have. Thank you.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Lisicki follows:]

United
States.
Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Thank you very much,
Commander in Chief Lisicki, for your legislative
presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the

ask
in
I will not ask any questions at this point so as to
give other members an opportunity to make statements and
questions. So we will move back and forth between the
Senate and the House and both sides of the aisle, keeping
mind the arrival time.

Let me first call on Chairman Filner.

itself
and
Chairman Filner. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
Commander, thank you. Your eloquence speaks for
and we thank you so much for what you have said today,

years
you touched on--or I should say I touched on many of the
issues that you have raised and been raising for many

and our agenda really comes from you, so we thank you for
all the work you have done over so many years.

disability
claims process that were voiced. I heard Ranking Member
Buyer, if I heard it right, call for a privatization, at
least of the study to figure out what to do. I don't

know--

we
people
I would have to say that that is not the way to go, that
can't have the care of our veterans in the hands of

who are trying to make a profit. We are looking to serve the veterans.

I suggested, as you know, a more radical breakthrough,
and I agree perfectly with you, by the way, that any two-tiered system is not going to happen. I mean, we just can't have it. But we should be breaking through that backlog for everybody. I suggested a pay-now, audit-later approach, and especially with the Vietnam veterans, looking at those claims which have been pending for decades, some of them, and granting them. I am just wondering what your gut reaction to that is. Should we be pursuing that and look at that as a way to break through all this logjam?

Mr. Lisicki. Yes, sir. Mr. Chairman, we certainly would be willing to look into anything. What our concern is, that the veteran is taken care of properly. We do not or will we support two systems. It is wrong, we are against it, and we will do everything we have in our power to fight it. We need to do what is right for our veterans. We need to come up with the right system. We need to work together and make this work for our veterans who have earned and fought and suffered and sacrificed for this country. We all need together, working together, need to come up with the right solution.

Chairman Filner. Well, save your energies. You don't have to fight that two-tiered system since we are not going to bring it up on the House side, anyway. So we are going to have to fight for the veteran, not against them.

[Laughter.]

Chairman Filner. You have got a lot more things to fight for, so we want to save it for that.

As you know, many of the items that you talked about cost money. We have a \$3 trillion budget. We can't afford not to pay for these items. That is what we owe to our veterans. We are spending about \$1 billion every two days in Iraq. Part of the cost of the war is funding the warrior and all the warriors before him.

But we have certain budget rules, et cetera, et cetera, we are going to have to try to deal with. I would argue, again, that it is a cost of war. We are spending, as I said, hundreds of billions on the war. Surely the few billion that you suggested that this budget is out of range for from the Independent Budget, we can afford. We have to afford it.

You mentioned Senator Webb's bill with great admiration, as we all do. We have got to deal with a new G.I. Bill, and as I said earlier, and I forgot the item that you did, not only do we bring the cost of education benefits to the true level that is needed, the cost of the housing program to its true level, the bringing in of the Guard and Reserves to their earned benefits, and I think, Senator, that we ought to add some statements, maybe like our Founding Fathers, I mean, that there is an absolute right to

mental health care from the Veterans Administration and the resources to give that. There ought to be an absolute right against homelessness of veterans. This is simply a moral blot on the nation, that we have so many past veterans and we are seeing new veterans on the streets. This is just unacceptable for the United States of America.

But we are going to need your help in those budget

fights. People are going to say, we can't afford it. We are going to be arguing with you that we can't afford not to. And I just say to all of those who are here and made this long trip for your legislative conference, it is important that you are here. It is probably more important that when you go home, you talk to your legislator. Have a delegation--you all know this, but I have got to repeat it because your power is not fully exploited in the districts.

If you go into your Congressperson and talk about Senator Webb's bill, if you talk about assured or mandatory funding, if you talk about the disability claims system, they will listen and they will hear.

You know, there are, I think, barely 100 House members now out of 435 that are, in fact, veterans. The vast majority, including myself, are not. And it is not that they are evil, or we are evil. We have to learn what you all went through and the only way to learn that is for

you to tell your stories. So you have to do that with all the Congressmen, particularly those who have not served in the Armed Forces. They are just not personally familiar with a lot of the things you have gone through.

So when you go home, make sure you visit your Congressperson. Tell him or her the stories of what you are going through, of your experiences with the VA. And we will do what you have said that we have to do here. Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman Filner.

Senator Burr?

Senator Burr. Mr. Chairman, I am going to take your

thank
lead and yield my time so that other members can have the opportunity to fully speak, but I also want to again

the Commander for being here.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Ranking Member Senator Burr.

Now I call on Ranking Member Congressman Buyer.

Mr. Buyer. Mr. Chairman, I reserve my time to allow other members the opportunity to question.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Congressman Buyer.

Let me now call on Senator Isakson.

for
Senator Isakson. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thanks very much to the Chairmen and Ranking Members

our
a
allowing us this time. I will be brief, but I want to commend you, Mr. Lisicki, on your comment with regard to

veterans are not a partisan issue and wanted to tell you

a
brief story that illustrates how true that is.

to
In the waning hours of last year's session, thanks

to
the cooperation of Senator Akaka, we were able to pass an authorization for the restoration and renovation of the

VA
hospital in Atlanta out of the Senate. It got to the

House
and it got tied up in a great deal of difficulty, not all

of
which I understood, but I did what we have to do from

time
to time. I got on my knees and I went to, first of all,

to
Congressman Buyer, and second of all, by long distance to California to Chairman Filner. I will just tell you,

those
two gentlemen, in particular Chairman Filner, at the very last hour as we were about to close brought that to the floor as a suspension, got it passed, and made it

possible
for the completion of the restoration of that hospital,

and
I just want to publicly acknowledge and thank all three

of

them for what they did in that.

[Applause.]

Senator Isakson. I will make two quick points.

One, I

share with you every word in your pre-printed remarks with

regard to the issue of suicide. It is something that we have to pay close attention to. It has certainly been a difficulty, a rising difficulty in this current time of

conflict. We in Georgia at Robins Air Force Base alone have

experienced a problem with a blended wing, a Guard wing blended with active duty wing, at that particular facility.

I commend you, and I am investing my time right now in seeing to it we do address the issue of suicide in the military and try and prevent these tragic deaths that have

taken place.

Secondly, I would like for you to elaborate on the comments you made with regard to seamless transition between

DOD and Veterans Affairs. We have had great difficulty, particularly in health care, in the hand-off from active duty to veteran status between DOD facility and veterans' hospital. I am wondering if you are aware of what was

done

at the Uptown VA Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia, and the

Eisenhower Center in terms of their seamless transition program.

Mr. Lisicki. I am going to refer this, with your permission, to a member of my staff who has really been working hard on this issue and they can probably give you

a

more accurate explanation which you are looking for than

I

can at this time, with your permission.

Senator Isakson. Okay.

Mr. Wallace. Senator, I don't know anything about it,

but I do know an awful lot about seamless transition. I spent two years on the President's Task Force to Improve

Health Care for our Nation's Veterans and one of the number one priorities of that task force was seamless transition, and the problem was very clear. DOD was not cooperating with VA at that time. But I understand that that has now changed. In Great Lakes Naval Hospital, they work together.

