

1 TO RECEIVE THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
2 THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

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4 TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2017

5 United States Senate,
6 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
7 House of Representatives,
8 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
9 Washington, D.C.

10 The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 2:00 p.m.,
11 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jon
12 Tester, presiding.

13 Present: Senators Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds, Tester,
14 Sanders, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, and Manchin;
15 Representatives Roe, Bilirakis, Coffman, Wenstrup,
16 Radewagen, Bost, Poliquin, Arrington, Rutherford, Higgins,
17 Bergman, Banks, Gonzalez-Colon, Walz, Takano, Brownley,
18 Kuster, O'Rourke, Correa, and Esty.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

20 Senator Tester. Good afternoon, everybody. It is
21 going to work a little bit different than normal because
22 Chairman Roe is in the middle of a series of votes. He
23 tells me he is going to be back at 2:15. So we will do a
24 little pontificating from this rostrum, and then if need be,
25 we might go into a temporary recess. And then as soon as

1 the Chairman gets here, we will proceed on.

2 I am going to read my statement. Then I am going to
3 read Johnny Isakson's statement, the Chairman of the Senate
4 Veterans' Affairs Committee. Johnny had some surgery last
5 week, and so he could not be here in person today. But I
6 understand that he is watching, as Johnny always watches,
7 and so we wish him a quick heal and a hurry back to the
8 United States Senate because he is a quality man.

9 I want to wish you all a good afternoon. To the DAV
10 and Auxiliary members, welcome and thank you for traveling
11 literally from every corner of this country to be here
12 today. This is the first in a series of joint House and
13 Senate VSO hearings.

14 Commander Riley, I am honored to have you and your
15 leadership team with us today, and I would like to recognize
16 Joe Parsetich. Joe, where are you at? There he is, Joe
17 Parsetich, commander of the Montana DAV. Joe, from the
18 bottom of my heart, thank you for all the work that you do
19 on behalf of veterans across Montana.

20 We are here because Congress should take its cues from
21 you. DAV provides a critical perspective on how veterans
22 are affected by VA policies. We hold these hearings because
23 only VSOs and not partisan political groups or pundits on
24 cable can help Congress focus on its oversight and
25 legislative efforts to ensure that veterans have access to

1 quality care and benefits. That means taking cues from you
2 on how to hold the VA accountable, ensure the VA has the
3 capacity to meet the needs of all veterans, and fix Choice
4 and Community Care.

5 On this last point, I am pleased to note that your
6 written testimony highlights how there is agreement among
7 all major stakeholders on a path forward. Rather than just
8 giving a veteran a card to seek care in the private sector--
9 which, by the way, has largely been a disaster in my home
10 State of Montana--the Path Forward is an integrated network
11 of VA and community providers. This means the VA should
12 continue to serve as a coordinator and primary provider of
13 care while the private sector fills gaps.

14 So I am hopeful that we acknowledge the broad agreement
15 among folks in this room and among others who use VA and
16 take some meaningful steps to fix the Choice Program before
17 we extend or expand that program.

18 I commend DAV's campaign, "Setting the Record
19 Straight," to educate policymakers, veterans, and the public
20 about the best way to strengthen and reform veterans' health
21 care. I encourage all of my colleagues and the folks
22 watching from home to see DAV's short video, "Putting Choice
23 in Context: Exploring the Unrealistic Visions of Choice
24 Options."

25 Commander Riley, welcome again. Let me close with a

1 final reference to your testimony. In your written
2 testimony, you mention that the VA is, and I quote, "a
3 national treasure and an essential resource for millions of
4 veterans, particularly disabled veterans, who choose and
5 rely on VA for all or most of their health care. It is not
6 a perfect health care system. There is no perfect health
7 care system."

8 Well said, Commander. In my book, DAV is a national
9 treasure. So thank you, and thank you for being here.

10 Now I want to read a statement by my friend, Chairman
11 Johnny Isakson, who I said earlier is recovering from
12 surgery and we wish him a speedy recovery. Chairman
13 Isakson's statement goes like this:

14 "Welcome to the hundreds of DAV members and Auxiliary
15 members in attendance, and a special welcome to those who
16 traveled to Washington from Georgia"--his home State. "I
17 regret that I am unable to attend the hearing today. On
18 February 20th, I was admitted to Emory St. Joseph's Hospital
19 in Atlanta, Georgia, for a schedule operation on my back to
20 address spinal deterioration. Per my doctor's orders, I am
21 at home recovering the rest of this week before returning to
22 Washington. I look forward to returning with a new and
23 improved back to continue working harder than ever on behalf
24 of veterans."

25 "As I said at Secretary"--let me get this right. "As I

1 said at Secretary Shulkin's confirmation hearing, we are
2 about making health care more available to veterans through
3 care in both the private sector and VA. We do not want to
4 privatize the VA. We want to empower it. I look forward to
5 working collaboratively with you and other stakeholders to
6 help improve the care and services for our veterans."

7 That was Johnny's statement for the record. Of course,
8 we wish him a fast recovery, and hopefully he is watching,
9 because Johnny is one of the real good guys that serve here
10 in Washington, D.C.

11 So, with that, I think we will--Joe, do you have
12 anything you would like to say?

13 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR MANCHIN

14 Senator Manchin. Not a whole lot to add to what you
15 said so eloquently, Mr. Chairman, but Johnny Isakson is a
16 special person. I think you all probably have met Johnny.
17 If you have not, you ought to make it a point to do so.

18 Let me just say this about the Veterans' Committee that
19 we sit on. We sit on a lot of committees, and we work on a
20 lot of legislation. It can be contentious at times. This
21 atmosphere can be very toxic. Thank God for our veterans.
22 You all keep us bipartisan. You make Democrats and
23 Republicans talk to each other because we all truly care
24 about the care of our veterans. And that is the one thing,
25 the common voice we have around here, is our veterans,

1 especially our disabled veterans. I can assure you there is
2 no one that would allow privatization of the care for our
3 DAV. It is not going to happen. There is no one that gives
4 better care than a veteran who knows a veteran, a veteran
5 hospital or a veteran clinic. We hear it and see it every
6 day.

7 So I think you are going to find the support you need
8 right here. They are looking for pathways forward of how we
9 can continue to find commonality.

10 The State of West Virginia that I represent, a
11 beautiful State, has a high population of veterans and a lot
12 of people that have been willing to give their life for
13 their country, basically for their fellow countrymen. And
14 we have a lot of disabled veterans, too, that depend on the
15 care that they get in the hospitals we have and our CBOCs
16 and everything else that we are doing.

17 The Choice Program that Chairman Tester has talked
18 about, it is all well intended, and truly we are trying to
19 look at it and improve it, make it better, making sure that
20 basically wherever you need care, wherever the best care is
21 available to you in your region or anywhere in this country,
22 that you would get priority treatment to get that care. We
23 are committed to that, and we are trying to get a pathway
24 forward.

25 Our next Secretary Shulkin, we are pleased with his

1 selection. We are pleased because, first of all, he came in
2 as a team with Bob McDonald. He understands--he has been
3 involved and he understands the intricacy of how this
4 organization, which is extremely large, how it works. To
5 have him having 18 months of experience under his belt and
6 hit the ground running means a whole lot to all of us, and
7 especially to you all who depend on the services. So we
8 think that we are going to have some good things happening
9 here, and you are going to see basically some adjustments
10 and some changes that need to be made. But it is always
11 going to be you all first.

12 So I thank you for your service. I never have been
13 able to find the words to thank the people that give me the
14 life I have. My grandfather was in the Army; my father was
15 in the Army. My uncle was in the Navy; another uncle was in
16 the Marines. I never served. I sure desired to, but things
17 just did not work out because of a horrible football injury
18 way back when. But I was still willing to go, so I am one
19 of the last classes of anybody in Vietnam, from the Vietnam
20 era.

21 I will share this one little story. We were all
22 getting drafted in 1967-68, 300 at a time, that little
23 Fairmont station that we had there, a recruiting station,
24 and we were bringing them out of all the colleges. I came
25 from WVU, and we were all there, and they were going through

1 it, and right to the end, and you are doing your physical.
2 I had just had a knee operation, a construction of my knee
3 playing ball at WVU. And my knee was stiff as a board. It
4 had been in a cast for 6 weeks. And at the end of the day,
5 this old sergeant says, "Deep knee bends," and I could not
6 do a deep knee bend. So he is writing on his pad, "Manchin
7 refuses." I said, "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute. I am not
8 refusing, sir. I am happy to serve. I want to serve. I do
9 not have a bit of problem. Just let me get healed up."

10 Well, he was still writing down refusal. The doctor
11 next door, he heard, and he followed football and knew I got
12 hurt pretty bad. So he said, "Come in here." And he looked
13 at my knee, and he said, "Heck, if we took you, with your
14 luck you would probably end up living and we would have to
15 pay you the rest of your life."

16 [Laughter.]

17 Senator Manchin. I said, "Boy, that was encouraging
18 words." But I said, "You cannot wash me out at 4-F. I just
19 cannot"--"I cannot go face my dad and my uncles. I just
20 cannot do it." Back in 1968, they still had a
21 classification 1-Y, in case of national emergency, and I got
22 a 1-Y classification.

23 But to all my Marine friends out there during the
24 Vietnam era, let me tell you how they joined the Marines in
25 West Virginia during that period of time when we needed head

1 counts. They said, "Everybody line up against the wall."
2 And I will never forget this. And they said--and the
3 sergeant went down, he went down, "You are in the Army, you
4 are in the Army, you are in the Marines. You are in the
5 Army, you are in the Army, you are in the Marines." He
6 said, "Army, one step forward. Marines, one step back.
7 Army, right. Marines, left. Good luck, boys."

8 So when someone says today, "I joined the Marines," I
9 say, "Like hell you did. You were third in line."

10 [Laughter.]

11 Senator Manchin. Thank you so much for your service.
12 God bless each and every one of you.

13 [Applause.]

14 Senator Tester. Manchin, you almost burnt up enough
15 time.

16 [Laughter.]

17 Senator Manchin. Now I have got to go to Intel.

18 Senator Tester. The only question I have got, what the
19 heck is WVU, Joe?

20 [Laughter.]

21 Senator Manchin. The Mountaineers.

22 Senator Tester. That is good.

23 Senator Blumenthal, we are trying to burn a little time
24 here until Chairman Roe gets here. Do you have any
25 statement you would like to make?

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BLUMENTHAL

2 Senator Blumenthal. I want to thank every one of you
3 for being here today and really for your service. First, to
4 introduce anyone from Connecticut who is here, if you could
5 just stand or raise your hand? Great. Thank you for
6 coming.

7 [Applause.]

8 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you for being here.

9 I am deeply grateful to every one of you for your
10 presence because your presence sends a very profound and
11 powerful signal and a message. Even in the midst of all the
12 chaos and conflict, some values and ideals remain constant,
13 and they ought to be bipartisan. With you and in this
14 place, I think that is a tradition that is worth preserving
15 and protecting, the principle of bipartisan,
16 nonpartisanship, non-political approach to veterans issues,
17 because those needs and those ideals are still so urgent.

