

RANKING MEMBER RICHARD BURR

Burr Opening Statement at Veterans' Committee Hearing On Disability Compensation

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to you and to our witnesses. I appreciate you calling this hearing to discuss ideas on how to improve the disability evaluation system for our nation's veterans. For the men and women who have served and sacrificed for our nation, they deserve a system that meets their needs without hassles or delays.

To truly live up to that goal, experts have stressed for more than five decades that we need to update and streamline the disability system. But, decades later, many wounded warriors still face a lengthy, bureaucratic process to find out whether they will be medically discharged from service and what benefits the military will provide. Then, these injured veterans may go through a long, complicated process to find out what VA benefits they will receive.

We will hear today about the steps that have been taken to try to improve this situation, such as the joint VA/DoD pilot program for transitioning servicemembers and ongoing efforts to modernize information technology systems. Also, there have been large staffing increases at VA, with field staff more than doubling in less than 10 years.

Despite those efforts, I think it's clear that simply adding more staff and making minor changes hasn't fixed the problems. The claims process, as a whole, still takes far too long for many veterans, in North Carolina and across the country.

It takes more than five months on average for VA to make an initial decision on a claim for veterans' benefits and, if the veteran decides to appeal, the delays can go on for years. In fact, Professor Allen noted in a recent article that the average time from when a veteran files a claim with VA until getting a decision by the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims is between five and seven years!

I think a process that takes that long is indefensible. Our veterans and their families deserve better.

That's why, at a hearing earlier this year, I asked our witnesses to take a clean piece of paper and redesign the entire disability process, as if we were standing up a new system today. In response, the Committee received some very constructive recommendations, and I thank everyone involved in crafting those responses.

Today, we will hear from the Disabled American Veterans about the proposal they developed in response to my request. That proposal includes recommendations for technological improvements, compressing timeframes throughout the claims process, eliminating unnecessary procedural steps, and helping avoid time-consuming remands.

I applaud DAV for these constructive proposals. I think these types of changes could go a long way towards streamlining the claims process and, more importantly, towards reducing the delays and frustrations our nation's veterans and their families now face. That's why I am pleased to be working with DAV to draft a bill that would help make those changes a reality.

Mr. Chairman, I hope my bill will be a good step in the right direction. I look forward to working with you to advance that legislation and other changes that can help get decisions to veterans faster. This system has been plagued with problems for far too long. So, I hope this Committee will move aggressively to make the system work better for veterans, now and in the future.

I thank the Chair.

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