I would assume that is the same thing that is happening down in your area.

Senator Isakson. Since you are not aware, I wanted to tell you that because of the hard work of the veterans in the Augusta area, General Schoemaker and others, the Uptown VA facility and the DOD facility, which is the Eisenhower Medical Center at Fort Gordon, combined their effort and they have made seamless transition work. In one particular example of that hospital where I visited, I visited a Sergeant Harris who had been severed from active duty because of traumatic brain injury in Iraq. She was treated in DOD but separated because she could not compete any further.

She came to Augusta, went to the veterans' facility, the Uptown facility. They corrected the traumatic brain injury and she reenlisted in the military, which is living proof if you can have a smooth transition of health care and you don't get a dip in that health care, that remarkable things can and do take place in our hospitals. So I am going to continue to be an advocate for the seamless

transition you talk about in here because it is absolutely critical for those veterans that are returning from the Middle East today.

I thank you very much for your testimony and your service to the country.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Senator Isakson.

Congressman Walz?

Chairman Filner. Mr. Chairman, before Mr. Walz goes, I just want to introduce him as the highest ranking enlisted man ever elected to the United States Congress, Army Command

Sergeant Major Tim Walz.

[Applause.]

Chairmen Mr. Walz. Thank you. Thank you to both the and thank you to the Ranking Members, and Commander, thank you for the privilege to be here and hear your testimony. Madam President, thank you for the work you do. And to all of you for being here. It is a real honor and I appreciate you giving your time to us.

I know I for many years sat out in my VSOs over the years and I sat right where you are and I know the question going through your mind. Does anybody up here actually get it? I would say--trust me, I said that many times, and at times I think the answer is yes and at times we have a ways to go. But the one thing I would like to say, and you have

heard it from these members up here who I have had the privilege to serve with and learn from, the absolute commitment to this nation's veterans is unwavering, and the idea of partisanship--and trust me, it is sure there, and trust me, this year, the complaints that we are not getting anything done at times do ring true, but I can tell you on the issues of veterans, it is an area that I think can serve as a model for the way government can work, that we can have

differences, we can bring different ideas together, but the goal is unwavering. The end is unwavering, and that is the care of this nation's veterans.

This group here, to you--I don't need to tell you, it is preaching to the choir--it is a moral responsibility that this nation deliver those to those veterans, but it is also a national security imperative that we deliver to our veterans so that our best and brightest in the next generation is choosing to serve this nation, because we are all pragmatic up here. We take the approach, we will hope for the best, but we are going to plan for the worst, and that means having this nation's military ready to serve when they need to be called upon. I tell you that that commitment--

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. That commitment is unwavering amongst this group, and I also want to thank you for all you do. This part of it is absolutely crucial, but all you do out in our communities, and I can tell you that the littlest things that you do are some of the biggest things in a soldier's life.

I can still remember, I personally used one of the Operation Uplink cards to call my daughter on her third birthday when I was deployed, and those stories happen over and over and over, so that is a thank you to you and the work that you do. And I can tell you, for a soldier that is thousands of miles from home, hearing that voice on the other end is all that it takes to renew your commitment to doing your job, so I thank you for that. It is important work you are doing.

In listening to you talk about this and listening to

the things that you care so deeply about, Senator Dole summed this thing up right when he came in to testify on the Dole-Shalala Commission. He said, regardless of where you are at on any of the other issues, you spent billions putting them in harm's way. Now spend whatever is necessary and do whatever is necessary to get them out of harm's way. It is a very simple equation. And you asking us need to be the stewards of those resources and you need to be the stewards of the programs to make sure we are delivering them.

So we take that very, very seriously, and I said, looking at the experts, I know the one thing I don't-- something I do know is what I don't know, and that is why we go to the experts. And that is why when I see this, this Independent Budget, this is not something you print just for the fun of it. This isn't just a suggestion. This has been thought out. This is the gold standard of what we are supposed to be able to do.

And this document--I would say as an old sergeant, I remember this always. When my soldiers weren't performing their maintenance on their Howitzers, you would go ask them where their dash-ten manual was, and if it didn't have a smudge of oil on it, you knew they were lying to you.

[Laughter.]

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. I would ask your Congressional representatives, if this thing is not dog-eared, if they haven't read through here and listed your point of view on this, they are probably not making an informed decision on where they need to be. They can disagree, but they better know the point you are coming from.

And I would like to mention just a couple things here, Commander, from your testimony and coming out of this, and I think each of these gentlemen talked about this. Changing the culture--I heard Mr. Buyer talking about that, changing the way things were done, changing the way we approach things. That is the attitude that this committee needs to have, thinking beyond what we have done in the past. And there is something in here, and it is a very small portion, and it is one that I don't think gets talked about very much, but I think it is symptomatic at the heart of where we are at when it comes to veterans' funding and that is the idea of rounding down compensation. If there is anything that is more disrespectful and a slap in the face of this nation's veterans, it is the idea of pinching a few pennies on the back of a wounded warrior to try and balance a budget that is nowhere near being balanced. And when they tell you when they look at this, well, these are good suggestions, but we can't afford it-- you have heard these members talk about that. Well, we have figured out a way to give ourselves a pay raise. We have figured out a way to fix the AMT with \$56 billion in deferred payments. We have figured out a way to do a stimulus package for \$170 billion. We can't figure out a way to round up for a disabled veteran? It is beyond me--

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. This committee's commitment is not about ideology and it is not just about spending money, because trust me on this, I come from the classroom. I am a schoolteacher and we are the cheapest people alive because

at we have to be. We pinch pennies. I ate in the lunchroom

school because it was cheaper.

weeks But I sat here and listened to testimony several
ago from the IG in the VA, and the IG's budget has
continuously been cut. Those of you in this room know

that the IG is the watchdog, the eyes to make sure that we are
not wasting or misspending the hard-earned tax dollars

that this nation is giving for our veterans. And I had that
IG testify and stand in front of me and tell me there are

we hundreds of millions of dollars out of this budget, and
are talking hundreds of millions that could go to

veterans,
that are being wasted in fraud, waste, and abuse.

that I said, let me get this straight. Can I ask you
again? Are you telling me that people are war

profiteering
on the backs of our injured warriors and we don't have
the resources necessary to investigate and prosecute that?

And the IG said, yes. So why in the world would we cut the
IG budget this year?

are Those are the questions that you brought up. Those
the things that you have been asking.

on And the last thing, Commander, I want you to help me
this one, if you can, the sufficient, timely, and

in predictable funding. I can't tell you, there are people
this room that have fought this thing for decades. There

sense are people in this room that have said simple, common
should prevail in this. The question is, what is the

direction to go on this? The mandatory funding issues,
there are bills being put forward. What does the VFW--
are
you proposing a broad framework and then asking us to
work
through the possibilities, or where do you think we
should
go, Commander, on this, to make sure that we do that,
that
it is sufficient, that it is timely, that it is
predictable?