18 In the State of Connecticut and I am sure around the
19 country, there is still a need for more job opportunity,
20 more skill training, and, yes, more health care so that the
21 invisible wounds of war of all generations are met.

22 John McCain, Senator McCain, and I wrote a bill called
23 the "Clay Hunt veteran suicide prevention bill," bipartisan,
24 went through both the House and the Senate, tried to protect
25 young men and women of all ages who suffer from those

1 invisible wounds because often they lead to veterans taking
2 their own lives. Still in this country, the greatest
3 country in the history of the world, 20 veterans every day
4 commit suicide. We need more research, outreach, care, and
5 treatment, and more facilities available for them, more
6 services.

7 So that has to be one of our continuing goals, and I
8 want to thank every one of you who has served because you
9 are the models of public service for all of our children.
10 Two of my sons--we have four children. Two of them have
11 served, one in Afghanistan, United States Marine Corps
12 Reserve. He is back now. One is deployed at this moment,
13 deployed abroad in the United States Navy. I am proud of
14 both of them. I am proud of all of you. I am proud to be
15 among you today. Thank you for your service, and thank you
16 for being here.

17 Senator Tester. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

18 [Applause.]

19 Senator Tester. Senator Rounds, we are waiting for
20 Chairman Roe to arrive, and, actually, Congressman Byrne,
21 too, because I think he is going to introduce you,
22 Commander, when he gets here. But if you have any comments,
23 Mike, you can proceed.

24 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR ROUNDS

25 Senator Rounds. Thank you. Gentlemen, let me begin by

1 just saying thank you very much for your service and your
2 sacrifice and that of your families as well.

3 When we talk about the commitment that you have made,
4 to me it brings to mind the commitment that we made to you
5 as a Nation as well, and that was an offer and a promise
6 that we would provide certain benefits.

7 Let me just say to begin with that we have got a long
8 way to go to honor those commitments, and the one thing I
9 would ask of you is, please, come in united and come in with
10 a focus. We have got lots of opportunities here to make
11 things better for these young men and women who are coming
12 in today and, as veterans, need additional assistance.

13 Let me just start by talking just for a few minutes
14 about some of the challenges that I see at the VA and some
15 things that I think we should be focusing on.

16 I think, number one, regardless of how you want to see
17 Choice implemented, modified, changed, first and foremost we
18 have to make sure that Choice is a primary delivery. In
19 other words, rather than secondary in payment, which is
20 causing a lot of problems around the United States today,
21 rather than secondary meaning you wait and you wait for
22 Medicare to pay first or you wait for private insurance to
23 pay first and then VA steps in secondarily and that delays
24 the payments to doctors, it makes more of them think twice
25 about providing some of those services, we have to make the

1 VA primary. We have got that in the Veterans First proposal
2 that we passed last year out of this Committee, and coming
3 in, we have to refocus again. That will take care of a lot
4 of the consternation around Choice.

5 Second of all, there is something else I want to talk
6 about, and that is the Emergency Care Fairness Act that was
7 passed in 2009, signed by the President in 2010. This said
8 that if a veteran was being taken care of in an emergency
9 room, regardless of where they were at, at a VA facility or
10 otherwise, the VA would step up and be responsible for those
11 payments. They have not made those payments. In fact, the
12 cost over a 10-year period of time is estimated to be over
13 \$10 billion. And the question is: Is that \$10 billion
14 going to be paid by the VA or is it going to be paid by
15 veterans themselves?

16 VA's position currently is it is going to be paid by
17 veterans. Our position is the law was passed and it should
18 be paid by the VA, and that those veterans who go to an
19 emergency room should have that benefit available to them,
20 and we should not be waiting since 2010 for that to be
21 implemented.

22 And so as I look at this and in terms of all of the
23 changes that need to be made, there are a couple of things
24 that we have got to fix, and that is one of the most
25 important parts out there, is to send the message that

1 clearly if we say that you are entitled to emergency care
2 regardless of where it is at, that the VA will step up and
3 they will pay that bill, and they should not expect a 90-
4 year-old veteran to pay his own emergency room bill.

5 So there are some things we can do. I am very
6 optimistic about the changes that will help improve the
7 benefits coming through. I am very optimistic that with the
8 new administration stepping in, they are recognizing clearly
9 the need to provide additional assistance to veterans out
10 there and to honor the commitment that we have made. But
11 for me personally, this is something that we should never
12 forget, and that is that we have made a deal with veterans.
13 The veterans honored their end, and it is our goal here to
14 see that those promises are kept on our side as well. And
15 part of what we need from you is that combined front that
16 says we get it and we are going to work together to make
17 sure that we send a powerful message that the changes
18 necessary to improve that service is something that we will
19 work together to overcome.

20 With that, thank you, and perhaps there are some other
21 members that would like to have a few words before we--thank
22 you.

23 Senator Tester. Thanks, Senator Rounds. And before I
24 get to Senator Hirono, I would just like to say that--and I
25 know you guys know this, but the Senate Veterans' Affairs

1 Committee, and I think the same could be said for the House,
2 is very nonpartisan. We work together. Whether it is Mike
3 Rounds talking or whether it is Dick Blumenthal talking, you
4 are going to see a lot of heads nodding because this
5 Committee serves for one reason, and that is for the
6 veterans of this country. So that is why your input is
7 going to be critically important today, Commander, and we
8 look forward to it.

9 The Chairman has not arrived yet, obviously. If
10 Senator Hirono has any comments, she is certainly welcome to
11 say a few words. This is a great opportunity because, as
12 you guys well know, Senators like to talk.

13 [Laughter.]

14 Senator Tester. Moving right down the line, Senator
15 Hirono.

16 Senator Blumenthal. He is speaking only for himself.

17 [Laughter.]

18 Senator Tester. They have already heard from Manchin.
19 They know.

20 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR HIRONO

21 Senator Hirono. Thank you so much for having this
22 joint hearing, and I want to thank all the veterans here, of
23 course, for your service to our country. And I recognize
24 Raymond Welch, our DAV commander, who came all the way from
25 Hawaii. Where are you, Raymond?

1 Mr. Welch. Aloha.

2 Senator Hirono. There they are. Okay. Aloha.

3 [Applause.]

4 Senator Hirono. I think of all the States, of course,
5 you came the farthest. Thank you very much. And I also
6 want to thank you for your support for the Filipino World
7 War II Veterans Congressional Gold Medal Award. That took a
8 lot of us working together, but that day came and we are now
9 working very hard to create the events and the ceremony
10 around these brave veterans who fought with us during World
11 War II, and it is high time that we recognize their service
12 to our country. And for many of the veterans--and every day
13 that goes by, more of them are passing on, but they are very
14 grateful because this is really a point of honor for them at
15 this stage in their lives, so I want to thank all of you
16 folks for helping to make that happen.

17 Thank you.

18 Senator Tester. Thank you, Senator.

19 I think we will just recess now for the arrival of
20 Chairman Roe. The big boss is not here yet. These guys do
21 all the work; we take all the credit. But we will sit in
22 recess now until Chairman Roe arrives.

23 [Recess.]

24 Chairman Roe. I would like to call the meeting to
25 order, and before I begin my statement, I would like to

- 1 yield to Congressman Bradley Byrne of Alabama, who will now
- 2 introduce Commander Riley.

1 STATEMENT OF HONORABLE BRADLEY BYRNE, A
2 REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF
3 ALABAMA

4 Mr. Byrne. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 Mr. Chairman, Ranking Members, and members of these
6 Committees, I am honored to introduce National Commander of
7 the Disabled American Veterans, David Riley. David is a
8 resident of Mobile, Alabama, and Alabama's 1st Congressional
9 District. He has also been a lifetime member of DAV's
10 Chapter 7.

11 David's military career includes service with both the
12 Army and the Coast Guard. During his 6 years in the Army,
13 David served as a radar repair technician and spent time
14 overseas in Korea.

15 After leaving the Army, he served as a helicopter
16 rescue swimmer with the Coast Guard. While on active duty
17 at the Coast Guard Aviation Training Center in Mobile, he
18 contracted septic shock pneumococcal sepsis. This resulted
19 in a 3-month hospitalization, and he lost all four limbs and
20 some internal organs due to the infection. David Riley has
21 since used this experience to become an advocate for other
22 disabled veterans.

23 As National Commander of the DAV, David leads a 1.3
24 million-member organization with 1,300 chapters nationwide.
25 In 2010, David was selected as DAV's Outstanding Disabled

1 Veteran of the Year. He also previously served as chairman
2 of DAV's Convention Committee on Legislation and Veterans'
3 Rights.

4 As a quick note, I know the Coast Guard Aviation
5 Training Center in Mobile has David's photo hanging in their
6 gym. It serves as a good motivator for all the Coast Guard
7 pilots that go through training about his hard work and his
8 dedication.

9 The DAV is a nonprofit charity that provides a lifetime
10 of support for veterans of all generations and their
11 families. Their efforts include a real focus on helping
12 veterans find meaningful employment through job fairs and
13 other resources. Their top focus is on ensuring our Nation
14 keeps the promises made to those who serve.

15 Mr. Chairman, it is a distinct honor to represent
16 someone like David Riley, a person who has given so much to
17 his country and is now continuing to serve his fellow
18 veterans. I look forward to his testimony.

19 [Applause.]

20 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ROE

21 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Mr. Byrne. And welcome,
22 Commander. Good afternoon. I am sorry Mr. Byrne and I have
23 been delayed, and others up here on the House side, for some
24 inconveniences called votes. So we are sorry we are a
25 little late.

1 Good afternoon, Commander Riley, DAV members, and
2 members of the DAV Auxiliary. It is an honor and a
3 privilege for me to be here with Ranking Member Walz and
4 Senator Tester to welcome you all today to this joint
5 hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees
6 to receive the legislative presentation of the Disabled
7 American Veterans.

8 Unfortunately, Senator Isakson, as you heard, is on
9 medical leave today--and I think he is probably watching
10 this on television--and will not be here and not be able to
11 attend this hearing. I believe I can speak for the rest of
12 the dais in wishing him a very speedy recovery.

13 DAV represents perhaps the most humbling cohort of
14 American veteran servicemen and -women--those who have given
15 up their health and mobility in wartime service of this
16 great Nation. Before we continue with my opening remarks, I
17 would like to take a moment to personally thank you all for
18 your service and sacrifice in uniform, as well as your
19 continued service through the DAV. Thank you very much for
20 that service.

21 I want to extend a special welcome to Commander Dave
22 Riley and his wife, Yvonne. Sir, thank you for your years
23 of service in both the Army and Coast Guard, for your
24 leadership within DAV, and for being with us here today.

25 I want to also welcome the rest of DAV's national

1 leadership team as well as the DAV members from my home
2 State of Tennessee who are in the audience today. Will
3 those of you from Tennessee please stand or raise your hand
4 and be recognized? Thank you.

