

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Chairman Jeff Miller
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

Joint Hearing to receive the legislative presentations of the Fleet Reserve Association, The Retired Enlisted Association, National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, Military Officers Association of America, Air Force Sergeants Association, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Non-Commissioned Officers Association, Jewish War Veterans, and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America

**Wednesday, March 16, 2016
10:00 AM
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room G-50**

Thank you, Chairman Isakson.

Good morning, everyone.

As you all know, this is my final joint hearing with our Senate colleagues.

Although the day is coming when the torch will pass to the next Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, I intend to continue vigorous oversight of VA, and I look forward to working with each of you to the end of the 114th Congress.

Therefore, I would like to extend my appreciation to the witnesses and the members of their organizations, many of whom are here today. I am grateful for your courageous service to our nation, as well as your tireless efforts on behalf of our nation's veterans.

Before we begin, is there anyone here from the great State of Florida?

Would you please stand or raise your hand and be recognized?

Thank you for taking time to leave the Sunshine State to be here in Washington.

It's also important to acknowledge the members of these organizations' auxiliaries, who commit countless hours to improving the lives of our military and our former military.

Although each organization here today has its own legislative priorities, we all share the same goal: Ensuring that the men and women of the Armed Forces receive the best possible service from VA.

The information you give us provides a true picture of VA. Your organizations tell us whether veterans are being treated with respect, whether they are having to wait too long to get health care, and whether VA is accurately processing their claims for benefits.

I especially appreciate the feedback I receive regarding VA's lengthy appeals process.

It is extremely frustrating that VA has touted the reduction in the claims backlog, even as the appeals backlog has exploded over the last two years.

As of February 1st, VA had more than 436,000 appeals pending.

Each of these appeals represents a veteran who has been waiting an average of five years for VA to decide his or her claim.

I am encouraged that the Secretary recently put forward an idea to overhaul the appeals process, and that VA held a summit last week with VSOs to work on appeals reform.

At the same time, the House is moving forward with various initiatives, including H.R. 677, which includes several provisions that would help streamline the appeals process.

I look forward to working with the Secretary, my colleagues, and all of you, to develop other proposals to improve VA's appeals process.

But the real answer to the growing appeals backlog is to ensure VA processes claims accurately the first time.

Over the past several years we have dealt with multiple scandals at VA, including veterans having to wait too long to receive the care they need.

But there is an answer to the root of VA's many problems.

We need to instill accountability among VA employees, especially those at the highest levels.

Last July, the House passed H.R. 1994, which would give the Secretary real authority to discipline underperforming employees, and I appreciate your organizations' support for this bill.

Without accountability, we will not be able to provide the services that our veterans have earned.

I look forward to listening to your testimony outlining other changes we can make to VA in order to ensure that our national heroes receive the benefits to which they are entitled.

Thank you again for your work on behalf of veterans and their families.