Mr. Lisicki. First of all, we certainly support, as
you will see in our testimony not only this year but
years
previous, that we need mandatory funding. We don't feel
that our veterans of this nation have to come year after
year after year for the funding in the Congress and the
Senate to pay for our wounded warriors. We feel that we
should have mandatory funding. The budget shouldn't be
balanced on the backs of these wounded warriors, but they
should be put up front for these wounded warriors and
then
balance the budget. That is our feeling.

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. Well, as I said, in closing, and I
appreciate the time, and as you could tell, I used this
time, because I sat where you were and I wanted to be up
here for many years just yelling about these things, so
now
we have a little bit of a platform to do it. This issue
is
going to come up. We delivered good work last year
bipartisanly and I applaud my colleagues across this,
that
there truly is--of all the committees I sit on, this is
the

most bipartisan of any of them in Congress. But we
delivered some things, but we did not deliver enough, and
we
have got a lot of work to do this year to try and get
that
done.

I would ask this of you, each of you. The pundits
are

telling us that this is a year, because we have three
Senators running for President, everything is going to
shut
down and we are not going to get anything done. I say,
to
hell with the pundits on that. We have got a lot of work
to
do. We made progress last year, and this issue of
mandatory
funding, those of us who tell us not to bring it up this
year because it is not popular in an election year, we
need
your help to tell them that it is always the right time
to
deliver for the veterans.

So I thank you for the opportunity.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Congressman Walz.

Congressman Boozman?

Mr. Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As you can
see,
Congressman Walz is a great advocate and a great addition
to
the Veterans Affairs Committee.

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. Thank you.

Mr. Boozman. My dad was in the Air Force for 20
years
and retired as a Master Sergeant and he reminds me of
him.

I am always a little nervous being around him.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Boozman. I am afraid he is going to ask me to
do
something.

It is great to have you up here. We appreciate your
leadership. We appreciate your hard work and also really
appreciate your D.C. guys. You guys do a good job of
helping us in so many different ways.

Also, President Carman, it is good to see you here.

I
tell the story all the time about being in a meeting
several
years ago and talking about how the backbone of the

organization that I was with was the women's auxiliary,
and
as I was riding home, my wife punched me and said, "They
are
not only the backbone, most of the time they are the
brains."

[Laughter.]

Mr. Boozman. The G.I. Bill--as you know, I am the
our
Ranking Member on Economic Opportunity and working with
Chairman Herseth Sandlin, as you know, we have started to
go
forward on that. I think we have got tremendous
opportunity
to really make radical reform. I think the committee is
committed to doing that. The best I can tell, hopefully
Congress is committed to doing that. So again, we
appreciate your input.

You mentioned the Dole-Shalala, and I understand
your

concern, the two-system thing. Dole-Shalala also had a
lot
of good stuff with the wounded warriors and taking these
guys that are severely injured, giving them an advocate
and
stuff. Again, hopefully we can get all of those things
done.

I have got to recognize my Arkansas folks. Where
are
they?

Chairman Filner. A lot of them.

Mr. Boozman. Thank you. I am not going to have you
call the hogs, but we really do appreciate your being
here.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Boozman. I will tell you, I know this is a hard
trip for many of you, but it is so important. As we talk
about those things here and as you talk to the committees
that advocate these things, it is so important as you are
with your Congressmen over the next day or two that you
look
them in their eyes and tell them how important these
things
are to you. So thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Congressman Boozman.

Now we will hear from Senator Sanders.

Senator Sanders. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman,
and thank you, Chairman Filner, also, for holding this
very,
very important hearing. Let me suggest to you why this
hearing is important.

When you leave Washington, D.C. after your
convention,
there will be remaining here on Capitol Hill some 35,000
well-paid lobbyists--35,000--and these guys represent
some
of the largest corporations, some of the most powerful
special interests in the world, and every day they are
busy
knocking on doors saying, "We need more. We need more.
We
need more." Well, I think, and I think the consensus up
here and what you have said is that instead of worrying
about some of the wealthiest people in this country who
are
doing just fine, maybe it is time we changed our national
priorities and paid attention to the men and women who
have
put their lives on the line defending this country.

[Applause.]

Senator Sanders. Chairman Filner made this point a
moment ago, but let me reemphasize it. Adequately taking
care of our veterans, in fact, costs money. It costs
real
money. But I want to put the veterans' budget in
proportion
to other budget requests. At a time when there are some
who
say we cannot afford a few billion dollars more for a
G.I.
Bill of Rights and an educational program, at a time when
some say we cannot afford to bring back into the VA the
Priority 8s, the Category 8s who have been thrown out a
few
years ago because we don't have enough money to do that,
we
don't have a few billion dollars to do that, these same

a people do manage to come up with the fact that they want

trillion dollars over a 20-year period in order to give
tax breaks to the wealthiest three-tenths of one percent of
the population. That is repealing the estate tax. One
trillion dollars over 20 years for millionaires and billionaires,
and then people say we don't have a few billion dollars to
take care of our veterans. I think that is a nonsensical
approach.

[Applause.]

your Senator Sanders. I want to thank all of you for
have work on the Independent Budget. I think last year, we
my made some real progress. I want to say what a number of
be colleagues have already said, that they are not going to
raising prescription drug fees or copayment fees on our
veterans. It ain't going to happen, and let me tell you
why.

[Applause.]

to Senator Sanders. Don't kid yourself. Anyone who
you thinks that that relatively small sum of money is needed
VA balance the budget doesn't understand the budget process.
happen. Do you know what the goal of raising those fees are? Do
all know what it is? It is to drive veterans out of the
system. We all know that, and that is not going to

[Applause.]

to Senator Sanders. Now, on that point, I would like
ask Commander Lisicki and others, a few years ago, the

President said we could not afford to allow Priority 8

veterans to come into the VA system and threw them out. Some of us think we have got to change that policy, that promises were made to veterans in terms of health care. Those promises should be kept. What is the VFW's

position

on Priority 8s? Should we bring them back into the system or not?

system

Mr. Lisicki. Senator, I am going to yield to my colleague here.

every

Mr. Wallace. Senator, the VFW very clearly wants every veteran to have access to the VA health care system, but

the

VFW very clearly understands one problem and one major hurdle. It is called capacity. If you don't have

capacity

for people and you give them a false expectation of care, you are going to--the most severely disabled veterans are going to suffer, or you are going to go out and buy

services

in order to give them the care.

maybe

So we have to be very careful how we do that, and

and

one of the ways to do that is to raise the income level

the

let people start coming in and see the effects it has on

system, because as the Commander said, the Secretary recently said there are 70,000 people waiting for health care. We don't want to see that get worse, and we don't want to see our most severely disabled veterans put in

the

back of the line because somebody is a Priority 8 who is

paying for their services.

but

Senator Sanders. I think your point is well taken,

both

I believe that with good budgeting, we can accommodate

goals. It goes without saying that we want those who are coming home tomorrow who are wounded to get the best

quality

care, but I think we also owe it to the older veterans to

whom promises were made to take care of them, as well,
and I think as a nation, we can, in fact, do both.

I just want to again thank all of you for being
here.

Don't underestimate the impact that you have on the
political process. We need you and the other service
organizations to stand with us. We are making progress.

We have got a long way to go.