5 [Applause.]

6 Chairman Roe. I want to also welcome and acknowledge
7 the members here from the DAV Auxiliary. I know many of you
8 wear many hats as volunteers, spouses, and caregivers, and I
9 want to thank you all for your selfless commitment to those
10 who have served. DAV members across the country provide an
11 invaluable voice for veterans, and that voice has perhaps
12 never been more important than it is today. As Commander
13 Riley noted in his personal story, DAV representatives are
14 ever present both on and off campuses, helping injured and
15 ill servicemen and -women navigate the reality of the
16 injuries they sustained while serving.

17 I want to give a very special heartfelt thank you to
18 DAV for the disaster relief performed in one of my towns in
19 my district, Gatlinburg, Tennessee. As many of you know,
20 fierce wildfires hit the Gatlinburg area of the Great Smoky
21 Mountain National Park in November of last year. These
22 wildfires caused 14 deaths, countless fire-related injuries,
23 and over half a billion dollars in damages across the
24 county.

25 As the fires still smoldered, DAV first responders were

1 on the ground providing supplies, support, and nearly
2 \$30,000 to displaced veterans and their families in the
3 area. On behalf of the veterans of East Tennessee, thank
4 you.

5 Over the past 3 years, the Department of Veterans
6 Affairs has faced an ongoing access and accountability
7 crisis, ballooning construction mismanagement that has led
8 one project running \$1 billion over budget and an
9 unprecedented and last-minute budget shortfall that
10 threatened the Secretary's ability to keep the doors open at
11 hospitals and clinics from coast to coast.

12 In responding to the many crises VA faces, my focus
13 will be: one, to fulfill the Committee's constitutional
14 responsibility to provide aggressive, top-to-bottom
15 oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure
16 that veterans have timely access to high-quality health care
17 and benefits; that poor-performing VA leaders are held
18 appropriately accountable for failing to provide the service
19 that our veterans have earned and deserve; and to foster an
20 agenda focused on problem solving and results, bringing
21 together stakeholders and policymakers to build a better
22 future for VA; to revamp VA's outdated legacy IT
23 infrastructure, especially with regards to interoperability
24 of electronic health records.

25 That said, first among the Committee's current

1 priorities is improving and consolidating the Choice
2 Program, which is set to expire in August. We will work to
3 remove the sunset date and allow VA to use the projected \$1
4 billion in leftover emergency funding which remains in the
5 Veterans Choice Fund to continue the Choice Program while we
6 work on a comprehensive overhaul of how VA authorizes non-VA
7 care.

8 Moving forward, we are going to consolidate VA's
9 multiple care in the community programs under one roof,
10 which will simplify and improve how community care works for
11 VA, for community providers, and most importantly, for the
12 veterans who need it.

13 Let me assure you, throughout that effort, we are going
14 to continue to view community care as a way to supplement
15 not supplant the care that is provided in VA medical
16 facilities. We are going to continue to rely on the
17 valuable feedback from DAV and other stakeholders as we work
18 together to find the best model of care for the VA health
19 care system and in working to establish a network of
20 community providers under the coordination of care from VA.

21 DAV leaders here in Washington have provided essential
22 information, from anecdotal information to survey data to
23 important testimony, regarding the successes and
24 shortcomings of the Choice Program since it was first
25 created, and their ongoing feedback continues to be

1 critical.

2 I am pleased to see that health care for female
3 veterans is a DAV priority included in your testimony,
4 Commander Riley. As a veteran and retired OB/GYN physician
5 who took care of the unique health needs of female patients
6 for the VA Medical Center in my home town of Johnson City,
7 Tennessee, I am fully supportive of increasing access to
8 care for the fastest growing minority of veterans.

9 The disability claims process is yet another area where
10 DAV's leadership is critical. We know that while the
11 backlog of claims has been reduced, this has come at the
12 expense of the production on appeals, non-rating work, and
13 vocational rehab and education claims.

14 Commander Riley, I know you share my concern about how
15 important all VA claims are to veterans and, like me, will
16 not be satisfied until all backlogs are eliminated. We look
17 forward to continuing our partnership with DAV and all the
18 stakeholders to address these important claims issues. As
19 you can see, there is a lot of work ahead of us. However, I
20 am optimistic that as our Committee works together with the
21 Senate and members of DAV, we can serve our Nation's
22 veterans as they have served us.

23 And with that, I will yield back the balance of my
24 time, and now I think, Commander Riley, you are recognized
25 for your opening statement.

1 STATEMENT OF DAVID W. RILEY, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
2 DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; ACCOMPANIED BY JIM
3 MARSZALEK, NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR; JOY J. ILEM,
4 NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR; GARRY J. AUGUSTINE,
5 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS; J.
6 MARC BURGESS, NATIONAL ADJUTANT; BARRY A.
7 JESINOSKI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL
8 HEADQUARTERS; JOHN KLEINDIENST, NATIONAL DIRECTOR
9 OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE; JEFFREY C. HALL, NATIONAL
10 DIRECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT; AND FRANCES COSTA, DAV
11 AUXILIARY NATIONAL COMMANDER

12 Mr. Riley. Congressman Byrne, thank you for your kind
13 introduction. It is good to have a home town face and a
14 true friend of veterans by my side.

15 Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee on Veterans'
16 Affairs, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you
17 today. My written statement details DAV's key legislative
18 priorities for the 115th Congress and reports our many
19 accomplishments. I ask that my formal testimony be
20 submitted for the record.

21 I want to start by recognizing those seated at the
22 table with me, as well as some distinguished guests in
23 attendance: DAV National Adjutant and CEO Marc Burgess;
24 National Executive Director Barry Jesinoski and Garry
25 Augustine; National Service Director Jim Marszalek; National

1 Legislative Director Joy Ilem; National Voluntary Service
2 Director John Kleindienst; National Employment Director Jeff
3 Hall; Auxiliary National Commander Fran Costa of
4 Massachusetts; Auxiliary National Adjutant Pat Kemper of
5 Kentucky; DAV Senior Vice Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster
6 of California; Junior Vice Commanders Dennis Nixon of Texas,
7 Stephen Whitehead of Minnesota, Donald Day of New York, and
8 Andy Marshall of Florida; National Judge Advocate Mike
9 Dobmeier of North Dakota; Immediate Past National Commander
10 Moses McIntosh of Georgia; Chaplain Michael Dover of
11 Georgia. And I also want to thank my officers: National
12 Chief of Staff Bill Baker, Officer of the Day Debb Walker,
13 and Sergeant at Arms Chad Richmond of Alabama.

14 And, of course, I would also like to recognize my wife,
15 Yvonne Riley, and my brother, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Riley,
16 U.S. Army-Retired.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Riley. I ask DAV's National Executive Committee,
19 please stand or raise your hand to be recognized.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Riley. Will the members of National Legislative
22 Interim Committee also please stand or raise your hand?

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Riley. Finally, I would like to recognize the DAV
25 delegation from my home State of Alabama.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Riley. Chairman Roe, Senator Tester, and members
3 of Committees, it is an honor to appear before you today
4 together with the membership and leadership of DAV.

5 My name is Dave Riley. I am a veteran of both the Army
6 and the Coast Guard, where I served as a helicopter rescue
7 swimmer. In 1997, while taking a rare vacation with my
8 family, I started feeling extremely ill and quickly lapsed
9 into a coma.

10 When I awoke nearly a month later, I was devastated to
11 find both my arms and legs had been amputated as a result of
12 a devastating infection. As I lay in my hospital bed, I
13 felt despair. I could not imagine how the rest of my life
14 would have any value or happiness.

15 But one of the first visitors to my bedside was a DAV
16 service officer. He not only helped me file for my VA
17 health care and benefits, but welcomed me into a community
18 of fellow veterans who, like me, had been forced to find a
19 new normal.

20 Thanks to the love of my wife and family, the support
21 of my fellow Coast Guardsmen, and the services of DAV, I
22 began my long road to recovery.

23 Mr. Chairman, 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of World
24 War I. Over the past century, 625,000 Americans sacrificed
25 their lives defending our country, and another 1.2 million

1 were wounded in combat, and millions more have had their
2 lives forever changed with permanent disabilities. It was
3 for these people that the DAV was formed after World War I
4 to ensure that our Nation keeps the promises of all those
5 who wear the uniform.

6 Foremost among these promises is access to high-quality
7 health care. As someone who relies on the VA health care
8 system, I have seen its strengths and weaknesses. But
9 despite the existing problems and the need for reform, I
10 know that the VA is an essential resource that millions of
11 veterans, particularly disabled veterans, choose and rely
12 on.

13 Since the waiting list scandal of 2014, a national
14 debate has taken place about how to reform the VA. By the
15 end of 2016, virtually all major stakeholders had agreed to
16 a common long-term solution. Rather than just giving
17 veterans a Choice card, the real solution is to create an
18 integrated network of both VA and community providers to
19 ensure that veterans have access to care whenever and
20 wherever they need it.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Riley. However, despite this agreement, there are
23 still some promoting an unrealistic vision of choice. They
24 say choice will allow veterans to select their own doctors,
25 but many doctors do not accept choice payment rates. They

1 say choice will lead to a better-quality health care, but VA
2 regularly provides equal or better care than the private
3 sector, according to independent experts. They say choice
4 will expand access; however, if too many veterans leave VA,
5 it would be forced to close facilities, resulting in less
6 choice for disabled veterans who rely on their local VA for
7 care.

8 Further, economists say that expanding choice would
9 cost between \$5 and \$35 billion in just the first year and
10 as much as \$2 trillion over 10 years. Mr. Chairman, rather
11 than continuing to debate the false promise of unlimited
12 choice, it is time for Congress to get behind the plan to
13 create an integrated network that keeps VA as a coordinator
14 and primary provider of care and uses the best of private
15 care to fill the gaps. That is real choice.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Riley. Another critical DAV priority and an issue
18 very personal to me is honoring and supporting caregivers of
19 seriously disabled veterans. When I was in a coma, all the
20 hard decisions fell to my wife. I cannot imagine the stress
21 Yvonne felt when she was consulted about the need to
22 amputate my arms and legs. The decision was easy enough
23 because there was no other choice if I were to survive. But
24 even before I knew what challenges I would face, she knew
25 the burdens that lie ahead. When I needed her most, she was

1 there for me, and she has continued to support me through
2 every challenge since. She and all caregivers are truly
3 unsung American heroes.

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Riley. Unfortunate, VA's Caregiver Assistance
6 Program is limited to veterans injured or made ill after
7 9/11, leaving untold thousands of family caregivers like my
8 wife behind. Mr. Chairman, we call on Congress to correct
9 this inequity by extending assistance to all seriously
10 disabled veterans of all eras.

11 [Applause.]

