

## OPENING STATEMENT Senator Bernie Sanders

### Statement of Senator Sanders During the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs' Hearing on DoD/VA Collaboration

January 23, 2007

Mr. Chairman, let me begin by thanking you for calling this very important hearing. The men and women who put on our country's uniform - soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines, both past and present - deserve the very best care that we can provide them. I think this point is especially important to remember now when so many brave men and women are in harm's way overseas.

Mr. Chairman, let me say that I believe any efforts we can make to ensure that our service members seamlessly transition from DoD health care to the VA are extremely valuable. It ensures a continuity of care and also significantly increases the likelihood that veterans will know the benefits that are available to them from the VA.

During my time as a Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, I held more Congressional Town Meetings on veterans health care and veterans benefits than any public official in the history of Vermont. The reason that I kept doing these meetings was that I was constantly amazed how many veterans I would find who had no idea of the benefits they were entitled to. As a result of these meetings we helped hundreds if not a few thousand access the health care and prescription drug benefits they had earned through their service to the country.

My hope is that increased coordination between the DoD and the VA will mean that future veterans will be better informed and more likely to get their care at the VA. Being connected into the VA system is especially critical for returning Guard and Reserve members who return to their largely civilian lives when they come home. By being plugged into the VA, these service members will have a better chance of having previously undetected service connected conditions diagnosed and treated than will those men and women who come home to small town America and never enroll with the VA.

That's a very real concern for Guard and Reserve members from rural states like Vermont, especially given the high rates of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that we are seeing in those returning from Iraq as well as what some believe are many, many undiagnosed cases of Traumatic Brain Injury.

Mr. Chairman, as a House member I secured \$1 million in funding over three years for DoD/VA model sharing programs in Vermont. One of the results of this effort was to increase the capacity of the VA in its Colchester, VT, clinic to perform audiology exams. Previously, veterans had had to wait up to a year to have their hearing tested. Not only was this expansion of audiology care a benefit to veterans in Vermont but it also created capacity for the Vermont National Guard to receive audiology services in-house at the VA rather than having to pay to have those tests done in the private sector.

In addition, some of the funding went to strengthen family support and counseling for returning Guard and Reserve members in areas around the state.

Mr. Chairman, half of this funding was secured through a DoD earmark, and the second half two years later was initially approved as a DoD earmark but was transferred in a subsequent appropriations bill to the VA. The reason why the funding was switched, I am sad to say, is that while some very dedicated individuals at DoD worked with my office to see that this model sharing program went smoothly, DoD as a whole was adamantly opposed to continuing with this effort. I say "sadly", Mr. Chairman, because I think all of us, first and foremost, should be committed to the health and well-being of our service members and our veterans. And in this case, it appeared that preserving departmental turf trumped that very important principle.

However, Mr. Chairman, I remain hopeful that as we move forward there will be greater and greater cooperation between DoD and the VA. There is no question but that it is in the best interest of the men and women of the armed services.

There is one final point and very critical point, Mr. Chairman. All of us agree that we want the DoD and VA to work together to make sure that men and women returning from Iraq, Afghanistan and other places seamlessly transition to the VA. No question there. But what we do have to keep in mind is that the VA health care system ? which in my view does an excellent job in terms of delivering quality care ? is being starved by this Administration. That problem is only going to get worse with the tens and tens of thousands of people who have come back and who will be coming back from deployment in the future and will be in need of care. So far this Administration's major response to the need for more VA resources has been to bar over a million Category 8 veterans from enrolling in VA health care ? these are so-called "wealthy veterans" many of whom in reality have incomes as low as \$27,000 a year.

I personally think it is a travesty that this Administration pushes for hundreds of billions of dollars in tax cuts for the wealthiest people and the largest corporations while the men and women who served this country are denied the VA health care they have earned through their service and sacrifice. This is an immoral set of priorities that I hope this new Congress can rectify and I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, and the other members of this committee to make sure every veteran gets the care and benefits he or she has earned before we give another nickel in tax cuts to the wealthy.