But I think, in conclusion, to repeat what Chairman
Filner said a moment ago, whatever one's view may be on

the war, and there are strong disagreements in this country
about the wisdom of this war, there is no disagreement

that when people put their lives on the line, we keep our
promises to those people. We take care of them. And as

the wealthiest nation in the history of the world, we can do

no less. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Senator Sanders.

Now we will hear from Congressman Bilbray.

Mr. Bilbray. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Chairman
Filner

and I have the privilege of representing two different
parts

of San Diego County, but we are not going to ask for
California to stand up in either room, but we will say

that it is a privilege not only to represent the area, but for
myself to be raised in a community and to be raised by

two fathers who were actually Pearl Harbor survivors. Mom

had a thing about men in uniform.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Bilbray. In clarification, I also--

Chairman Filner. You had better.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Bilbray. My father passed away when I was in
tenth

of grade, and I remember though he had retired from 20 years
who service as a Warrant Officer in the United States Navy
the actually ran landing crafts up, so he always said that
the Marines were put on board ship to remind the Navy what
the military was all about--

[Laughter.]

Marines Mr. Bilbray. He used to tell that one when the
the were around. I am not going to tell you the ones when
the Marines weren't around.

[Laughter.]

wanted Mr. Bilbray. But I have just got to say that I
remember when he found out he was terminally ill, he
away desperately to be in a military facility and he passed

him in Balboa Hospital in San Diego, and it meant a lot to
every because that was his family. He came and visited us
engaging once in a while when the United States Navy wasn't
it him, but he still as a boy had grown up in the Navy and
something meant a lot to him. And that military service is
those of us who have never been engaged in will never
understand, how many men and women become men and women
through their service and in their service.

different And so I apologize if I speak from a little
position. I have got to say that I was glad to see the
Sergeant Major clarify Chairman Bob's misspeaking on the
issue of Ranking Member Buyer's statement. He didn't say
privatize, Bob. He said get our bureaucrats out in the
world learning from other people's operations to increase
efficiency, and this is one thing you learn in the
military

you do all the time. I think that that idea of taking
the bureaucracy and teaching them, go out and try to learn to
do things better, don't accept the status quo, is a
challenge we have in every bureaucracy and it is really reflected
in our service to our veterans.

Mr. Chairman, I think that one of the things we have
got to remember is that we are not talking about welfare
programs when we talk about veterans. We are talking
about earned benefits. These are not benefits--
[Applause.]

Mr. Bilbray. These are not services that have been
given down by God or by some concept of Congress. It is
a contract that was made and it is one that should be kept.
And so I always believe that we have got to separate the
benefits we would like to give people to the benefits
that people have earned, and that is one of the drawing lines
we need to say here.

So I have to say that there is a flip side on this,
too. Too often in Congress, we all get involved in
certain issues. One of the things that I think that is really
missed here is that veterans' services, or veterans are
not a burden, are not just an obligation. They are a huge
resource that this country, in my opinion, has forgotten
how to tap into more often, and I will give you an example.

This country every year imports massive amounts of
foreign nurses because we desperately need nurses and
medical technicians to provide the services to our
citizens,
including veterans, when in fact we have being discharged
every day in this country medics who have experience that
you can't learn in college, you can't go to school for.

And

I am very proud in San Diego that our community colleges
are actually doing outreach at making sure that we try to not
only allow, but encourage returning veterans to come back
in. They get the credit as the equal of an LVN to get
that to the RN. I think that we ought to be looking more

aggressively at making sure that every medic, anybody
involved in medical services, as they leave the service,
are given the best opportunity and the most encouragement to
be able to continue their service to the American people as
civilians.

The other issue that I remember, unlike the Sergeant
Major or the Chairman on the House side, I didn't get to
be a teacher. I wanted to be a history teacher, but I
couldn't pull the academics, so I ended up in Congress instead.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Bilbray. But I do have to say that when I went
to school, we had not only the privilege, but we had the
advantage of not having a teacher that went from
elementary

school to high school to college and then right back to
school, that never went out in the real world, and today

a lot of our educational institutions are full of people
that have been in education their whole life and have done
nothing except spend time in school, and that reflects in
the education that our children are receiving.

One of the privileges we had in my generation was
having the G.I. Bill take the asset of veterans with
their real-life experience and tap into that asset to train the
next generation, which was my generation. I think we are
not doing enough, Mr. Chairman, to really encourage and
fast-track our retiring and our veterans back into
service

teaching the next generation not only about how to read
and
write, but what it means to be an American and what it
means
to really be a patriot that wants to know that this
country
is a country, not just one that you ask what it can do
for
you, but what you can do for it. And I think this
country
is one that really can tap into that resource.

So I would ask again that we look at it, Republicans
and Democrats, that these are just two examples. We are
talking engineers. We are talking about a lot of other
things this country desperately needs that the veterans
have
to offer that we need to make sure that those resources
are
available to help in the transition from that service.

So again, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the chance to
be
here. It is a privilege to work with Chairman Filner and
Ranking Member Buyer. I just hope my mother doesn't hear
this tape. Thank you.

[Laughter and applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Congressman Bilbray.
Now we will hear from Congresswoman Herseth Sandlin.
Ms. Herseth Sandlin. Thank you, Chairman Akaka. I
want to thank Commander Lisicki for being here and
presenting to the joint session of the House and Senate
Veterans Affairs Committees the priorities for the
Veterans
of Foreign Wars proposal and certainly your input into
the
Independent Budget. I also want to thank all of the
veterans who are here for your service to the country,
all
of the members and the leaders of the Auxiliary for the
work
that you do on behalf of our veterans and military
members
and their families.

I do want to recognize the South Dakotans who are
here,

three in particular. I am not sure if they are in this room

or the other one, but Gary Knutzen is a National Council Member. Marvin Saronka, our State Commander, very good. And Rick Barge, who is our State Quartermaster. I had a chance to see them as well as some of you from other States

and proud members of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyape at the White House yesterday and the presentation of the Congressional Medal of Honor to Master Sergeant Woodrow Wilson Keeble, a hero from World War II and Korea, an important tribute that was long overdue but important nonetheless to give to his family and survivors for his tremendous service during those wars.

As you know and Mr. Boozman mentioned, I am the Chairwoman of the Economic Opportunities Subcommittee on the

House Veterans Affairs Committee and we work in a very bipartisan manner on a number of the issues, Commander,

that you mentioned in your opening statement, the importance of

readjustment benefits, ensuring service members have the education benefits, the housing benefits, vocational rehabilitation, employment benefits to successfully

transition from the military to civilian life. Many of the

issues that you did identify and speak to in the opening statement are issues that we have been working on for a number of years and have made significant progress in identifying the challenges, identifying the priorities.

And one of those, of course, is modernizing the Montgomery G.I. Bill, and we are very pleased to be working

with Senate Webb and his colleagues in this chamber to build

on the changes and the progress that we made in the National

Defense Authorization Act of 2008 in providing flexibility,

but we also have to increase the overall benefit for active

duty, for National Guard and Reserve. We appreciate the

VFW's support of our efforts in moving this important bill

so that we can reflect the new realities that have transformed our nation's military commitment since September 11, 2001.