12 Mr. Riley. Yvonne is humble about the sacrifices that
13 she endures daily to ensure my quality of life. But she
14 will be the first to tell you that serving as a caregiver
15 does not get easier with age. Yvonne has been my source of
16 strength and inspiration all these years, especially in my
17 darkest moments. Her ability to rise up as my caregiver and
18 best friend has made every accomplishment in my life
19 possible. She has selflessly dedicated herself and
20 unconditional love and compassion for three decades. For
21 Yvonne and caregivers like her, we owe a tremendous debt of
22 gratitude, and I would like to take a moment to recognize
23 her for her dedication throughout the years.

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Riley. Another continuing priority for DAV is

1 ensuring women veterans have equal access to VA health care
2 and benefits. In 2015, DAV released a special report on
3 their needs. We found that women are frequently not
4 recognized for their wartime service and that there are
5 serious gaps in Federal programs to aid their transition.
6 We urge Congress to enact legislation this year to close the
7 gaps in VA programs to meet the unique needs of women
8 veterans.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Riley. Another major priority for 2017 is
11 enactment of appeals modernization legislation. While there
12 has been significant progress in addressing the claims
13 backlog, the backlog of appeals has risen steadily. Last
14 year, VA and the veterans community reached consensus on a
15 framework to reform and modernize the appeals process. We
16 call on these Committees to make enactment of appeals
17 modernization legislation a high priority this year.

18 [Applause.]

19 Mr. Riley. Mr. Chairman, while much of our focus in
20 Washington is on advocacy, DAV's core mission around the
21 country involves providing direct services to veterans, most
22 prominently through our National Service Program. DAV has a
23 corps of nearly 300 national and transition service officers
24 that accredit thousands of chapter, department, and county
25 service officers who provide free assistance to veterans and

1 their families seeking their earned benefits.

2 DAV has a fleet of ten mobile service offices that
3 traveled nearly 100,000 miles last year, helping over 15,000
4 veterans. Over 13,000 DAV and DAV Auxiliary volunteers
5 provided 1.6 million volunteer hours, saving taxpayers at
6 least \$38 million. Last year, DAV's National Transportation
7 Network provided 670,000 veterans with rides to VA medical
8 appointments and donated 112 vans to VA. Over the lifetime
9 of the program, DAV has donated more than 3,200 vehicles to
10 VA for this purpose at a cost of over \$73 million. Like
11 everything else DAV provides, these services are provided at
12 no cost to veterans.

13 Our National Employment Program will sponsor 127 career
14 fairs this year, reaching 40,000 veterans and spouses, which
15 we expect will lead to at least 15,000 job offers.

16 Finally, our DAV Charitable Service Trust continues to
17 support nonprofit organizations helping America's ill and
18 injured veterans, with close to \$100 million in grants given
19 out since its inception.

20 Mr. Chairman, when it comes to serving our veterans,
21 DAV is like my beloved Coast Guard. We are "Semper
22 Paratus," always ready when we are most needed. I feel I am
23 continuing my mission as a rescue swimmer, saving lives and
24 ensuring no one is left behind.

25 In conclusion, we are fortunate that so many men and

1 women continue to put themselves in harm's way to protect
2 the freedoms we cherish. Sadly, many will be wounded, many
3 will die, and many will be disabled for life. That is why
4 there will continue to be a need for a strong VA and
5 organizations like DAV to support them when they return
6 home.

7 In his novel, "A Farewell to Arms," set during World
8 War I, Ernest Hemingway wrote, "The world breaks every one
9 and afterward many are strong at the broken places." I know
10 what it means to be broken, and I know what it means to be
11 lifted up and truly supported. It is a blessing that the
12 very illness that took my limbs and almost took me also made
13 my life richer in ways I never imagined.

14 Mr. Chairman, it is a great honor to serve as DAV's
15 National Commander. I am truly humbled to be in this room
16 full of heroes who served and those who care for them. May
17 God bless and watch over all our soldiers, sailors, airmen,
18 Marines, and Coast Guardsmen serving in harm's way around
19 the world. May God bless the DAV and all those who serve
20 their fellow veterans. And may God bless the United States
21 of America.

22 [Applause.]

23 [The prepared statement of Mr. Riley follows:]

1 Chairman Roe. Commander Riley, thank you for your
2 compelling testimony. And as you can see, this Committee is
3 probably the most bipartisan Committee in the U.S. Congress,
4 and I have served on it since I have been here, the 8 years
5 I have been here. And I think you can see by the attendance
6 the importance that the Committee puts on this, both on the
7 Senate side and the House side, Republican and Democrat
8 side.

9 I know you all have a hard stop at--I think you have a
10 bus to catch at 4:15, or many do, and so I am going to limit
11 our members to 4 minutes instead of the usual 5, and I am
12 going to forgo my questions to begin with and start on the
13 House side with Dr. Wenstrup.

14 Mr. Wenstrup. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a
15 pleasure to be with you today as a veteran, and one of my
16 first affiliations with any VSO when I came back from the
17 war in Iraq was with the DAV, and we worked on some
18 fundraisers together in the local area, recognizing the
19 sacrifices so many Americans have made. Little did I know
20 that I would end up here after that, but I am honored to be
21 here as a veteran and as a doctor as well, especially one
22 that has served in theater. And now I have the honor and
23 responsibility and privilege to be the Chairman of the
24 Health Care Subcommittee, and I am excited about the members
25 that we will be working with--Dr. Roe, as another physician

1 and veteran; Tim Walz, Ranking Member, whom we work with
2 very well, and also a veteran; and Julia Brownley, the
3 Ranking Member on Health Care.

4 So we have many challenges ahead, as you so aptly
5 described, and for me, a primary mission that I foresee is,
6 as best we can, I would love to see every veteran have a
7 primary care doctor that they call their own, because I
8 think that is the linchpin to delivering the best quality
9 care after that. And if we can get that, which is hard to
10 do in the civilian side, too, outside of the VA, I think we
11 can accomplish a lot. I have seen some of the good things
12 at our community-based outpatient centers where the doctors
13 have a set of patients that are theirs, and the patients
14 love it, and they love it, too. As a matter of fact, the
15 doctors I know left their private practice. They used to
16 refer to me in practice, and now they are doing that.

17 And I think that if we can focus getting towards that
18 area and where we have this one-on-one relationship, then we
19 can do so much more. And from there, if we can eliminate
20 some of the bureaucracy and then allow the patient and the
21 doctor to decide what is their next best move when it comes
22 to specialty care, I think we will go a lot further in that
23 regard.

24 So I do not really have questions for you per se today,
25 but I just want you to know that our door is open, and we

1 would love to hear back from you. We started off this term
2 with a health care roundtable, with many of the VSOs
3 present, asking them what they feel their members need more
4 than anything else. And that was one of the key components.
5 People said, "I would like to have a primary care doctor
6 that I can call my own."

7 So just know that we will be dedicated to that and
8 doing everything that we can to make care available and the
9 best care available in a timely fashion and cut through a
10 lot of the red tape that can lead to greater anxiety. And
11 when you are ill, as you know, that anxiety does not help.
12 And so we will be working very hard and I think we have a
13 good team here in place that will try to do all we can to
14 make sure that we are serving our veterans.

15 With that, I yield back.

16 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

17 I will now yield 4 minutes to the Ranking Member on the
18 Senate side, Senator Tester.

19 Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want
20 to thank you for your testimony, Commander Riley. I was
21 talking to Mr. Walz here to my right, and I do not think
22 there is anything in those comments that I disagreed with.
23 So I want to thank you very, very much for putting for the
24 DAV's perspective on what needs to be done.

25 There seems to be broad agreement that the Choice

1 Program has been inconsistent at best, disastrous at worst.
2 Either way it is in need of reform before it is extended or
3 expanded. Commander Riley, would you comment on that?

4 Mr. Riley. That is an important issue, sir. I would
5 like to pass that to my staff.

6 Senator Tester. Absolutely.

7 Mr. Augustine. Thank you, Senator. Yes, the Choice
8 Program has had its problems, and as we go forward, you have
9 very eloquently pointed out the need for what we all agree
10 on, along with our fellow VSOs and the Commission on Care
11 and the VA, an integrated health care network that is the
12 primary provider and coordinator of care.

13 Dr. Wenstrup, I understand your wanting to have a
14 primary care provider for everyone, and we agree that that
15 is a great idea. But we have to be realistic, too, about
16 what is available and what the cost factor is for doing
17 community care. So the integrated health care system we
18 believe is the best way of controlling the cost, the best
19 way of bringing in providers that will understand veterans'
20 issues, understand the reimbursement situation, because one
21 of the real problems in the current Choice Program is when
22 doctors do not want to wait for the reimbursement and our
23 veteran patients get billed unnecessarily. It causes a lot
24 of stress. It causes a lot of anxiety and a lot of
25 confusion.

1 So the integrated health care system is, we believe,
2 the best way to control for that, and as you put forth,
3 Senator Tester, it is a way to supplement the VA, not to
4 supplant the VA, because we are all very strong supporters.
5 We all use the VA. We volunteer in the VA. And we even
6 work in the VA. So we believe real choice is best achieved
7 utilizing that model.

8 Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Augustine. Senator
9 Rounds talked about making the VA the primary payer. What
10 does the VA believe would be the practical effect of
11 allowing the VA to be the primary payer?

12 Mr. Augustine. Well, again, whether it is the primary
13 or the secondary payer, anytime you pay for community care,
14 it is taking resources away from the VA system. So our main
15 concern is the resources needed to keep a strong and healthy
16 VA system. And that is what the priority should be, in our
17 view.

18 Senator Tester. Okay. thank you.

19 As I mentioned, Congress should take its cues from VSOs
20 like the DAV. Secretary McDonald really set the tone for
21 this with some solid communication. From the executive
22 standpoint, have any of the representatives from the DAV met
23 personally with the President?

24 Mr. Augustine. We have not. We have made a request
25 along with our fellow VSOs to meet with the President or

1 senior staff.

2 Senator Tester. If you had the opportunity to meet
3 with the President, what would be your three top priorities
4 to address?

5 Mr. Augustine. Well, obviously Choice is the subject
6 of the day, our concern about where it goes from here and
7 making sure it is the right kind of choice, the real choice
8 that we believe veterans will benefit from. Obviously, you
9 heard the commander talk very passionately about the
10 caregivers issue. Being a Vietnam veteran, I can tell you
11 that I agree with him. My generation is not eligible for
12 caregiver benefits, so obviously that is the second one.
13 And women veterans, as we pointed out.

14 Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Augustine. Thank you,
15 Commander Riley.

16 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

17 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator, for yielding back.

18 I will now yield to Mr. Bost to my left here, a Marine
19 veteran.

20 Mr. Bost. Thank you, Chairman.

21 First off, Commander, I have got a quick question
22 before I get to the questions I really want to ask. So
23 Congressman Byrne said you were in radar. Is that correct?

24 Mr. Riley. It was Vulcan in the Army. I worked on
25 Vulcans and--

1 Mr. Bost. Okay, because as a radar guy, I was going to
2 ask you about Zener diodes and amplitrans and things like
3 that.

4 [Laughter.]

