



For Immediate Release
October 30, 2013

Contact: Sanders Press Office
(202)-224-5141

Statement of Chairman Bernard Sanders

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Hearing: Pending Health and Benefits Legislation
October 30, 2013

Welcome to today's hearing to examine health and benefits legislation pending before this Committee. Today's agenda once again reflects important work by Senators on both sides of the aisle and demonstrates the Committee's desire to be responsive to the concerns expressed by veterans and their families.

Before I discuss a few of the bills I have on today's agenda, I want to briefly touch on the issue of Administration views. This Committee has a long-standing practice of requesting the Administration's views on pending legislation. I believe firmly that taking stakeholder views, including the Administration's, into account allows us to craft better public policy.

VA's testimony today touches on only a few of the bills on the agenda and to be fair, we've been operating under a compressed schedule in order to ensure we considered as much legislation as possible at today's hearing. The recent government shut-down also hasn't helped matters.

With that said, we will not wait months, as we did after the last legislative hearing, for the Administration's views on pending legislation. This Committee has an obligation to address the needs of this nation's veterans and their families.

I want to work with VA and I want to take the Administration's views into account, but I will not let the failure to provide Administration views in a timely manner impede this Committee's progress.

VA provides high-quality, cost-effective health care to many of our nation's veterans. In an era of ever-increasing health care costs, expanding access to VA's health care system will help bend the health care cost curve while improving the lives of veterans.

Currently, veterans above certain income levels and without serious service-connected disabilities are unable to receive care at VA facilities. This is because VA has prioritized which veterans can access care based on the amount of available funding. However, in a time of fiscal restraint, VA's model has proven itself a good investment, not just for veterans, but for the entire health care industry.

The Veterans Health Care Eligibility Expansion and Enhancement Act of 2013 expands access in two important ways:

- *First, it would require VA to provide services to certain veterans previously ineligible for care when they do not have access to health insurance outside of the health care marketplace; and*
- *It would also extend the period of time combat veterans are eligible to enroll in VA health care from five to ten years post-discharge.*

In addition to expanding access to these groups, my legislation also simplifies the enrollment process for lower income veterans.

Most importantly, this legislation reaffirms our commitment to those veterans with the most severe service-connected disabilities and lowest incomes, as their high priority for receiving care will be maintained.

As we expand access, we must also continue to improve services and fill existing gaps in care. A critical aspect of health care, which is often overlooked, is dental care. According to the National Institute of Health, oral health should not be interpreted as a separate issue from general health. Bad oral health impacts overall health, including, increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, and poor birth outcomes.

Each year, over six-and-a-half million veterans receive VA health care services. However, due to strict requirements, fewer than half of these veterans are eligible to receive VA dental care.

Lack of access to dental services has pervasive and expensive repercussions throughout society:

- *Americans spend over \$100 billion on dental care services each year, a third of these expenditures are paid out-of-pocket.*
- *Poor dental health affects the ability of members of the National Guard and Reserve – who may not have access to dental care – to deploy, having a negative impact on military readiness.*
- *Poor dental health exacerbates existing health problems like diabetes and heart disease.*

Our nation's veterans should not be forced to rely on expensive private insurance, out-of-pocket funds, or visits to the emergency room for their oral health needs.

That is why I introduced the Enhanced Dental Care for Veterans Act of 2013.

This legislation would authorize VA to provide more extensive dental services through VA Medical Centers, Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, Federally-Qualified Health Centers, the Indian Health Service, and contract care to veterans enrolled in VA's health care system. It also

provides education to veterans to promote oral health, so more serious dental problems may be prevented, which will save the system valuable money and resources over time.

We also have a responsibility to ensure VA is providing appropriate care and support to those who have experienced military sexual assault.

We know sexual assault occurs all too often in the military. According to DoD, an estimated 26,000 servicemembers experienced unwanted sexual contact in 2012. That is why I introduced legislation that would expand access to VA's counseling and care services to active duty servicemembers who have experienced military sexual trauma.

Further, studies have found domestic abuse occurring at higher rates in military populations than in civilian populations. Survivors of domestic abuse are at increased risk of chronic health issues. My legislation, the Survivors of Military Sexual Assault and Domestic Abuse Act of 2013, would lay the groundwork for VA to develop a more comprehensive response to domestic abuse.

This bill would ensure sexual assault and domestic abuse survivors have the necessary care, support and tools to confront and overcome the emotional and physical consequences of these horrific experiences.

When men and women volunteer to serve in the Armed Forces, they should do so knowing Congress will do all it can to support their efforts. Congress enacted the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act for just this reason – to enable servicemembers to devote their focus to the defense needs of this nation.

We took a close look at these protections at a hearing earlier this year, and we learned there was room for improvement. That is why I introduced the SCRA Enhancement and Improvement Act. This legislation would ensure that the protections we've afforded to our servicemembers are ready to serve future generations as well as they protect the men and women serving today.

I have also introduced legislation that would –

- Address concerns of the Independent Budget VSOs related to VA compensation for hearing loss and related injuries, life insurance for service-disabled veterans, and automobile grants for some of our most disabled veterans.*
- As well as legislation that would establish educational and peer support services for family members and caregivers of veterans with mental health disorders and allow VA to cover the cost for veterans receiving long term care through VA's Medical Foster Home program.*

I realize there are a number of bills on today's agenda, some of which have significant costs. While the constraints of the current fiscal climate make funding new priorities difficult, Congress has shown that – when the stakes are high – we can find a way forward. We must ensure veterans receive the care and benefits they have earned.

I look forward to addressing the legislation pending before the committee today. I appreciate our witnesses' work on behalf of America's veterans and for providing their views today. I truly value and appreciate your input as we move forward.