

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Markup: Meeting to Consider Legislation Pending Before the Committee

September 12, 2012

“Good morning and welcome to today’s markup. I want to thank the Members of this Committee, as well as many of my colleagues here in the Senate, for all the effort they have put into these important pieces of legislation. During the Committee’s legislative hearings earlier this year, we considered a wide variety of bills from a number of Members. We have worked hard to accommodate much of that legislation in order to provide the benefits and services that veterans need, especially those who have served during the post-9/11 era.

The first bill I would like to touch upon is S.3340, the Mental Health Access to Continued Care and Enhancement of Support Services Act of 2012 (“ACCESS Act”), a sweeping piece of legislation with provisions that would address some of the most pressing needs facing our veterans.

Over the past year, this Committee has repeatedly examined the alarming rate of suicide and the mental health crisis within our military and veterans populations. We know that our servicemembers and veterans face unprecedented challenges; multiple deployments, difficulty with finding a job here at home, and isolation within their communities are just some of the issues they face on a regular basis.

We know that our nation is now losing more servicemembers to suicide than to combat. Over the past year, we have lost one servicemember to suicide every day and one veteran to suicide every 80 minutes. While the Departments of Defense (DoD) and Veterans Affairs (VA) have taken important steps towards addressing this crisis, more must be done. This Committee has heard repeatedly about the unbearably long wait times to get into care. Often, veterans and servicemembers first seek out care only when they are on the brink of crisis. If they are told “sorry, we are too busy to help you,” we have lost the opportunity to help – we have put their lives and well-being in danger. This is simply unacceptable.

This is why I introduced the ACCESS Act, which would compel VA to focus on reducing wait times, improving access, and achieving true coordination of care between VA and DoD. While VA's recent announcement to hire 1,900 new mental health professionals is a significant step toward meeting these goals, major questions remain. According to an April 23, 2012, report by VA's Office of Inspector General, VA lacks an accurate means of assessing mental health needs and a credible staffing model for placing those new personnel. The ACCESS Act would require VA to develop and implement an accurate assessment tool and a staffing model that meets the mental health needs of our veterans and servicemembers.

Beyond these measures, the ACCESS Act would expand VA's mental health care services to the families of deployed servicemembers, ensure that peer support counseling programs are available at each VA medical center, direct VA to build upon the success of initiatives like Give an Hour, and engage in outreach efforts to broaden the mental health resources available to veterans.

The ACCESS Act also contains a number of provisions that would address a wide range of veterans' issues. From giving VA the tools to continue the fight against veteran homelessness to creating a registry for soldiers exposed to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ACCESS Act represents a significant step towards meeting our obligation to those who served.

The next bill I would like to address is S. 3313, the Women Veterans and Other Health Care Improvements Act of 2012. This bill would help injured veterans and their spouses make real the dream of starting a family. Between 2003 and 2011, more than 600 servicemembers experienced blast injuries that caused trauma to their reproductive or urinary tracts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even more veterans and servicemembers have sustained other wounds, such as spinal cord injuries, which have affected their ability to have children. By authorizing VA to provide advanced fertility treatments to these veterans, we will bring VA services in line with the services already provided by DoD and TRICARE. Expanding these treatments to veterans is the right thing to do – it is what our veterans deserve.

Since we passed the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2008, hundreds of thousands of veterans have built upon their military skills and leadership ability with the education and expertise needed to prosper in the civilian workforce. In 2012, VA is projected to spend over \$9 billion supporting the 590,000 servicemembers, veterans, and beneficiaries who are currently enrolled in educational institutions and use GI Bill benefits. We owe it to each and every one of them to make sure that they are getting the full potential of this well-deserved and potentially life-changing benefit.

Yet, veterans have repeatedly told me they lack the proper information they need to determine what educational institution to attend or even that they feel as if some institutions have not helped them in building a foundation for their careers. The GI Bill Consumer Awareness Act is designed to ensure that our servicemembers and veterans have the facts they need to make informed decisions about the schools they attend. Making sure that the educational benefits that our veterans receive are accessible and effective is vital, especially with so many veterans transitioning out of the military in the years ahead.

The final piece of legislation I would like to touch upon is S.2299, the Servicemembers' Protection Act of 2012. The Servicemembers' Protection Act of 2012 will expand upon the protections established by the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act and the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act. When we ask our servicemembers to risk their lives abroad, the last thing they should have to worry about is whether the job or the house they are leaving behind will still be there when they return. This bill will extend foreclosure protections to servicemembers eligible for hostile fire or imminent danger pay, surviving spouses of servicemembers who died during military service, and servicemembers who are medically retired and have a total service connected disability. The Servicemembers' Protection Act of 2012 will also strengthen the authority of the Attorney General to bring suits against banks, landlords, and businesses that violate the foreclosure and employment protections that servicemembers have counted on since World War II. With Guard and reservists being used more than ever in our most recent conflicts, we must do everything we can to strengthen these promises to them.

I am proud of these bills and all the work that has gone into them thus far. I look forward to continuing to work with the Members of this Committee as we continue to make major strides towards meeting our obligation to our nation's veterans."