5 Mr. Bost. But I do not think that is where I probably
6 need to go today.

7 Just so you know, my job is dealing with the
8 subcommittee--I am Chairman of the Subcommittee on
9 Disabilities and Memorial Affairs. In your testimony, you
10 expressed strong support for the bill we passed last year
11 out of the House, and that was when we were trying to reform
12 the appeals process, and I know you support that. But can
13 you elaborate on why that is important and what you see that
14 we can do to try to improve as we pass that bill forward the
15 appeals process--not only the appeals process, but also how
16 quick we can get the original request through?

17 Mr. Riley. That is an important question. I will let
18 my staff answer that question.

19 Mr. Bost. Thank you, Commander.

20 Mr. Marszalek. Thank you, sir. The appeals reform is
21 critical to overhauling the VA appeals process. There are
22 over 450,000 pending appeals in the VA right now. That is a
23 serious concern of ours. It is affecting the claims backlog
24 because all those efforts went to reducing the claims
25 backlog. That is what drove the appeals backlog so high.

1 Now there are over 80,000 pending hearing requests at the
2 Board of Veterans' Appeals as well.

3 What I liked, what we liked as an organization was that
4 we got together with all the other VSOs, VA, the Board of
5 Veterans' Appeals and created this framework, and we are
6 very supportive of the framework. Are there a couple issues
7 that we still want to work out and make sure the language is
8 exactly right? Absolutely. We want to make it stronger.
9 We want to make it so veterans have an option that does not
10 hurt them. Right now, if you disagree with a decision, you
11 have got to file a Notice of Disagreement. That is your
12 only option. Let us provide them some options, but the most
13 important part of that is providing clear, concise decisions
14 to them the first time, and accurate decisions, right?

15 So we have got to think about all those things, and in
16 the framework, there are eight specific items that need to
17 be addressed in a VA decision to veterans. And if they
18 implement all of those, veterans should understand exactly
19 what evidence is needed to seek the benefits sought. They
20 can go out and get that evidence and come back into a lane
21 that is not going to take them 4 years to get through, and
22 they can get a quicker decision.

23 So we are very supportive of it, and we are willing to
24 sit down with anybody to make sure we can make it as strong
25 as possible to make it right for veterans the first time.

1 Mr. Bost. Thank you, because what you did was you
2 answered my second question as well, and I appreciate that.

3 [Laughter.]

4 Mr. Bost. Another thing that I do want to know,
5 because our Committee has just met a couple times, but one
6 of the things and the concerns we had was after trying to
7 implement through the VA the new system, we saw an increase
8 of a backlog of about 33 percent above and beyond what we
9 had already had. Do you have any suggestions on how we can
10 aggressively go after that backlog and try to work with our
11 VSOs and others to try to speed that up?

12 Mr. Marszalek. Yes, so you are referring to the claims
13 backlog.

14 Mr. Bost. Yes.

15 Mr. Marszalek. It was over 600,000. Now it is nearing
16 100,000 right now, and the biggest thing was, again, there
17 is no more overtime for working claims. Those people that
18 they pulled from appeals to work claims now have been routed
19 back and you can only work appeals. So that is what is
20 making the rise in the claims backlog. Our independent
21 budget recommended an additional 1,700 FTE for last year for
22 the VBA. They only were provided 300. It is going to take
23 resources to help drive that backlog of claims back down.
24 It really is. There has been the National Work Queue, which
25 I was at the hearing when we talked about the National Work

1 Queue, and then VBMS. So there has been some things that
2 are helping drive that backlog down or keep it as low as
3 possible, but it is going to continue to rise without
4 additional resources.

5 Mr. Bost. Thank you, and thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 Mr. Augustine. I would also like to add one thought.
7 The benefit side has not been exempted from the Federal
8 hiring freeze. That is a problem for them because as those
9 claims slow up, that means that the adjudication of claims
10 will not result in those veterans getting their health care
11 benefits either. So the freeze is definitely hurting the
12 benefit side of the house.

13 Mr. Bost. Okay. Thank you.

14 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

15 I now yield 4 minutes to our Ranking Member on the
16 House side, Sergeant Major Walz.

17 Mr. Walz. Thank you, Chairman.

18 Commander, thank you, and to your wife, thank you both
19 for being here. These are the best days on the Hill when
20 the National Commanders give their testimony, because I
21 often think--and if you could see what we see from up here,
22 it is a beautiful sight of folks who have done their duty,
23 have served their Nation, and still come here to make a
24 difference in our democracy. And so it is uplifting. I
25 agree with Senator Tester that I think you laid out the

1 blueprint for how we make the VA better. You have always
2 held the VA accountable, and you should hold us accountable
3 to make sure that we are able to deliver those things. So I
4 am very grateful for that.

5 I would like to take a point of privilege to point out
6 a couple folks here: Past National Commander Jim Sursely is
7 here, a favorite son of Rochester, Minnesota, also one of
8 the first people I talked to before I was thinking about
9 running for Congress, and the very first group in D.C. that
10 I was able to meet with through him was with Joe Violante
11 and the national staff sat down with me and said, "We do not
12 care what your politics are as long as you are right on
13 veterans' issues if you get here."

14 [Laughter.]

15 Mr. Walz. So thank you for that, Jim. I appreciate
16 it.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Walz. And Second Junior Vice Commander Whitehead,
19 a point of personal privilege to point out with this. When
20 he and I first became acquainted, he was Specialist
21 Whitehead when I was his first sergeant. He was then Staff
22 Sergeant Whitehead when I was his sergeant major. And now
23 he is the sergeant major. So thank you for that service,
24 and thank you for making me feel very old.

25 [Laughter.]

1 Mr. Walz. To each and every one of you who have come
2 here today, you really--and I think of this with Commander
3 Sursely, is the way I always thought, because when he calls,
4 sometimes it is good advice, and sometimes he is not happy
5 with what we have done. And I have always viewed, when you
6 come here, Commander, that you are the voice and the
7 conscience of this Nation. And when you lay out these
8 priorities, these are not "nice to have" things. These are
9 core responsibilities that we as a Nation need to deliver.
10 So when you are talking about fixing the care in Choice,
11 this is not a theoretical debate. It is real. It needs to
12 be done because that is what we have promised.

13 The same thing with the caregivers, and I think this is
14 the issue of our time, and I think all of us up here owe a
15 great debt of gratitude not just to you and this
16 organization, but to Senator Dole, Senator Elizabeth Dole,
17 and her work in making this a national priority, that this
18 is an issue that unifies people. To be very honest, these
19 are folks that just by nature kind of do like your wife did,
20 and did everything that was asked of them for--not just for
21 you, but for this Nation. And it is very difficult to ask,
22 and it was very difficult to seek out the help that maybe
23 should have been there. But I think as a Nation, there is
24 such a desire of our constituents to deliver that.

25 So I thank you for pushing it there. I think the

1 public is with us. I just do not think they know what it
2 looks like, what that Caregiver Act looks like, what those
3 services are that we can offer, what we need to do to make
4 that happen, to make sure that we are helping share that and
5 it is not a burden but share the sacrifice that was made by
6 your families.

7 So I look forward to working with you towards that
8 goal, and, again, I would say--and Dr. Roe said it--the
9 bipartisanship that is shared on here is not just in lip
10 service. We often say this up here. We talk about "my good
11 friend" when we know that we are not telling the truth
12 sometimes about that. The fact is up here when it comes to
13 the care for veterans and each of you out there, you should
14 expect nothing less than the best we have. A lot of folks
15 up here could choose to be in other committees. They chose
16 not to be. They chose to be here because this is the
17 highest calling. I am grateful when you come here, and I
18 would like to point out, because he is a humble man, Dr.
19 Wenstrup talked about how we work together. At 1800 hours
20 today, Dr. Wenstrup will then be Colonel Wenstrup when he is
21 promoted, and I congratulate him.

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Walz. You told us what we need to do, and I think
24 the final words would be, "Let us get to work and get it
25 done."

1 I yield back.

2 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding back.
3 And Sergeant Major Walz is correct. Usually the more times
4 you hear "my good friend," the worse we dislike each other.
5 So that is kind of the way it works.

6 [Laughter.]

7 Chairman Roe. I would like to now yield to General
8 Jack--we have actually a three-star general here, so I left
9 as a lowly major. I would like to now yield 4 minutes to
10 General Bergman, another Marine.

11 Mr. Bergman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 How many Marines in the crowd?

13 [Cheers.]

14 Mr. Bergman. You know, there can be 1,000 people in a
15 room and nobody in uniform, and if there are two Marines in
16 there, they will find each other. That is just how it
17 works. And, you know, when you grow up in a little town in
18 the Midwest and you start as a Boy Scout, the motto is, "Be
19 prepared." And I will tell you, why that is important is my
20 first venture out of high school was at the Coast Guard, and
21 you become "Semper Paratus," "Always Prepared." And as you
22 end up in the Marine Corps, it is "Semper Fidelis," "Always
23 Faithful." And I would suggest to you that what I see in
24 this room today is a sense of faith that transcends any
25 religious meaning, but a faith in one another and a faith in

1 what we can achieve as individuals and, most importantly,
2 collectively when we truly care for one another.

3 It is an honor to be with you, and I guess I would just
4 have one question for the group, and this could be
5 potentially what questions you would get from a Marine. If
6 you had to choose where you live--you know, you live where
7 you live. But if you had to choose between getting health
8 care from the VA system or quality health care, what would
9 you choose?

10 Mr. Augustine. Thank you, sir. Right now, the way
11 things are, it is a difficult question. But I think I would
12 still choose the VA. It is the best system we have. It is
13 the best system in the world out there right now.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Bergman. Then you are okay if this Committee, as
16 we--by the way, I am the Subcommittee Chairman on
17 Investigations and Oversight, and we know that we have
18 challenges within our VA delivery system, our health care
19 delivery system, everything from issues with prescription
20 meds, with issues that--as you articulated so very well, the
21 fact that a provider provides care in the Choice Program but
22 does not get paid, so we have different scenarios.

23 But we have challenges in our broader system here to
24 make sure that we are always in lockstep with entities,
25 VSOs, that make sure that we reflect going forward, so those

1 who have chosen to wear the cloth of the country after you,
2 that we have got it set up so they are the beneficiaries.

3 So I just wanted to say thank you for being honest and
4 direct, because what you will get from the Veterans' Affairs
5 Committee, especially under the leadership of Dr. Roe, is
6 that the gavel drops on time, we get down to business, and
7 we handle the tough issues.

8 So we are all in this together, and thank you. God
9 bless you all, and I yield my time back.

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Roe. Thank you, General. Always leave it to
12 a jarhead to ask the tough question, right?

13 Now I take this opportunity to yield to Senator
14 Blumenthal of Connecticut for 4 minutes.

15 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you. Thank you, Mr.
16 Chairman. I would suggest very respectfully that we should
17 never force you to choose between quality care and the VA.
18 The VA ought to be the best care in the world.

19 [Applause.]

