

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray  
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee  
Joint Hearing on Legislative Priorities of Various Veterans Service Organizations  
March 30th, 2011

Good morning, welcome to this joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees. Today we will hear from several of our dedicated veterans service organizations about their legislative priorities for this Congress.

This morning we will hear from representatives of The Air Force Sergeants Association, The American Ex-Prisoners of War, The Military Order of the Purple Heart, The National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, The Paralyzed Veterans of America, The Retired Enlisted Association, The Vietnam Veterans of America, and Wounded Warrior Project. Thank you all for being here today to share your perspectives.

I also want to welcome back Congressman Miller and Congressman Filner, and the other members of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee who are joining us again on this side of the hill this morning.

We have had some very productive hearings thus far and I look forward to continuing our work this morning.

As the daughter of a World War II veteran and a member of this committee for over 16 years, I have a deep and personal connection to helping our veterans meet the challenges they face. And as all of you well know, we have many challenges that must be met.

When the nation makes the decision to go to war, it also makes the commitment to care for the men and women in uniform - while they are in the service, through their transition out of the military, while they are veterans, and after they have passed on.

But all too often our veterans are coming home from battle only to fight against a system that should be working for them - a VA system that should be their biggest advocate. Last month, I sat down with many of the veterans whose lives are impacted by the decisions made in Washington, D.C. each day.

At small veterans' halls in my home state I heard from a female Iraq veteran who told me that when she calls the VA she continually gets asked if she's calling for her husband, a Vietnam veteran with PTSD whose son, a National Guard member, just recently committed suicide after returning from the battlefield with PTSD.

I also heard from veterans about the claims backlog, access to care, holes in the education benefit, barriers to employment, and, unfortunately, much more.

(over)

But I know I don't have to tell all of you about the struggles our veterans face, or about the fact that all they are looking for is what was promised to them.

That's because I know that each of your organizations are in our communities every day working with these same veterans, their families, and their loved ones to make sure that they are heard.

I know that's why you are here today. To be a voice for individual veterans who may not have a seat at the table when the decisions affecting them are made. To make real change on issues that impact real veterans. So I am looking forward to hearing from all of you today.

But before we move on, I do want to mention a few challenges that I am pleased to see many of you share my concern on from looking at the testimony you have submitted.

First, I saw that many of you point to the need to help our veterans find meaningful employment when they return home as a top concern. Let me say that I couldn't agree more and I believe it's time to act.

Earlier this month, we saw annual unemployment numbers that tell the story of the challenge we face on this important issue. Young veterans aged 18-24 that are coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan have an unemployment rate of nearly 22%. And Reserve and National Guard members have an unemployment rate of 14%.

Unbelievably, I've had veterans tell me that they no longer put the fact that they are a veteran on their resume because they feel there is a stigma attached. One of my top priorities in this Congress is going to be improving outreach and services to our veterans and to businesses to address this problem.

I introduced legislation in the last Congress – focusing on vocational, apprenticeship and on-the-job training opportunities that became part of the new GI Bill. And I am now preparing a new measure for introduction in the very near future that will help provide additional outreach and assistance to put veterans to work. I will need your input and your help on this measure and look forward to working closely with you.

Another major concern we all share are the devastating injuries incurred by some of our servicemembers and the work we will need to do to ensure they get the lifetime of care they are owed. Over the past few weeks, we have seen new data that shows dramatic increases in amputations among casualties of the current conflicts.

Some of the most shocking statistics include that twice as many wounded soldiers needed a limb amputated than in the previous two years. While amputations are certainly not unique to this generation of veterans, the increase in size of IEDs, increased foot patrols in Afghanistan, and improvements in health care mean that more catastrophically wounded veterans will be entering the VA system in the coming years. As these veterans return home badly hurt and in need of a lifetime of care and services, we must be ready for them and their families.

Among those services that we must be ready to provide – is the caregivers' program - which provides support for those who are forced to leave careers and their health care behind in order to care for their wounded loved ones. I am glad to see that several of you have identified this as one of your priorities as well. The legislation creating the caregivers program passed here in the Senate by a vote of 98 to 0.

In an environment that as we all know is too often overly partisan, every voting member supported doing what was right. Yet, we are now seeing delays and questions about who is eligible.

That's unacceptable and I thank Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Filner, and Senator Burr for their help in ensuring this program is implemented quickly and accurately. Once the caregiver program gets up and running in a manner consistent with the intent of Congress we must begin to examine ways to expand the full benefits to veterans of earlier wars.

And finally, we all know that we must tackle how VA handles claims for benefits. This is a system that has been broken for far too long and a backlog that has only grown larger with each passing year.

Addressing this problem will be a focus of my Chairmanship but as we continue to work on solutions, some things must be acknowledged - including the fact that more veterans are filing claims and more of these claims are increasingly complex. There is nothing that can be done to change that reality.

That said - we must focus our attention on real solutions – including viable I.T. support – if we are going to reach the shared goal of timely, accurate decisions on benefits claims.

So I look forward to working with all of you on these issues and many more that we will touch on today. I would also like to take a moment to let you know that a tireless champion for all the issues facing our veterans will be leaving us soon.

Bill Brew, my staff director on the Committee will be retiring in the near future and as so many of you know, Bill has been a critical part of:

Advancing so much important legislation, creating new programs and services, providing oversight, and most importantly, being an extraordinarily knowledgeable advocate for what is best for veterans. We will all miss him, but we wish him the very best as he embarks on a much, much deserved retirement. Thank you, Bill.

Finally, we are learning more about new information that indicates the problems with misidentification of remains at Arlington National Cemetery may be worse than originally thought.

Just this morning I met with the nominee for VA's Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

In that meeting I asked him to provide me with information on what safeguards are in place to keep what happened at Arlington from happening at our VA national cemeteries.

These national shrines are so important to our veterans and their survivors. After all they have done for our country they deserve the peace of mind that they will be taken care of after death.

Thank you all again for coming today, I look forward to your testimony.