

OPENING STATEMENT Ranking Member Larry E. Craig

STATEMENT OF SENATOR LARRY E. CRAIG

Ranking Member

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and welcome to all of the Committee's newest Members. First of all, congratulations on your new position, Mr. Chairman. I must say, it's great to be back. Of course I would have much preferred to retain the title that is now yours. But I have come to learn that the titles of "Chairman" and "Ranking Member" are largely ceremonial when it comes to this Committee's business. There is a cooperative spirit and unity of purpose that we share here that is unrivaled. And that is how it should be.

Consider this: During the 109th Congress, all enacted legislation under the jurisdiction of this Committee was approved, in the Senate, by unanimous consent. Whether it was Committee-reported legislation or floor amendments cleared by the Committee, all of it required 100 Senators of varying political views to give their assent. Fortunately, bipartisanship is not the exception when it comes to veterans, it's the rule. And it is a rule that I, as Ranking Member, will gladly abide by during the 110th Congress.

Turning now to the Committee's legislative and oversight agenda for the current Congress, I believe we must continue our focus on the needs of those returning from battle in Iraq and Afghanistan. That was my priority as Chairman; I know it is Senator Akaka's priority as well. And I am pleased to hear that the first oversight hearing we will hold this Congress will be to review the efforts of the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs to seamlessly transition servicemembers from active duty to civilian life. Medical care, necessary financial assistance, vocational counseling and training, and employment services must be provided with high quality and speed, and the Committee must ensure that is happening.

Furthermore, services provided to surviving spouses of those killed in the line of duty must again be reviewed. The Department of Defense has implemented a uniform policy on casualty assistance to survivors that stems from oversight we conducted last year. I want to know if it's working. Have things improved? Are survivors getting timely information about all Federal benefits in a clear, concise format? These are some of the questions I would like answered at the upcoming hearing.

In addition to the needs of returning servicemembers and their families, which will be an ever-present theme in all of the Committee's discussions, I believe that ? at a minimum -- we must explore the following 5 issues:

1. Rural Health Care Delivery

VA medical centers and outpatient clinics cannot be built on every street corner in America. There simply must be an adequate patient population to support their existence. This demographic reality presents challenges to veterans who live in rural states like Idaho. I believe

an analysis of modern technology to deliver health care such as telemedicine, would be appropriate. I am interested in the Committee taking a comprehensive look at innovative solutions that would improve health care delivery services to rural veterans, without busting the budget.

2. Long-Term Care

The challenges confronting VA in meeting the long-term care needs of veterans are similar to those confronting the rest of the nation: Who is eligible for care? What type of long term care should they be eligible for? And, who should pay for it?

Today, VA is hamstrung by an outdated requirement that mandates an arbitrary in-house nursing home bed level of about 12,000. Resources that could be better used to further programs such as home and community-based care are unwisely diverted. We need to come together on a comprehensive long term care policy that is focused on providing veterans choices for meeting their long-term care needs, and **NOT** merely filling beds.

3. Claims Processing Reform

Disability claims backlogs continue to plague the claims processing system; it seems to be a perennial problem. Yes, resources and effective management are one part of the solution, but I believe sensible changes to the law must also be considered. Some of those possible changes were discussed at hearings we held last Congress, such as allowing the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to hear limited types of class action suits. I believe we should continue to explore these and other ideas for reforming the claims process.

4. Educational Assistance

A lot of attention has been given to the need to update the Montgomery GI Bill for the 21st Century. As a part of this effort, I am interested in the Committee continuing to explore the possibility of allowing for more flexibility in how veterans utilize their benefits. For example, we moved legislation through the Senate last year that would have allowed veterans and their dependents to receive **accelerated** lump sum payments of their educational assistance benefits, in order to attend a variety of short-term programs leading to jobs in high growth sectors of our economy. I believe there is more we can and should do in this area.

5. VA Budget Sustainability

Finally, I think the biggest challenge that we all must come to grips with is whether the VA medical care budget can be sustained at its present rate of growth. Assuming money is added in the Continuing Resolution for VA medical care, its budget will stand at \$80 billion. That will mean 70% growth since the President took office in 2001. At the current pace, VA's medical care budget will double every 6 years. I've said it before and I'll say it again: Unless prudent policies are adopted with respect to the financing of the VA health care system, then we will continue to see VA spending collide with many other important programs in government. We saw it last year with the tension between VA spending and Military Construction Projects. And we will see it again.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my remarks about some of the issues I will be discussing with you and other Members during the 110th Congress. I thank you for calling this meeting. And I look forward to our continued cooperation and friendship as we move forward with our work.

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