20 Senator Blumenthal. And that is what we owe you, we as
21 a Nation owe you.

22 I really appreciate your focusing on the appeals
23 process. As you know, during the last session I introduced
24 a bill, with your help and your collaboration. I intend to
25 do it again because there are 450,000 cases pending, and it

1 is not a matter only of more resources; it is also using
2 those resources in a smarter way. That is what appeals
3 reform has to do, and it should be, as you suggested, sir,
4 at every level of the judicial process in that system.

5 I also appreciate your focusing on women's health care.
6 I am astonished and appalled to note that 18 percent of all
7 VA facilities offering primary care, 18 percent, have no
8 provider designated for women's health care. That is
9 something that we need to improve and change, an example of
10 how we need to give you world-class care in the VA system.

11 I want to ask finally, if I may, the kinds of care that
12 we provide for prosthetics in the VA system. There are
13 world-class advances that are being made. In fact, I
14 visited just a couple days ago the University of Hartford
15 center, which is one of 12 in the Nation that is developing
16 sensors and new types of equipment. Would you support
17 investment in these areas by the VA to an even greater
18 extent than we do it now?

19 Mr. Riley. That is an important issue, sir. I would
20 like to pass that to my staff to answer.

21 Ms. Ilem. In terms of prosthetics, you know, we want
22 our veterans that need them, especially the specialized
23 prosthetics, to really have the best. And I know many
24 veterans especially coming back--there is a lot of
25 collaboration between DOD and VA. At first it was a little

1 rocky, but getting better in terms of making sure that when
2 veterans transition to the VA from DOD and are in need of
3 prosthetics, that they get the very best. And I know that
4 the Department works very hard with veterans to make sure
5 that they have access to the most current technology with
6 regard to prosthetics, and that is the way it should be.

7 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you very much. I appreciate
8 all of you being here today. As I said at the very start,
9 your presence is a very important message to all of us, but
10 also the collaboration you have given us on all of these
11 issues has been invaluable. Thank you for your service to
12 our Nation.

13 Thank you.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Bost. [Presiding.] Chairman Roe had to step out,
16 Congressman Bost in the chair. Now I would like to go to
17 recognize Representative Jenniffer Gonzalez-Colon.

18 Miss Gonzalez-Colon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I
19 really want to thank and recognize the presence of the
20 Puerto Rico chapter of the DAV is here today and went to my
21 office. And I think many people do not know that there are
22 many Puerto Ricans fighting for the U.S. along all these
23 years, most of them being recognized by the Borinqueneers in
24 the Korean War, recently distinguished as receiving the
25 Congressional Gold Medal in the past Congress, but more than

1 200,000 veterans from Puerto Rico in the recent years. And
2 one of the issues that we have to address is that I am the
3 only Representative from the island of Puerto Rico, so we do
4 not got any Senators from the island here. So a lot of the
5 issues regarding the Puerto Rican veterans are not being
6 met, and one of those is the TRICARE Prime. Our people do
7 not have TRICARE Prime because they are qualified as
8 overseas living on the island. So there are more than
9 15,000 retirees from active duty in Puerto Rico that do not
10 qualify for TRICARE Prime just because they are living in
11 Puerto Rico. They can move to Florida, they can move to
12 Texas or any other State, and they will qualify for those
13 benefits. So that is one of the issues I would support, to
14 include veterans living and residing on the island. And I
15 know the territories here do not have the same services.

16 We have a lot of clinics, our VA clinic lacks a lot of
17 specialists in mental health, Alzheimer's disease and
18 treatments, and most of them have to travel to Florida, New
19 York, New Jersey to receive that kind of treatment. And I
20 want to ask you--and I want to commend you and thank you,
21 Commander, for recognizing all the efforts of all veterans
22 in our Nation defending us in time of war and in time of
23 peace.

24 I want to ask you directly about those services that
25 are issues for Puerto Ricans, but I will note that it is the

1 same issue for other U.S. territories.

2 Mr. Riley. That is very interesting. I had not known
3 that, ma'am. But I would like to pass that to my staff to
4 answer.

5 Ms. Ilem. I think we want to make sure that all
6 veterans have access to high-quality care and the
7 specialized services that they need following military
8 service, especially those who have become disabled as a
9 result of that service. And I think we have continued to
10 hear, you know, the comments that you have just highlighted
11 from our veterans that are there that are DAV members, and
12 that continues to be a problem, as it is in many rural areas
13 and other areas of the country here that, you know, have
14 these special challenges.

15 So we definitely understand your frustration and
16 wanting to make sure that veterans who have served have this
17 equal access to those benefits.

18 Miss Gonzalez-Colon. Well, thank you for that, and we
19 are going to have in this, the first 100 years of U.S.
20 citizenship, and while other people are equal on the
21 battlefield, they are not equal back home. So I commend to
22 be in this Committee. I am the first Puerto Rican to be in
23 this Committee, and I asked to be in this Committee because
24 of our veterans. So thank you, all of you, for your service
25 to our Nation.

1 [Applause.]

2 Miss Gonzalez-Colon. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

3 Mr. Bost. The gentlewoman yields back.

4 Senator Hirono, you are recognized for 4 minutes.

5 Senator Hirono. Thank you very much.

6 Commander Riley, thank you very much for your vote of
7 confidence for the VA system, because I am sure that you
8 know that there are some who think that we should be
9 privatizing veterans' health care, and I am certainly not
10 among those people.

11 I thank all of you. This is a full house. I think
12 that every State is represented, and our territories
13 probably, so as we say in Hawaii, mahalo nui loa.

14 Commander, I have a question about the--there is a
15 statute right now that requires the VA to provide nursing
16 home care for those seriously disabled veterans at no cost
17 to them. And this particular law and this requirement is
18 set to expire at the end of this year. According to the VA,
19 around 35,000 veterans nationwide and nearly 350 Hawaii
20 veterans have received care under this particular program
21 last year, including at Hale Makua Health Services on Maui,
22 which I just visited earlier last week.

23 Could you or someone from your staff comment on the
24 importance of extending this VA benefit and its impact on
25 the lives of disabled veterans?

1 Mr. Riley. Thank you, ma'am. I look forward to
2 visiting your beautiful State this summer, and I would like
3 to pass that to my staff.

4 Ms. Ilem. Sure. Long-term care and supports are
5 essential for disabled veterans, and VA has expanded that
6 care in a variety of ways for those long-term services and
7 supports. Everybody wants a veteran to be able to stay in
8 their home as long as possible to have caregiver services
9 and a variety of other supports. But when long-term care is
10 necessary, it is very important--oftentimes, you know, a
11 spouse or family member is no longer able to care for that
12 veteran, so it is critical. And we will continue to support
13 obviously extending it and making sure that that benefit
14 stays available for veterans who need it.

15 Senator Hirono. I am planning to reintroduce that
16 bill, so I certainly invite all my colleagues to join in
17 that.

18 We know that eliminating the backlog in both claims and
19 the appeals process is a very high priority for you, and we
20 managed to automate the claims process for benefits for
21 widows and widowers. So I am just wondering, as we face
22 this huge backlog in claims, whether automating some of the
23 other processes would be helpful and if you can identify
24 which processes can be automated so that people are not
25 there filling out all these repetitive forms. Can you

1 respond to that?

2 Mr. Riley. I would like to pass that question to Jim
3 Marszalek.

4 Mr. Marszalek. Yes, thank you. Yes, automation is
5 key, and like you had mentioned, for dependency and
6 indemnity compensation claims, DIC claims, for survivors,
7 those are automated. So is it for dependency claims. So if
8 you want to add a dependent or remove a dependent, you can
9 go online and do that yourself. VA is continuing that
10 automation, and what has created that was VBMS. Earlier on
11 in my career, I got to spend some time with the VBMS team;
12 30 days I went to work over there and provide the VSO
13 perspective. I spent 10 years in the field myself, so I was
14 able to help a lot of veterans throughout my career. So
15 when I went over there, we talked about those type of
16 things: How can we make this process better for veterans?
17 The ease of access to file a claim, right? You have
18 eBenefits. You can go on eBenefits and start a claim. You
19 can elect a representative. DAV, we have all of our service
20 officers out in the communities. Our mobile service office
21 is out in the communities. We want to make it as easy as
22 possible for veterans to file that claim with the VA. The
23 VA has standardized it, and it is a standardized claim form
24 you must use to file that claim.

25 So I think continuing to work with VA, and VA

1 collaborating with VSOs and key stakeholders to develop more
2 ways to streamline the process is going to be key to helping
3 drive down the backlog.

4 Senator Hirono. And I would really appreciate your
5 identifying other areas, because it took legislation to
6 enable the VA to automate those benefits.

7 Mr. Marszalek. Absolutely.

8 Senator Hirono. Thank you.

9 Mr. Marszalek. Thank you.

10 Senator Hirono. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

11 Mr. Augustine. I would just like to add that DAV files
12 more electronic claims than any other organization.

13 Mr. Bost. The gentlewoman yields back.

14 Senator Boozman is recognized for 4 minutes.

15 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And,
16 Commander Riley, I want to thank you and your team for
17 sharing your time with us this afternoon and for all the
18 work that you do each and every day. From the 1.6 million
19 hours your volunteers spent transporting veterans last year,
20 to the 35,000 servicemembers you helped brief as part of
21 your Transition Service Program, my colleagues and I are
22 really very, very grateful for all that you guys do--guys
23 and girls. I have got a wife and three daughters. I
24 understand very much.

25 This morning, I had the privilege to meet with one of

1 the many volunteers from your National Transportation
2 Network, Dallas Erdman, and his wife, Mary, who spend
3 countless hours helping to transport veterans free of charge
4 to their health care appointments each week in Arkansas.
5 This is such an important program, and I thank the Erdmans
6 and the DAV support of VA Medical Centers across the country
7 for providing this much needed service. That is a
8 tremendous service and is of such benefit.

9 Commander Riley, I am very interested in hearing your
10 thoughts on suicide prevention efforts and specifically your
11 ideas or your staff's on how we can improve access to
12 meaningful mental health services and strengthen suicide
13 prevention awareness among our veterans' communities. In
14 Arkansas, veterans represent about 8 percent of the
15 population but about 20 percent of the suicides. That is
16 very troubling. We must do more. Can you talk about the
17 efforts the DAV is currently doing as well as your ideas for
18 strengthening and expanding suicide prevention efforts?

19 Mr. Riley. That is such an important issue. I would
20 like Joy to answer that question.

21 Senator Boozman. Thank you very much.

22 Ms. Ilem. Sure. Absolutely, mental health services
23 and access, timely access to mental health services is so
24 key. VA has been the leader in terms of really looking at
25 suicide prevention, partnering in a collaborative way with

1 DOD to try and address the barriers that veterans face. One
2 of the first things VA did that I think has been
3 instrumental in improving services is making sure that
4 primary care--mental health is integrated into the primary
5 care services.