Also, last week, our subcommittee held a hearing on the

VA's home loan program and how veterans are being affected

in the current subprime mortgage crisis. Chairman Filner and Ranking Member Buyer have both introduced bills on improving the VA home loan program and we look forward to working with them in the upcoming weeks to make those improvements so that any of our veterans who have been caught in the subprime mortgage mess can have access to a program that has worked well for many and that we think can

work well for many more.

I do have a question for you, Commander, as it relates

to some of the comments you made about PTSD. Last Friday, I was back home in South Dakota and met with a number of young

men who served in OIF and OEF and it was an open roundtable discussion. I anticipated that perhaps there would be more

questions about changes that we had recently made to education benefits and other things that we needed to do to

help their transition, similar to a roundtable that I had had up in the Sisseton, South Dakota area the week before.

But immediately, the discussion went to PTSD, and I was

pleased that a number of these young men were willing to open up to me about what they were experiencing and what they were experiencing at the VA. Now, these happened to

be young men who lived in Sioux Falls, our largest community in

South Dakota, and they told me of a concern that I have

heard from some of my friends who served in Vietnam who
are also accessing care in the VA. One of my friends from
Brookings says, "You know, I have been going to the VA
for six years for my PTSD and I have had six different
psychiatrists." Now, that is over six years.

These young men told me, and they have been
accessing their care for maybe two, maybe three years, and they get
a different counselor each time. They get a different
psychiatrist each time. Some of them are in school and

working and so they miss their appointments and some at
the VA interpret that as indicating that they maybe really
don't want further help after an initial appointment or two.
Well, they are working and they are going to school and

we have to be flexible about when we set up their
appointments and when we have group sessions for them that are set up
at the VA medical center in Sioux Falls.

But I also have real concerns about our National
Guard and Reservists or those that may be separated from active
duty, living back in their communities, that are in small
communities in South Dakota, that are in small

communities in other parts of the country, and I am wondering if in
addition to increasing the number of psychiatrists,
psychologists, licensed counselors in our medical

centers, perhaps even making them available at our Community-Based
Outreach Clinics, would the VFW support for those
individuals that simply can't make appointments on a

regular basis either to medical centers or CBOCs, contracting
with community mental health centers who hire licensed
counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and others to

PTSD provide that care for those that may be suffering from that are in remote and rural areas.

You Mr. Wallace. That is a very interesting question. You can't find on the corner a psychologist or psychiatrist who necessarily understands post-traumatic stress disorder, so

isn't contracting out just for the sake of contracting out going to solve the problem. You have to get the right trained people to be able to take care of the issues.

have, The problem that many in the veterans' community and the Commander said it in his testimony, nobody goes into battle and comes home the same. We all handle it differently. We have to be cognizant as a nation and you as a member of Congress that it might not show up for many, many years, but the most important thing is when it does show up, we have the right clinicians to take care of them, and you can't just go to any community outpatient clinic and say, take care of these people, because they have no clue of how to talk to them and what they have experienced.

So the VA has a major challenge in front of them in order to get the right number of clinicians that are qualified to take care of these individuals and their families.

the Ms. Herseth Sandlin. Well, and I appreciate your response. I mean, there are other issues here that I addressed in this roundtable discussion about mandatory screenings, and, of course, all of them said not during

demobilization process. We are not going to give you accurate information then. We just want to get to our families. But a 90-day, six-month, and have the families also attend who may be picking up on things.

But what I hear you saying is--I agree with you, it can't just be anybody, but I do feel that we are unrealistic to expect that many of these men and women who do not live close to medical centers or CBOCs are going to be able to access the care even if the VA is able to hire more counselors in the area of mental health, which I have concerns about. I have concerns about reports that I get that the resources we have put forward have gone to hire mid-level managers versus caseworkers.

And so I agree that we have to do our oversight, but if we were able to carefully negotiate the contracts, ensure a level of training, because some of the young men I met with didn't necessarily feel that the folks they were meeting with in the VA were necessarily understanding all that they had had seen psychiatrists who were combat veterans. We know of those complaints from past veterans, as well. But I do think that we have to think outside of the box and contract in a way that, addressing the cost issues, addressing the training issues as it relates to PTSD among combat veterans, that we have to seek more partnerships with people that have the degrees and the background, but then more specialized training to confront and work through the issues of avoidance that many of our OIF and OEF and those from Vietnam and others that suffer from PTSD, to get them

through that.

But I think that it has the potential to help address this issue that was expressed to me, the concern of the turnover and seeing someone else, someone new every time, and you have a hard enough time getting over those initial avoidance issues, that if they had the continuity of a licensed professional in their community that had some

specific training to perhaps better anticipate what they might be hearing and help them through that, that that is something that we need to perhaps be more aggressive in pursuing.

other
Mr. Wallace. I agree with you 100 percent. The
thing we have to do is we have to stop stigmatizing
veterans
as being crazy and having mental illness because they
have
served in war.

is-
Ms. Herseth Sandlin. I agree with you, and my time

-
Mr. Wallace. That is a major problem that we have,
and
that is why the Guard and Reserve, if they are suffering
from some kind of--or an active duty person--if they are
suffering from kind of a flashback or some kind of a
whatever, a disruption in their life, that doesn't mean
they
are crazy. That doesn't mean they shouldn't have a
firearm.

It doesn't mean they shouldn't be able to be hired by a
company or what have you. They should be treated, they

should be given the right counseling, and they should
become
productive citizens. That is the problem,
stigmatization.

We stigmatize them all as suffering from PTSD and it is
totally wrong.

[Applause.]

Ms. Herseth Sandlin. Chairman Akaka, I yield back,
but

I agree with that. There is a broad stigma across the
country, not just among our nation's veterans, as you
know,
but all those who suffer from mental illness, and I would
bring to your attention as well as Chairman Filner and
Ranking Member Buyer that the State Adjutant General for
the

South Dakota National Guard is going to be undertaking a
series of Public Service Announcements to reach out and

address precisely that issue and trying to erase the stigma

to encourage more young men and women who may be suffering

from PTSD to seek help. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Congresswoman Herseth Sandlin.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Now we will hear from Senator Webb.

Senator Webb. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Commander, I want to first of all just thank you for your service and for the service that everyone in this room

has given. As a fellow infantryman from Vietnam, also

the

father of a son who served in the Marine infantry in Iraq,

there is a truth acquired the hard way when you go through

that experience and all of us should remember that.

There has been some conversation here about growing up

in the military. My dad was a career Air Force guy who flew

B-17s, B-29s, and was in the Berlin Airlift. If anybody has

seen that movie, "The Great Santini," the Robert Duvall movie years ago, that was my dad. I can remember when I was

eight years old, standing at parade rest in front of my chest of drawers on Saturday morning. He would walk in

and

I would say, "Dad," and he would say, "Shut up. You are a

corporal."

[Laughter.]

Senator Webb. I have to say, when I decided to go in

the Marine Corps, my dad was really puzzled and he said, "Why are you going in the Marine Corps?" And I said,

well,

I thought I would see what it is like to actually be in the

military--

[Laughter.]

Senator Webb. But I will say, my dad gave 26 years to the Air Force, but he gave the Marine Corps both his sons.

[Applause.]

