

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Jeff Miller
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Joint Hearing on the Legislative Presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars
(VFW)**

March 2, 2016

Good morning, Commander-in-Chief John Biedrzycki and VFW members.

It is an honor and a privilege for me to be here with Chairman Isakson and Ranking Members Blumenthal and Brown to welcome you all to today's joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees to receive the legislative presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW).

I don't have to tell all of you that VFW is one of our nation's oldest, largest, and most active veterans service organization and I am so grateful to all of you not only for your service in uniform but also for your continued service with VFW.

I want to extend a special welcome to Commander-in-Chief John Biedrzycki.

Sir - thank you for your years of military service, for your leadership within the VFW, and for being with us here today.

I also want to welcome the rest of the VFW's national leadership team and, in particular, Francisca Guilford, the National President of the VFW Auxiliary.

Ma'am, thank you for what you do and for being here today.

I would also like to recognize the VFW members from my home state of Florida who are in our audience today.

Would those of you from Florida please stand or raise your hand and be recognized?

I had the opportunity to meet with many of you in my office yesterday and I thank you, again, for all the good work that you do representing the Sunshine State.

VFW members across the country provide an invaluable voice for veterans and that voice has perhaps never been more important than it is today.

In the last two years, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has faced an ongoing access and accountability crisis, ballooning construction mismanagement that has led to one project running a billion dollars over budget, and an unprecedented and last minute budget shortfall that threatened the Secretary's ability to keep the doors open at hospitals and clinics from coast to coast.

In responding to those crises, my focus has remained the same - fulfilling the Committee's Constitutional responsibility to provide aggressive, top-to-bottom oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that veterans have timely access to high-quality health care and benefits and that poor-performing VA leaders are held appropriately accountable for failing to provide the service that our veterans have earned and deserve.

That said, first among the Committee's current priorities is improving the Choice program, which was implemented in 2014 after Committee oversight uncovered evidence of veterans waiting far too long for care across the country.

As Commander-in-Chief Biedrzycki states in his testimony, implementation of the Choice program has not been as smooth as we would have liked - though I would note that tens of thousands of veterans have been able to access care through the program so far.

Part of the reason that Choice has struggled is that it is just one of several ways VA refers veterans to community providers.

Moving forward, we are going to consolidate VA's multiple care in the community programs under one roof, which will simplify and improve how community care works for VA, for community providers, and - most importantly - for the veterans who need it.

Let me assure you that - throughout that effort - we are going to continue to view community care as a way to supplement, *not* supplant, the care that is provided in VA medical facilities.

We are also going to continue to rely on the valuable feedback from VFW as we work together to find the best model of care for the VA health care system.

VFW's leaders here in Washington have provided essential information - from anecdotal evidence to survey data to important testimony - regarding the successes and shortcomings of the Choice program since it was first created and their ongoing feedback continues to be critical.

Accountability is another area where VFW's input is important to Congress' work.

All of the policy goals that you are going to highlight today, Commander Biedrzycki, cannot be accomplished if good employees are forced to continue to work with those who don't share in the mission of service to veterans.

The majority of the men and women who work at VA are great workers who put veterans first.

But, for that small minority of employees that don't, the Secretary must have

the tools he needs to properly hold them accountable for their actions.

That is why H.R. 1994, the VA Accountability Act - which the passed the House last July - is so vital to VA's success.

That bill provides the Secretary another tool to protect whistleblowers and veterans and I want to thank the members of the VFW for your strong support of that effort, which I hope our Senate colleagues will consider very soon.

The disability claims process is yet another area where VFW's leadership is critical.

We know that while the backlog of claims has been reduced, this has come at the expense of production on appeals, non-rating work, and vocational rehabilitation and education claims.

Commander Biedrzycki, I know you share my concern about how important all VA claims are to veterans and, like me, won't be satisfied until all backlogs are eliminated.

VA continues to be given generous increases in resources year after year and now is the time for the Department to stop focusing on rushed and erroneous production and, instead, focus on quality.

No business in the world could survive if eleven percent of its production needed to be reworked.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with VFW and all stakeholders to address these important claims issues.

As you can see, there is a lot of work still ahead of us.

However, I am optimistic that as our Committee works together with the Senate and the members of the VFW and your Auxiliaries, we can serve our nation's veterans as they have served us.

To do anything less would be unacceptable.

One final note before I yield back to Chairman Isakson - I am very proud and humbled to be the recipient of the VFW Congressional Award.

Thank you all for that immense honor and I very much look forward to seeing you all at the reception this evening.

With that, I yield back to Chairman Isakson.