6 They also are taking a public health approach to that,
7 that it is going to take everyone to combat suicide and to
8 make sure that family members understand the signs and
9 symptoms, that they know where to go, the crisis line, peer-
10 to-peer programs that they have put in place which have been
11 really, really successful in terms of veterans and outreach
12 in a positive way for them where they might not be, you
13 know, willing to go in, but they are willing to talk to
14 someone else who can get them to the right place, the Vet
15 Center Program. I mean, VA is doing a lot, and the recent--
16 they just told us, I think Dr. Shulkin had mentioned they
17 are going to be doing some special analytics where they can
18 really try to prevent veterans that are really at high risk
19 for suicide by doing the analytics and searching out and
20 then reaching out to those people before there is a crisis.

21 But the wrap-around services in VA are really
22 essential, and I think that is why we fight so hard for the
23 VA health care system because it is those wrap-around
24 services that really help, you know, whether it is PTSD,
25 care for military sexual trauma, homeless, substance use

1 disorder. All of those things are key in watching and
2 making sure that veteran has a real opportunity to get over
3 the readjustment issues they are dealing with and have a
4 successful, positive life.

5 So we are doing everything we can to partner with VA.
6 We are at all of their mental health meetings that they do,
7 liaison with the VSO community. So we will continue that,
8 and we push out the message through our magazine, through
9 our social media, and every other way we can to make sure we
10 are watching out for one another.

11 Senator Boozman. Good. Thank you. Thank you very
12 much. And that is such an important issue, and as I close,
13 I just want to thank everybody for being here. I tell you,
14 we are working hard. This is a very bipartisan group. It
15 is not Democrats and Republicans. It is all about helping
16 veterans, which is as it should be. But there is no
17 substitute for looking out and, literally as far as we can
18 see, to see a bunch of veterans out there that are trying to
19 move things forward. So thank you very much for being here.

20 Mr. Bost. Thank you, Senator.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Bost. Mr. Takano is recognized for 4 minutes.

23 Mr. Takano. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
24 you, Commander Riley, for your testimony this afternoon and
25 all of the important work the DAV does advocating for and

1 supporting veterans.

2 I would like to recognize those in the crowd from
3 California today. From California, raise your hands if you
4 are here. All right, all right.

5 [Applause.]

6 Mr. Takano. Thank you for your service as well.

7 Commander Riley, in your testimony, you mentioned DAV's
8 "Setting the Record Straight" campaign. I think it is
9 important that we clear up a lot of the misconceptions about
10 what unlimited choice would mean for veterans and the VA,
11 and I am glad to hear that DAV is tackling this important
12 work. Can you tell us more about this campaign?

13 Mr. Riley. Choice is an important issue, and I would
14 like to have our executive director, Garry Augustine, answer
15 that question.

16 Mr. Augustine. Thank you. The idea of the campaign
17 was to educate folks on the ramifications of unfettered
18 choice. The ideas of Centers of Excellence and letting the
19 money follow the veteran needed to be explained so that
20 veterans and the country would understand the ramifications
21 of those type of things.

22 So we put together five videos that took each issue in
23 turn and simplified them to try to help people understand
24 how they would affect veterans and the VA system. The
25 bottom line is if you open up choice to everyone and they

1 can go anywhere, it will eventually drain resources from the
2 VA, and the VA will eventually wither on the vine.

3 What we believe is a better alternative is the real
4 choice of an integrated health care system so that the VA
5 stays healthy, and when they have a situation where they
6 cannot accommodate veterans, there is an overflow where the
7 veteran can go to get the treatment they need without having
8 to wait.

9 Mr. Takano. So, again, I heard it in Commander Riley's
10 testimony, but could you again cite the cost of unfettered
11 choice, the estimate?

12 Mr. Augustine. Yes, there are estimates anywhere from-
13 -well, the economist for the Commission on Care modeled cost
14 for allowing all veterans the unfettered choice to seek care
15 in the private sector and estimated a 10-year cost was
16 between \$1 trillion and \$2 trillion in new funding. The
17 Commission also recommended for choice inside a managed
18 network would have cost \$5 to \$35 billion in the first year.

19 Mr. Takano. I am afraid that some of the choice
20 proposals we have seen could--well, they would severely
21 undermine the VA if this is true for the millions of
22 veterans who depend on the VA. What kind of impact do you
23 think it would have on the VA, these diversions of
24 resources--what would it mean for, for example, the complex
25 patients that the DAV often advocates for who rely on the

1 expertise that can only be found at the VA, what would it
2 mean if we allowed these diversions away from the VA
3 resources?

4 Mr. Augustine. Very good question. One of the ideas
5 was that the VA should just center on certain conditions, a
6 half dozen certain conditions where they are known for doing
7 it better than anybody else--PTSD treatment, TBI,
8 amputations, spinal cord injury. But I do not think anybody
9 thinks it is realistic to think that a hospital can survive
10 only treating a half dozen conditions.

11 One of the great things about the VA is it is a
12 holistic, wrap-around type of treatment program. It takes
13 care of the whole veteran. Both the commander and myself
14 could testify. You know, when I came out of Vietnam, I
15 spent 18 months at Walter Reed, and if they would have said,
16 okay, Garry, you are retired now, here is a card, go find
17 your doctors, your therapists, the people that you need to
18 take care of all the conditions you need to deal with, as a
19 20-year-old I would have been--I probably would not be here
20 today. I only had to go through one set of doors, and that
21 is--

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Augustine. I went to the VA, one set of doors.
24 They took care of all of my medical needs. They made sure I
25 was getting compensation to pay my bills because I could not

1 work anymore. When it was time for me to go to college,
2 they paid for my college, to go through voc rehab. I can go
3 on and on. My first house I bought through the GI bill.

4 The VA is something that everybody in this room
5 supports and feels that it is necessary for us to have a
6 strong VA for folks like us when we come back.

7 Mr. Takano. Thank you, Mr. Augustine, and thank you,
8 Mr. Chair, for your indulgence. Thank you.

9 Chairman Roe. [Presiding.] Thank you, Mr. Takano.

10 Next I think is--let us see. Mr. Poliquin, you are
11 recognized for 4 minutes.

12 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.
13 Commander Riley, it is good to see you again. Mr. Chairman,
14 you might not know this, but the commander--and I believe
15 Yvonne was with you--came up to Maine for the 150th
16 anniversary of the Togus VA facility, which is the first
17 military hospital in America. But, you know, I have not
18 seen you since then, Commander, and I have been very
19 concerned you were lost in the Maine woods. But it is good
20 to see you back here. We have got a bunch of Mainers.
21 There are not a lot of us, but we are rugged, and we are
22 grateful for your service, sir. We love our veterans in
23 Maine. We just absolutely love them because we do not have
24 freedom, we do not have a country, unless we have you. And
25 we are very grateful, sir. And I think everybody in this

1 room for your service. It means a lot to everybody.

2 Commander, I think it was our first commander, George
3 Washington, who said--and I am paraphrasing--that we cannot
4 expect young men and women to step up and serve in the
5 uniform unless we have already taken care of those who have
6 already been on the battlefield. This is really important
7 stuff. We get it. We are here to help.

8 I represent, I think, the most rural congressional
9 district east of the Mississippi River. You listed a bunch
10 of priorities for us, Commander: access to health care,
11 caregivers help, women vets' issues, the appeals backlog,
12 transportation, and so forth and so on. If you had to
13 prioritize, Commander, or someone on your team for rural
14 veterans, what would be the number one issue we need to
15 address?

16 Mr. Riley. Thank you, sir. I did get lost in the
17 woods of Maine for a little while.

18 Mr. Poliquin. I bet you did. You made it here, and I
19 am glad.

20 [Laughter.]

21 Mr. Riley. I would like to pass that to my staff.

22 Ms. Ilem. Sure. Rural veteran issues have been, you
23 know, posed with a lot of challenges because there often is
24 not good access to any types of health care that are nearby,
25 let alone for veterans who often have had to travel really

1 far to get their care through VA. So there definitely--one
2 of the good things that happened was Congress established
3 the Office of Rural Health, looking at the very unique
4 situations, because there is a vast variety across the
5 country in rural areas and the different problems that are
6 posed in each one. And it is really important to have, you
7 know, the resources and the office that is focused on
8 looking at those particular issues so that they can be
9 resolved locally.

10 Mr. Poliquin. One of the things that we heard today
11 from the commander and the other folks here is, what I am
12 assuming, that veterans love to be with other veterans.
13 They heal better. They connect. And I understand all that.
14 I am not a veteran myself, but I have a huge soft spot in my
15 heart for our veterans.

16 That being said, Commander, when you talked about the
17 core of health care for our veterans be the VA and then have
18 other providers fill in the gaps, I wonder, Joy, if this is
19 an appropriate time to ask or maybe we can explore that
20 maybe there is a different process for our veterans who live
21 in rural areas, where it is a 5-hour drive from Madawaska,
22 Maine, down to Togus in Augusta. And, you know, you are not
23 feeling well, and the wind is blowing sideways, and it is in
24 February and it is 20 below. So that is a real issue for
25 us, and I wonder if Choice might be adjusted for folks that

1 live in rural areas.

2 Ms. Ilem. We have been supportive of that. I mean, I
3 think that Choice, not only because of the access issues
4 that were occurring, that were identified, but, you know,
5 rural areas are different. They are unique. And that has
6 posed a problem, and I think that is one of the places that
7 Choice can be very advantageous in terms of them being able
8 to have contracts with providers in those areas so that
9 veterans can have access closer to their home.

10 Mr. Poliquin. We already have a terrific program up in
11 Maine called the "ARCH Program" in Aroostook County such
12 that our veterans in the county can get access down to the
13 medical center in Caribou.

14 Yes, sir, Garry?

15 Mr. Augustine. I think it is also important to note,
16 though, one of the ideas of the integrated health care
17 system is that the doctors that would be recruited to be in
18 that system would be trained about veterans' issues.

19 Mr. Poliquin. I see, yes.

20 Mr. Augustine. For instance, Dr. Shulkin gave an
21 example. When a veteran goes in and says, "I was injured by
22 an IED," if the doctor has no idea what he is talking about,
23 that causes a problem for them to bond with that doctor.

24 So one of the ideas is in an integrated health care
25 system, those doctors would be trained about veterans and

1 veterans' issues.

2 Mr. Poliquin. My time is up. Thank you all very, very
3 much for coming here and serving us and serving your
4 country. Thank you very much.

5 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Roe. Because of time constraints, I am going
8 to try to ask you to hold your comments to 3 minutes. They
9 do have a bus to catch. And, Mr. O'Rourke, you are
10 recognized.

11 Mr. O'Rourke. Mr. Chairman, thank you, and I want to
12 thank Commander Riley, and his wife, Yvonne, for
13 exemplifying service and reminding us that it is the entire
14 family that serves, especially those who are the primary
15 caregivers for our veterans. And so I just want to thank
16 you again for what you do for this country and for reminding
17 us and prodding us to act and providing the accountability
18 and the pressure and your presence, which does all of that.
19 And I think each one of us to a person feels that up here
20 and wants to make sure that we deliver for you. So I want
21 to thank you for being here.