Senator Webb. I have been doing this a long time. When I started, we were watching the testimony go back and forth and talking about these issues. Thirty-one years ago, I started as a committee counsel on the House side, and

those were some incredible days in terms of leadership on the veterans' programs, as many of you know. Sonny Montgomery, John Paul Hammerschmidt, Ray Roberts the Chairman. We did a lot of stuff. There was never a question of Republican versus Democrat. Larger politics never entered the arena when we talked about taking care

of veterans. It was a time, as Chairman Filner mentioned, when

a very high percentage of the people in the Congress had served in the military and there was that knowledge base that existed not only among the members, but also in the staffs. We had a very high percentage of people who had served in the military compared to today, working on

these issues at a staff level and had that intrinsic understanding.

I would say, first of all to you, Commander, and to the people who are sitting next to you, that what you are doing now is vital to the understanding of what it means to serve.

It is more important now than ever. I want to thank your organization for all of the support that you have been giving our office over the last year on this G.I. Bill

that I introduced on my first day in office. It is a very simple concept when you think about it. That is, we keep saying these people are the next greatest generation and all you

War
have got to do is look back and see what they gave the
greatest generation. When somebody came back from World

They
II, as you mentioned in your testimony, they got all the
tuition paid. They got their books bought for them.
got a monthly stipend.

of
We reached eight million people, remade the notions
of
fairness in American society with eight million people
going
out, people who never thought they would have a chance to
go
to college and we were paid back in terms of tax benefits
seven times. Seven dollars for every dollar in tax
dollars
that went into that G.I. Bill, we were paid back. We owe
these people who have been doing this since 9/11 no less.

[Applause.]

into
Senator Webb. There have been some comments about
veterans as resources and how we can get them accessed
the
other parts of the American economy. I hope all of you--
this is a personal thing, but if you want to understand
here
commitment of my office on this, there is a newspaper
when
on Capitol Hill called Roll Call. You can pick one up
you are walking around the different offices today, and
there is an article that begins on the front page. More
importantly, it peels off into page 22, and it is an
article
about the veterans on my staff. It is one thing to say
that
we are going to help veterans, but this is a closed
system
up here. It is pretty hard for people to find out how to
get a job. I have a staff of maybe 35 people. I have
got
nine veterans on my staff--I am very proud of that--and
five

of them served in Iraq.

[Applause.]

say Senator Webb. So, Commander, I want to again just

I hear you. We appreciate all of the things that this organization does to further the cause of our veterans.

I

Service was very privileged to receive your National Media

in Award in 2001. I value that greatly. It is on my wall

of my conference room. I have got a father who was a member

member of the VFW. I am a member of the VFW. My brother is a

to of the VFW, was a Marine helicopter pilot. I will have

spent talk to my son and see what his status is, but having

up some hard months in Ramadi, I am sure he is going to step

and become a member, as well.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Senator Webb.

Now we will hear from Congressman Hall.

of Mr. Hall. Thank you, Chairman Akaka and Chairman

the Filner and Ranking Member Buyer. I would thank you first

our all, Commander, for your testimony and for the work and

and service that you and all of your comrades have given to

the country and to our country's veterans.

least As has been said by many other members on the House

Senate sides, this is a nonpartisan issue. I consider

partisan of anything that I see go on up on the Hill.

Many of the comments or questions I had have been already

made.

I just wanted to touch on something briefly that Chairman Herseth Sandlin of the Economic Opportunity Subcommittee, which I also am a member of, talked about, and that has to do with mandatory screening for TBI or PTSD. Primarily, I think she was talking about PTSD, but I would include TBI in that, also, especially the more moderate or mild forms of TBI that might masquerade as something else or not show up for a while.

I understand the avoidance. I understand the denial.

I have heard from veterans and from your representatives, among others, that there is a fear that the stigma that comes with having something in the record that says that you are mentally or emotionally damaged or handicapped may prevent you from advancement in the Guard or Reserve or prevent you from advancement in private industry of some kind. But nonetheless, we do have this problem to deal with

at some time, 30 days out, 60 days out, 90 days out after separation. What would your opinion be of mandatory screening for all veterans?

And the reason I ask this in particular is that we had a mother and father of a soldier who had committed suicide shortly after his return and his entering veteran status and he had not asked for help. He had not taken up the services

that were available and he kept it to himself until such time as it was more than he could deal with by himself, and the father was saying to us, please--he had two requests, from actually, interesting enough. Please change the name with PTSD disorder, which implies there is something wrong you, to syndrome, which I believe used to be used, maybe

back during the Vietnam War. It was post-traumatic stress syndrome or injury, he suggested, post-traumatic stress injury, something that implies that you are having a natural human response to an unnatural situation that you were placed in, and it is not something wrong with you. It is something that can be treated. So that is one thing.

But the more important part of it that he was talking about was he thought that if his son had been screened with everybody, he would not have had to self-identify, and it is that fear of identifying yourself as being psychologically handicapped or ill that is keeping our people from seeking the help that they need. Thoughts about that, sir?

Mr. Lisicki. Congressman, having the opportunity to travel around many of our military bases and meet with our military leaders, especially in the military field, this issue has come up and we have asked tough questions.

They do have a fear out there about coming up, giving information pertaining to any possible mental illness course that would relate to advancement in the military, staying in the military, going out into public life and being exposed in public life concerning their illness.

I think we need to get more professionals involved in this. I think our service personnel need to have more ease. Screening, mandatory, I think they possibly would need it and it possibly could help many of these. But they have to be--our service personnel have to be reassured, reassured that everything is confidential that they are putting in. It is not entered into their record. They are not penalized

for having a serious injury, not only that will affect their lives now, but a serious injury that will affect their lives in the future.

We need to assure our military personnel that everything that is told, and let them be confident that everything that they told will be confidential and will not jeopardize their military career, will not jeopardize their career as they go out into the real world and work as a civilian. And I think this is what our military today is lacking. They are lacking that confidence. They are afraid to come up. They are afraid to admit that they have any mental health care or any kind of problem. And I think this is something that we seriously have to study, seriously have to look into and come up with a solution that will assure these veterans.

Mr. Hall. Thank you, sir. We are working on that

the subcommittee which I am honored to chair on the House side on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs.

I just wanted to ask you a couple more quick questions and not take up more time than I am allotted. Regarding the seamless transition, which we are all fighting for, and I was told in October when I was in Landstuhl on the way back from Iraq by the commander at the medical center there that there is what he called an onion, an electronic file that travels with the wounded soldier from the battlefield that has a layer added in the helicopter on the way to Balad, has another layer of whatever treatment or surgery possibly or medication they are getting there when they are being stabilized, and then on the plane to Germany there is

then another layer of the onion electronically added. And
for in Landstuhl when they are treated, they might be there
with a couple weeks and they will have another layer added
or details of what the medical staff further diagnoses,
improvement or deterioration of their condition, surgery
or medication, and the whole thing goes back with them to
facility Walter Reed or Bethesda or Brook or whichever DOD
there is and that this is now a comprehensive multi-layer
USB file. The way he was describing it, it sounded like a
chip that could physically travel with a soldier or
something that could be e-mailed.
But he told me in October that he expected in
December,

two months ago, that this would be--we would be starting
to see this being handed off directly from DOD to VA. Now,
we had a hearing two weeks ago in which Under Secretary for
Benefits Walcoff testified, and I asked Secretary Walcoff
if he knew how close we are to having that hand-off, the
electronic seamless hand-off of medical history and
records,
and his answer was, "I don't know." I have been trying
to get the answer from somebody.
But it seems to me that it would help greatly to
have a starting point for new cases. This doesn't help the
backlog of hundreds of thousands of old cases. It doesn't help
the people who are waiting right now an average of 183 days,
which is a scandal and a shame on the face of this
country that we should be so quick to send our men and women in
uniform over there, yet so slow to take care of them when

they return home. But at least for the new cases, to have this instantaneous hand-off.

