

Chairman Patty Murray

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Patty Murray, Chairman
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of The American Legion
September 21, 2011

Good morning and welcome to this joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees to receive the legislative priorities of The American Legion.

Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to:

- National Commander Wong,
- The senior officials joining him,
- And all the members of The American Legion who are with us this morning.

I'd also like to welcome Kris Nelson, National President of the American Legion Auxiliary. Thank you for the great work the Auxiliary does on behalf of our servicemembers, veterans and their families.

I'm also so pleased to have Bob Wallace, Eva Wallace, Bill Schrier and Mike Montaney here from my home state of Washington.

Thank you for all your efforts on behalf of Washington veterans and for traveling many miles to be with us today.

And of course, I want to thank my colleagues from the House who have come across the Capitol to be with us at this important joint hearing.

You know, last month I traveled throughout my home state of Washington to hold listening sessions with local veterans to hear directly from them about the biggest problems they face.

In crowded halls I spoke with veterans – including many Legion members - about what concerns they wanted me to bring back to D.C. to fight for.

And the things that I heard may not surprise you at all:

I heard about a claims backlog that has our veterans waiting far too long to get the benefits they have earned.

I heard about barriers to employment that have put veterans out of work at a time when they badly need the dignity that a good paying job provides.

I heard about frustrations with the GI Bill.

And I heard from older veterans who want access to the care they need.

I know that none of these issues surprise you because the American Legion is hearing these same things all across the country.

Your membership works every day to be a voice for veterans who may not have a seat at the table when decisions affecting them are made.

And the work you do continually reminds us that we must never forget the sacrifices of our veterans and their families.

That's a lesson I learned early on in my life.

As many of you know, my father was a World War II disabled veteran who was awarded the Purple Heart for wounds he suffered during the invasion of Okinawa.

I grew up watching his struggles with the knowledge that he had sacrificed for our nation and that he asked very little in return.

Then later in my life - during college - I worked as an intern in the Seattle VA hospital, providing physical therapy to Vietnam veterans who came home with the visible and invisible wounds of war.

Those personal experiences have given me not only a very real understanding of the consequences of sending our servicemembers into combat - but also a sense of the obligation we have to care for them when they return.

And over the last 16 years, I have worked to put that knowledge to work on this Committee by tackling a range of challenges including:

- Preparing the VA for a generation of new veterans;
- Improving mental health care;
- Providing for a seamless transition from military service to the ranks of our Nation's veterans; and
- Ensuring our veterans can find meaningful employment when they return home.

And at every turn the American Legion has been there with support and action.

However, as the veterans I spoke to last month made abundantly clear - much work remains to be done.

Disability Claims

First off, we have a benefit claims system that most agree is simply broken.

Earlier this year I took a tour of the Seattle Regional Office, and I was astonished by what I saw.

Mounds of paper - seemingly everywhere - at a time when more veterans are filing claims and more are filing increasingly complex claims.

That's why it's past time to focus our attention on solutions – including improved I.T. – to reach the shared goal of timely, accurate decisions on benefits claims.

I look forward to The American Legion's participation in the months ahead on this ongoing challenge.

Job Training and Employment

We also need to focus on getting our veterans back to work.

We all know that our veterans are disciplined, team-players that have the skills to make vital contributions in the workplace.

But we also know that over one in five of our young veterans is unemployed.

And that far too many veterans are finding it difficult to transfer their skills into:

- Job interviews,
- Resumes,
- And our competitive job market.

That's why I introduced and continue to work towards passage of my comprehensive veterans' training and employment bill, the Hiring Heroes Act.

And I am pleased to be joined in the effort to put veterans back to work by Chairman Miller – who I know has a bill of his own - and who I look forward to working with in a bipartisan manner.

This is an issue that can and should unite us all.

Homelessness

The lack of jobs for veterans also puts them at risk of joining the ranks of tens of thousands of veterans who go homeless each night across our country.

And as we all know, one veteran sleeping on the street is one too many.

That's why I am committed to providing homeless veterans the services that they deserve.

We fought to preserve funding for over 7,000 chronically homeless veterans to participate in the HUD-VASH program, for housing and supportive services.

And we are working to provide the VA with the resources it needs to meet the President and Secretary Shinseki's goal of eliminating veterans' homelessness.

Mental Health

Another key challenge will be continuing to improve mental health care for our veterans.

This starts with effectively combatting the stigma that keeps our servicemembers and veterans from asking for help.

We must continue to reach out to veterans, and effectively target suicide prevention efforts. We must also ensure that mental health services are delivered in a safe and appropriate setting.

I am pleased that VA and DoD are continuing to work toward common mental health treatment guidelines.

Women Veterans

Another very important issue that requires immediate attention is the range of challenges facing our women veterans.

I share The American Legion's concern for these issues and have been pushing VA to provide women veterans with the care and benefits they have earned.

I introduced and passed the Women Veterans Health Care Improvement Act into law in the last Congress. The provisions included in my bill are in various stages of implementation, and I am committed to ensuring that VA continues to improve its services for women veterans.

DoD and VA must strengthen their efforts to prevent and to provide treatment for veterans, both male and female, who have suffered military sexual trauma.

And, VA must ensure that the privacy, safety, and security needs of our veterans are met.

Transition

VA must also work with DoD to improve communication so that the transition between military and civilian life is truly seamless.

I've visited with our wounded warriors and the courageous spouses and caregivers providing assistance and strength during their recoveries.

They face tremendous challenges during recovery and transition and we need to be there for them.

Health Care

And of course, we can never stop working to ensure that VA has adequate resources to deliver quality health care.

Just last week Ranking Member Burr and I sent a letter to VA asking tough questions about health care funding.

We want to be absolutely certain that VA remains ready and able to provide the health care upon which more and more veterans depend.

Closing

As you know all too well, the challenges facing our veterans are numerous. But so are the opportunities to fulfill our obligations to these brave men and women.

I'm so pleased that we have partners in all the members of the Americans Legion in this work.

Commander Wong, thank you again for being here today.

I look forward to working with you and The American Legion as we continue to honor our commitments to our Nation's veterans.

I now turn to Chairman Miller for his opening statement.