22 I want to thank all of those who made the journey,
23 especially those from Texas. My colleague Jodey Arrington
24 from Lubbock and I hosted a healthy donut and coffee
25 breakfast this morning for our fellow Texans, and we got to

1 spend almost 2 hours together really having substantive
2 conversations, listening, understanding what is going on
3 around the State, and trying to ensure that we have the
4 right legislative and administrative and leadership fixes
5 for those issues that were raised.

6 Commander, you have an outstanding staff. Garry and
7 Joy especially have spent many hours with me and my team,
8 providing feedback, giving direction and guidance on those
9 issues that affect your members and, frankly, every veteran
10 in this country. And so for all of you in the room, I want
11 to assure you as a Member of Congress you have outstanding
12 leadership and a great team here in Washington, D.C., doing
13 your business.

14 Let me ask you a question on an issue that is going to
15 come up in Chairman Arrington's Committee on Economic
16 Opportunity, and that is the subject of accountability. I
17 think we all understand, or at least I do, that we want to
18 make sure that the VA is central to care and delivery of
19 earned benefits, and that may entail additional resources.
20 We also want to make sure that there is a culture of
21 accountability and a prioritize of excellence in the
22 delivery of that care in those services.

23 What guidance do you have for us as members of this
24 Committee in terms of structural issues within the VA or
25 leadership that we need to be looking for from this new

1 Secretary, or for Members of Congress for that matter? And
2 I will ask the commander, and you are welcome to ask any of
3 your staff.

4 Mr. Riley. Thank you, sir. I will have my staff
5 answer.

6 Mr. Augustine. Thank you, Congressman O'Rourke. Yes,
7 accountability is a huge issue, not only in the VA but in
8 any organization. You have to have accountability. And for
9 things such as immoral or criminal acts or grossly negligent
10 acts, you know, there is no question about what needs to be
11 done.

12 However, whether it is in the VA or in Government or in
13 the private sector, in order to have a termination that is
14 going to be upheld, supervisors and managers have to do
15 their due diligence. They have to document. They have to
16 counsel. So when they do terminate someone, whether the
17 appeal process is 7 days or 7 months, if they do not do
18 their due diligence, that appeal process is not going to be
19 upheld. So it is important to train those people, and I
20 think the VA and their MyVA Program and their Leader to
21 Leadership training is doing the right thing in trying to
22 make their employees aware of what is necessary to make a
23 valid termination.

24 Mr. O'Rourke. Thank you.

25 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

1 Mrs. Radewagen, you are recognized for 3 minutes.

2 Mrs. Radewagen. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 I welcome all of you, and I want to thank you all for
4 your service and your testimony here today. When it comes
5 to our veterans, this Committee is dedicated to making sure
6 that the United States is upholding its commitment to those
7 who have stood in our defense.

8 My personal mission as the Representative for the U.S.
9 Territory of American Samoa is to make sure that those
10 veterans in the U.S. territories are being afforded the same
11 resources and care as those in the States. Some of my
12 colleagues here mentioned rural veterans, and I want you to
13 know that we in the territories have these very same
14 problems, and we feel for you.

15 We have a very large veteran population in American
16 Samoa, and I look forward to continuing to work with the
17 VSOs to make sure all of our veterans are being served
18 properly. My colleagues and I thank you again and look
19 forward to continue to working with you all. Fa'afetai tele
20 lava.

21 Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

22 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentlelady for yielding.

23 [Applause.]

24 Chairman Roe. I am going to have to ask you that you
25 maybe even go to 2 minutes because we have votes in the

1 House in 2 minutes.

2 Ms. Esty, you are recognized for 2 minutes.

3 Ms. Esty. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank all of
4 you for taking the time for not only your service to this
5 country over the years but your continuing service to
6 veterans who rely on your help each and every day.

7 Commander Riley, I wanted to again thank you and your
8 wife for your extraordinary service and talk a little bit
9 about the caregivers bill. I have introduced it in the last
10 two Congresses, and we keep running into a stumbling block.
11 It is going to cost too much. But I think as you know, if
12 you had to pay for the services that Yvonne provided you,
13 that would break the bank. So it is absolutely our job in
14 Congress to support the families who support all of you. So
15 could you talk a little bit about the true cost savings, to
16 say nothing of the moral obligation we have to support the
17 families who do so much to support each and every one of
18 you? Thank you.

19 Mr. Riley. Thank you. My wife, Yvonne, and my
20 children have been there for me all these years, ever since
21 the day that changed my life forever. I know I did not make
22 the journey alone, and I am here because of the love and
23 support of my family and my wife, Yvonne.

24 As a quadruple amputee, I need her help every day to be
25 able to get my prostheses on and off and get out the door

1 and live the wonderful life I have. If it were not for her-
2 -you know, she does more for me willingly and without
3 reservation, you know, such selfless sacrifice should be
4 recognized.

5 I firmly believe Yvonne and all caregivers--spouses,
6 parents, and adult children--should care for their ill and
7 injured veterans, and there should be some kind of program
8 that is extended.

9 I would like our staff to answer that a little bit
10 more.

11 Ms. Ilem. Sure. I mean, there is definitely a cost
12 when a veteran has to be institutionalized, and it is
13 obviously the best for a veteran to be able to stay in their
14 home with their family whenever possible. And we would love
15 to see parity, and we do support your efforts in that
16 regard. The cost issue does keep coming up, but the cost is
17 really high for these people who have been doing the
18 caregiving without the support that they need.

19 Chairman Roe. Thank you for yielding back.

20 Mr. Rutherford, you are recognized for 2 minutes.

21 Mr. Rutherford. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

22 I will keep this very brief in light of the situation
23 we have facing the votes, but, Commander, and all of the
24 veterans here today, you know, I have often said that I
25 think how we treat our veterans is a national security

1 issue. The volunteer military that we now enjoy I think is
2 predicated upon us keeping our promises to those who have
3 already laid their lives on the line, put themselves in the
4 breach to protect this country, and I just want to say thank
5 you to each and every one of you here. And I believe I
6 speak for the entire Committee when I say our commitment to
7 you is to keep our commitments that have been made in the
8 past. God bless you.

9 [Applause.]

10 Chairman Roe. Ms. Brownley, you are recognized for 2
11 minutes, and we are voting now.

12 Ms. Brownley. Thank you. I am going to use my moment
13 here just to be able to say thank you, and thank you,
14 Commander Riley, for your leadership, and thank you to all
15 the men and women that sit beside you and behind you for
16 your leadership as well. It is extraordinary work that you
17 do, and the service that you have given to our country and
18 the service that you give to us today and to the veterans
19 and the men and women who are coming home, thank you.

20 The DAV is very important to me in many, many ways, but
21 so many of you who have not only served our country but have
22 come home with permanent disabilities, and, Commander Riley,
23 you talked about the new normal, and so I feel like so many
24 of you had to come home, and the courage that you had to
25 face and to learn really a new normal, it is beyond--we have

1 asked so much of you, and we appreciate it so very, very
2 much.

3 And to Yvonne, I just want to say that your husband not
4 only says glorious things about you in his testimony to us
5 today, but I can affirm that when he comes to visit each and
6 every one of us in our offices, he also reminds me of your
7 love to him and the care that you have given him and the
8 life that you have given him. So I personally am honored to
9 be able to meet you today, and thank you for your service as
10 well to our country. And, again, a heartfelt thank you to
11 each and every one of you.

12 I yield back.

13 [Applause.]

14 Chairman Roe. Mr. Correa, you are recognized for 2
15 minutes.

16 Mr. Correa. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to
17 thank as well all the veterans for your service to our great
18 country. I come from California, home to the largest number
19 of veterans in the Union. Thank you. When I was in the
20 California State Senate, I chaired the Veterans' Affairs
21 Committee where I tried to make veterans front and center,
22 front of the line. And I learned a very important lesson:
23 Always listen and cut your comments short.

24 But I do have a question for some of you here.
25 California--nationally, Hispanics make up 7 percent of the

1 veterans. That number is supposed to double in about 10
2 years. My question, and I would like to get the answer
3 later on from you: Does the VA have the services in Spanish
4 for those families with severely disabled veterans? I would
5 like to talk to you about that later on. Thank you very
6 much for your service to our country again.

7 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

8 Ms. Kuster, you are recognized for 1 minute.

9 Ms. Kuster. I will be very quick, and I apologize to
10 all of you that we have to go vote. Thank you, Commander
11 Riley, for your service and for your eloquent testimony. I
12 appreciate it. And to Yvonne and to all the family members
13 and vets who are with us today, we appreciate your sacrifice
14 and your service. And you served us; we are here to serve
15 you--and that is our goal--in a bipartisan way.

16 Just very briefly, I wanted to thank you, the DAV, for
17 your priorities, including gender-specific services at our
18 VAs all around the Nation. I have met today as well with
19 the VFW and the American Legion, and I was pleased to see
20 the gender-specific services on all three agendas. So I
21 think we can all come together and agree that women serve a
22 vital role in our services and that we as a country owe them
23 the health care that they deserve as well.

24 So we have got a lot of complicated issues ahead of us.
25 We are going to learn more tonight about potential plans for

1 the Choice Program, and we just want you to know that on
2 both sides of the aisle our goal is to provide you with the
3 highest-quality services and the access in as convenient a
4 setting as possible. But I particularly want to quote some
5 of my constituents this week in town hall meetings that
6 talked about the camaraderie of care within the VA and not
7 losing that camaraderie.

8 So we have got a number of things to sort out, and
9 under the able leadership of the good doctor, we will get
10 this done. And thank you so much for being with us in
11 Washington.

12 [Applause.]

13 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentle lady for yielding.

14 I will yield myself a minute. Commander Riley, I wrote
15 something down when you were giving your testimony, and it
16 was "love." And I think the best description of it I have
17 ever seen is what your wife, Yvonne, has done with you and
18 your family for the last many decades of your life. And I
19 know that no one could have a better partner than you have
20 in this life, and God has richly blessed you, even though
21 you have had a tremendous injury, with the family that you
22 have. And I am in awe of what she has done for you, and so,
23 Yvonne, I have not met you before, but my heart goes out to
24 you. And thank you for what you have done.

25 I want to finish by saying that I finished my military

1 career without any injuries. I got home perfectly intact,
2 no harm, no foul. And many of you--most of you, all of you
3 sitting in this room did not end up that way. I think it is
4 our responsibility in a bipartisan way to see you get the
5 benefits that you have earned, to make sure that the VA
6 delivers those benefits to you that you have earned--not
7 that someone has given you, but that you have earned. And I
8 personally want to thank each and every one of you from the
9 bottom of my heart for your service to this great Nation.

10 I ask now unanimous consent that each member be given 5
11 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks, and
12 without objection, so ordered.

13 The hearing is adjourned.

14 [Whereupon, at 3:55 p.m., the Committees were
15 adjourned.]