I was at the New York Regional Office yesterday asking the same questions there, and so I just wondered, first of all, what you have heard and what you know about how close we are to actually being able to get that electronic hand-off, and secondly, how much of a problem is it that on some instances DOD misdiagnoses.

I have heard complaints or worries or concerns from representatives of veterans' groups that there have been intentional--some thing intentional, perhaps accidental--misdiagnoses of preexisting conditions in the DOD side, for instance, schizophrenia or other problems that might prevent a veteran--if that actually starts their medical record and is handed off electronically to VA, then that would seem to say that they are not eligible for PTSD benefits and treatment and we want to make sure that that doesn't happen.

So I guess the second half of the question is, how much or what percentage of the time do you think that DOD is misdiagnosing PTSD and what do we need to do about it?

Once we have the seamless transition, what do we need to do to make sure that we catch those cases?

Mr. Wallace. A few years ago, Secretary Nicholson did a review and I believe he came up with ten or 12 percent of the cases on 100 percent PTSD that they felt were questionable--could have been misdiagnosed by the VA, because only they can do that. But I think what you are really talking about is the condition many are complaining

about where they are being put out of the Army called
personality disorder. If you have got a personality
disorder, and you can go through Paris Island and not

have

that personality disorder show, there is something wrong
with somebody. I am serious.

Mr. Hall. In other words--

Mr. Wallace. If somebody has a personality
disorder,

it is going to show as they go through their military
training, so it is absolutely ludicrous for the military
to

all of the sudden say, you have got a personality
disorder.

I am going to put you out because of that and I am not
going

to give you PTSD. It is absolutely ludicrous, in my
opinion.

Mr. Hall. Thank you very much. Thank you all for
your

testimony and for your service and I yield back.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you so much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Congressman Hall.

And now, since Ranking Member Buyer has reserved his
time here, I am going to ask Congressman Buyer for any of
his questions that he may have.

Mr. Buyer. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am glad you had the opportunity--I wish they were
still in the room. I want to make reference to Stephanie
Herseth Sandlin and Dr. Boozman. You had an opportunity

to

see two quality individuals. They have both chaired the
Economic Opportunity Subcommittee. They just kind of
swapped seats. And so they bring years of experience to

the

table. Now hold that thought.

Two weeks ago, I just came off my own annual
training,

and I can assure you that putting on the uniform felt
pretty

good. I mean, come on, I work in an institution that has
an

mean, 11 percent approval rating by the American people. I
the uniform felt really good.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Buyer. But then I come back to Congress and I
have

to caution myself, as I am now going to caution you,
Commander, that in the pride, in our pride of not only
having worn the uniform but also our service to country,
we

also must have an equal amount of humility and to ensure
that our pride doesn't say to someone who has never
served

in the military that you somehow are less of a citizen or
that you also cannot be a patriot if you have never worn
the
uniform.

These two individuals, and I also want to include
Mike

Michaud who serves on the committee, are very--they have
never worn the uniform, but they are extraordinarily
dedicated. These two individuals--you got a chance to
see

them, and they are good students and they do a lot of
things
on behalf of the men and women who wear the uniform, and
you

got a chance to see that and I wanted you to know that.

The other point I would like to make is I want to
bring
up an issue of integrity. The integrity and the issue I
want to address is to you, Mr. Wallace. When you were
asked

a question by Senator Sanders, you gave a response. It
caused Senator Burr and I to have a sidebar conference.

The
sidebar conference that we had went to the heart of your

value system and your character and the issues of
integrity.

You see, the answer that you gave to Senator Sanders may
not
have been the answer that he was looking for, but the
answer

that you gave publicly was the very same answer that you give privately and that compliments your integrity.

There

is a great deal of absence of that in this town. So I

want

to thank you for your integrity.

[Applause.]

Mr. Wallace. Thank you, Congressman. I appreciate that.

with

Mr. Buyer. The issue that Senator Webb brought up

respect to--he didn't use the word bias, but it was my interpretation of his words about how difficult it is in this town for those who have worn the uniform to get

around

and do certain things and get in spheres of influence.

When

he was Secretary of the Navy, and for many decades, we

had

something called a ban on dual compensation for military retirees that there was an offset if you were going to

stay

in the government. Well, when I was on the Armed

Services

Committee and chaired Personnel, I repealed dual compensation. So as I look back at that now contribution

of

many military retirees now who can keep their military retirement and also work in government, so after this

last

nine years, as I look back, I think that they have

provided

to our country a tremendous value added and it is

probably

one of the better things that I have done. I want to

bring

that to his attention.

The issue with regard to housing. Mike Michaud, who chairs the Health Subcommittee, and I had introduced a

bill

last fall, and as we saw the subprime mortgage mess happening, a lot of them also out there are veterans that got involved in the subprime mess and it was how we could then open up the VA by increasing the eligible amounts to

move them into the VA home loan.

you
negotiate something quickly and don't permit a vetting
process, some bad things can happen, and that is what
occurred when they did the stimulus package. So what did
they do? You have got politicians. They pounded their
chest and said, you know, before we addressed the
subprime
mortgage mess. But what they did is they increased the
amount of FHA from \$360,000 to \$729,000, and generally
when
you increase those amounts, it is coupled to the VA. It
was
not. So even though Mike Michaud and I wrote the Speaker
and we asked that the VA also be included in the process,
it
was not. So Mr. Filner and I have some work yet to do
and
we are going to have to take that issue up on the
committee,
and Senator Akaka, hopefully, you can also address this
so
that the veterans out there can be taken care of and
brought
into the VA system.

been
The other issue I want to talk about is there has
a lot of wonderful bipartisan talk here today. You have
heard a lot of good words. In the last 16 years, I don't
remember many partisan votes on the committee, but we had
one. When I read your testimony last night, I embraced
one
of the sentences in your testimony. Commander, you wrote
that, quote, "No veteran should be forced to pay another
veteran's benefit," end quote. Well, that is what
happened.
The House Veterans Affairs Committee voted to repeal the
Hartness decision, and what that did is that the Congress
is
saying that we should repeal the compensation to wartime
elderly disabled indigent veterans. Really? We should
deny
that compensation?

