

Ranking Member Richard Burr

Statement of Senator Richard Burr
VSO Priorities for the 111th Congress

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for calling this hearing. Welcome to our witnesses this morning.

Mr. Chairman, we have some new faces on the Committee this Congress. I'd like to welcome our new Committee members, Senators Johanns, Begich, and Burr. One thing I hope they'll find is that this Committee is unlike most others in the Senate. Care for our veterans and their loved ones is not a partisan issue.

If I could borrow a sentiment from a former colleague of ours, and now our Commander and Chief - the men and women who wear the nation's uniform don't come from a collection of red states and blue states, but from the United States. They expect us to leave politics aside when acting on their behalf, and I'm committed to working with the Chairman and all the Committee members toward that end. Again, welcome to all of my colleagues.

This morning, we will listen to the views of some of the leading veterans' service organizations on what their top priorities are for the 111th Congress. I often hear from VSOs from my state of North Carolina who provide me with a local perspective on some of the challenges confronting veterans. The organizations with us this morning provide a voice to millions of veterans nationwide. Collectively, they are a valuable resource upon which we may draw as we develop our legislative and oversight agenda.

I am anxious to hear their testimony and to work with them, and other important organizations like AMVETS and the Gold Star Wives, on behalf of veterans and their survivors. Looking through the testimony I see some common themes.

First, funding for the VA health care system is on top of everyone's list. Let me say at the outset that I am in full agreement with the goal of providing VA with a timely, predictable, and sufficient budget. I look forward to exploring ways we can accomplish these goals with our witnesses today. In my view, funding for VA health care should never be a political issue.

Second, fixing the disability claims system is another common theme. Mr. Atizado of the DAV calls the system "complex and burdensome." Mr. Blake with PVA states that the process is done in "an expensive and antiquated manner."

"Complex", "burdensome", "expensive", and "antiquated"...these are not flattering adjectives to describe a system that is designed to help veterans with injuries resulting from service. This is nothing new, and I hope all of us here can get behind innovative approaches to fixing the system.

Finally, another theme is ensuring adequate mental health treatment for veterans who need help with PTSD and TBI. Clearly, building capacity is one part of the effort, and VA is in the midst of hiring additional mental health professionals. But we need to make sure that we focus on getting veterans into VA for effective treatments early.

Secretary Shinseki stated he believed that PTSD is treatable and that early treatment is the key. I agree. It's time we develop a strategy to implement the Dole-Shalala recommendation of ensuring that veterans with mental health problems receive that necessary treatment soon after the veteran is diagnosed.

Mr. Chairman, I stand ready to work with you on these and other priorities on behalf of veterans and their loved ones. Our approaches to solving some of these problems may differ, but our goal is the same.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.