

Ranking Member Richard Burr

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Good morning, Chairman Filner, Chairman Akaka, and Ranking Member Buyer. Thank you all for convening this joint hearing to listen to the legislative priorities of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

Commander Gardner, welcome. And welcome to those accompanying you at the witness table. Thank you for the work you all do on behalf of veterans from my home state of North Carolina and across the country.

Hearing from the VFW gives us the opportunity to gain the perspective of a unique group of men and women. As you say in your testimony, Commander, VFW members "share the experience of the battlefield." I am grateful to you and every VFW member for that. Your members have all been on foreign soil. Many have seen combat and have felt what it's like to be apart from your family and friends for long periods of time and under the most difficult of circumstances.

VFW members are uniquely positioned to let us know what benefits and services are working well for them, and, more importantly, what improvements need to be made. This insight, together with feedback from our constituents at home, helps guide our efforts to improve the lives of veterans and their families across the country.

Commander, let me first comment on one issue that you raise in your testimony on third-party billing. Know that I will stand with you and the VFW to ensure that the President's idea to shift the cost of care for service-connected injuries goes nowhere. It was the government that sent our men and women into harm's way, so it is our responsibility to care for their injuries when they come home.

Frankly, I'm surprised that the President would rely on such a proposal to fund his budget. When he was a Senator he used to call these accounting practices "gimmicks." Regardless, you have seen it for what it is, and I am with you 100% in seeing its defeat.

Among the other concerns raised in your testimony is the need to provide VA with a timely, predictable, and sufficient budget. I could not agree more. It's simply unacceptable that, over the years, funding for VA has fallen victim to politics-as-usual in Washington D.C.

That's why I'm pleased to have joined with Chairman Akaka in co-sponsoring the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act. This bill will allow VA to plan its health care budget in two-year cycles through advanced-appropriations and will lend new transparency to the budget process. In short, it will bring about the much-needed changes that our veterans deserve.

Your testimony also highlights the need to improve VA's claims processing and appeal system. As we all know, this system takes far too long and frustrates many veterans -- including veterans from North Carolina. So, I hope we can all work together to find common-sense solutions that will make this system work better for veterans and their families, both now and in the future.

Also, you stressed the need to ensure that wounded service members experience a seamless

transition from active duty to civilian life. I share that goal and welcome your input on how we can make that a reality for the brave men and women who have served and sacrificed on behalf of us all.

As we collectively work on these and other important issues affecting our nation's veterans, we should keep in mind that just funding programs is not enough. We must make sure that these benefits and services are meeting the needs of our nation's veterans and their families and that they are actually improving their lives. I am committed to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to do just that.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman.

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