I believe--this is a Steve Buyer opinion--I believe it goes to the heart of why I am a member of the organization and also the American Legion. We join these organizations to associate ourselves to take care of individuals who have it tougher than what we have got it ourselves. And if we can't stand up and defend a wartime elderly disabled indigent, then how does that define us as a people? [Applause.] Mr. Buyer. The last comment, Mr. Chairman, I have is on the issue on the disability compensation systems. We have got a lot of study out there, Mr. Chairman, so whether it is our Disability Compensation Commission, Dole-Shalala,

your inputs, I believe it is timely for us to move out. I agree with Senator Burr. We want to end the two-tiered system, and let us get DOD out of the disability rating system. Would you concur? Mr. Lisicki. Yes. Mr. Buyer. Okay. Well, when you concur, that is a milestone for us. So we get DOD out of the disability rating system. They still can remain on the judgment for unfit for duty, and rightfully so. Then we create this retirement system whereby when you are rated unfit for duty, you are entitled to a compensation based on your years of service and your rank and there is no offset, and that is, in fact, what we are proposing. We want to modernize the disability compensation system. Now, I recall when I made changes to the pay tables-- remember those pay tables when you were a soldier and you looked and you saw your rank and years of service when you looked at it? When I proposed changing the pay tables, DOD looked at me like, you can't change those. They were

tablets. They came down--Moses brought them down,
Chairman.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Buyer. He did. The Ten Commandments and the
military pay tables, I think that is what he brought
down.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Buyer. I changed the pay tables to address
retention issues for the senior mid-grade NCOs and
officer corps. Well, we need to, with that same spirit, take
that on and modernize the compensation systems and recognize
that we also need to take quality of life into account and do
that transition payment.

So as we move into this process, please engage with
us, not only Senator Burr and myself, but also both Chairmen.
You know, this town loves to push problems off for later
and I really just--I don't want to do that.

The last thing I want to say is I want to compliment
Senator Akaka. He is a quality man. He has always been
centered and he thinks of the soldier and he thinks about
the--his judgments are about the impact to the soldier
and the family, and for that, I have tremendous compliment.

Maybe it hasn't gotten to your desk yet, Senator,
but I have proposed in our views and estimates an increase on
research and part of it is on mental health. I had great
he conversations with your nephew and he has some proposals

is going to get to you and hopefully we can work together
and improve some of the research with regard to the TBI
issues that we are dealing with. So I look forward to
working with you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Steve,

Congressman Buyer, for your remarks.

The time is running. I have one question to ask,
and that will be the last question for today, but prior to
that, I just want to ask Chairman Filner whether he has any
remarks and then I will ask my question.
Chairman Filner. Thank you, Senator Akaka.
Just briefly, I think many of you, like me, enjoy
that little radio thing that Paul Harvey does, "Now you know
the rest of the story." My colleague, Mr. Buyer, said
something about what does this say about us as a nation if we hurt
disabled, indigent old veterans, and you all applauded.
I have got to tell you the rest of the story.
of Sixty-four years ago--I am sorry, after the invasion
of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt in an attempt to make
sure our Pacific action went better than we were prepared for
drafted all the Filipino soldiers into the American Army.
The Philippines was a territory of the United States.
And they were drafted into the Army with the expectation, of
course, of being veterans with the benefits that came to
them.
We would not have won, or at least not have won with
more casualties if the Filipinos hadn't contributed to
that war effort. They held the Japanese advance far longer
than was planned, allowed us to prepare as a nation. When
they lost the final battles at Bataan and Corregidor, they
were put on a death march that wiped out a great percentage of
their Army. Many survived the prison camps there.
Before MacArthur returned, as he had promised, the Filipinos,
the ones that weren't captured became guerillas and kept the
Japanese busy for the time before MacArthur returned, and

then recaptured the Philippines, and many of those
Filipino soldiers then went on with MacArthur to our final victory
in the Pacific.

In 1944, this Congress--none of us were there then--
passed a law that rescinded the benefits that these
Filipino soldiers had earned. They have been fighting for 62
years--
64 years to get those benefits back. Most of them are
gone. They are in their mid-80s. Many of us believe that it is
a moral obligation of our nation to at least say thank you
after 64 long years and give some pittance of a benefit
to them as veterans.

Mr. Buyer. Bob, don't take it away from veterans
who served in World War II--

Chairman Filner. That is what--
Mr. Buyer. That is what you don't do, Bob. You
don't take it from veterans to give to another veteran.

Chairman Filner. That is what this was all about,
repaying a moral obligation. Now, we have rules in the
Congress which say you have to--since the other side of
the aisle wouldn't help me pay for the thing, we had to find

some way to pay for it, and what we did was repeal a
court decision that, in fact, made a decision contrary to what
Congress had intended. Nobody is taking any benefits
from any other soldier to aid one. For 64 years, these
veterans did not receive--have not received a penny from the U.S.
Government. We have to find a way to do it. If there is

a different way, we will do it. But I think this nation
has a moral obligation to those who have helped us win World
War

II. There are very few left, very few left, and that we say thank you to those brave Filipino soldiers. Thank you very much. And now you know the rest of the story.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Congressman.

My question to you, Commander in Chief, has to do with the newer and older veterans. Commander Lisicki, you stated in your testimony that VFW sees the care of OIF and OEF veterans and the care of older veterans already in the system as equally high priorities, which indicates that this is not what is happening. What are your suggestions on how VA can do a better job of balancing the needs of the larger population of the older veterans with the complex needs of the newest population of veterans? The question is, how can we do a better job of balancing those needs?

Mr. Lisicki. Mr. Chairman, as I stated before, we feel that all veterans need to be treated equal. We need to make

sure that our older population of veterans is taken care of

and their needs are met. And we now have a new generation

of younger veterans who have different needs and they are going to have different needs in the future. We have a population out there now of female veterans who have

joined the ranks of combat veterans to our country who have different needs on their own.

I think we have to look at all these issues and make sure the needs of that older veteran continues to be

taken care of for the rest of their lives. But we also need to look into the future of this new generation of veterans

and

we have to realize what their needs are going to be well into the future. And I think this is something that we have

to work on without segregating, without segregating that older veteran in favor of that younger veteran. All veterans are equal, Mr. Chairman.

[Applause.]

Lisicki, Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Commander in Chief for that response.

that The time is running late. I have other questions

you I will submit for the record. I want to thank all of you for being here so patient, but I thank you and I applaud

for your vision for all veterans and we look forward to continuing to work with you and to hear you as you come forth with your thoughts of how we can best help the

veterans of our country.

and I must tell you that the committees in the Senate in the House will continue to have hearings with VSOs, as you are, and we want to hear from you. We want to hear from those who have been in the trenches and who can tell us directly how you feel.

With that, I--

Chairman Filner. Mr. Chairman? May I recognize a member of my staff?

Chairman Akaka. Yes.

know Chairman Filner. Commander, I would like you to that two members of the staff of the House Veterans

Affairs Committee, Jeff Phillips is no longer with us. He has

been promoted to Brigadier General and has been activated and serves in the Pentagon. Behind me is a veteran of Afghanistan, Jim Lehrvier, the Staff Director on the Republican side. He is a Colonel and he has just been promoted to Brigadier General of the United States Marine Corps.

[Applause.]

Chairman Filner. Selected for promotion, sorry.

Chairman Akaka. That is a great staff, as well.
With that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:02 p.m., the committees were
adjourned.]