

1 JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE
2 MILITARY OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, THE RETIRED
3 ENLISTED ASSOCIATION, NON COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ASSOCIATION,
4 BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION, MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE
5 HEART, WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN
6 VETERANS OF AMERICA, AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

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THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2013

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United States Senate,

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United States House of Representatives,

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Committees on Veterans' Affairs,

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Washington, D.C.

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The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:01 a.m.,

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in Room G-50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Bernard

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Sanders, Chairman of the Senate committee, Hon. Jeff Miller,

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Chairman of the House committee, presiding.

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Senators Present: Senators Sanders, Blumenthal, Burr,

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Isakson, Boozman and Heller.

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Representatives Present: Miller, Benishek, Coffman,

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Wenstrup, Cook, Michaud, Takano, Negrete, McLeod, O'Rourke

21

and Walz.

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OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN SANDERS

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Chairman Sanders. Good morning. I want to thank

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everybody for being with us today, and a special thanks for

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all of our panelist representing extraordinarily important

1 veterans' organizations from throughout the country. So, we
2 thank you very much for your service to our country and we
3 look forward to hearing what you have to say.

4 We are going to begin with some opening remarks by the
5 Chairman of the Senate, which is me, Bernie Sanders of
6 Vermont, Veterans' Committee, and the Chairman of the House
7 Veterans' Committee, Jeff Miller and then we will hear from
8 ranking members and then we will go right to our panelists.

9 Your presence here today is about keeping us informed
10 about the strengths and weaknesses of programs which impact
11 veterans. We cannot do our job well, and I think the people
12 on the Committees in both the House and the Senate are
13 serious about trying to do their jobs well unless we hear
14 from you because you are on the ground, and you and the
15 people you represent understand what works well. You
16 understand what does not work well, and our job is to
17 strengthen the VA and to address the problems that your
18 membership faces every day.

19 So, we want to hear from you. We want this to be an
20 informal discussion. There is nothing to be nervous about.
21 We are on your side.

22 Let me just very briefly say that I think we all
23 recognize that the VA today is doing a lot of things very
24 well but they are doing something not as well as they
25 should, and our job is to strengthen the VA where they are

1 weak.

2 Now, one of the things that I am proud of, if you look
3 all over this country, and I can tell you this is certainly
4 true in the State of Vermont, people who go into VA health
5 care facilities, generally speaking, have a very high rate
6 of satisfaction.

7 In other words, when they do surveys all over America
8 and they say, well, how do you feel about the health care
9 you are getting, year after year VA ranks among the very
10 top; and one of the reasons for that is that we have great
11 staff all over this country who do their jobs not just as
12 work to be paid but often have a special sense of
13 responsibility to their brothers and sisters who are
14 veterans because many of them are veterans themselves.

15 So, can we improve the VA health care system?
16 Absolutely. It is an issue we are going to work on, but I
17 think we should recognize that in many ways the VA system is
18 doing a good job.

19 I have been impressed over the years about their
20 development of CBOCs, strengthening primary health care
21 which remains a very serious problem nationally for the
22 United States of America.

23 Now, let us talk about some of the issues out there
24 that we all know are problematic and that we have got to
25 address. I think at the top of my agenda is the issue of

1 claims backlog. Now, there is good news and bad news here.
2 Many people do not appreciate the good news.

3 The good news is that the VA is now processing
4 approximately a million claims a year, far, far more than
5 they used to. The other good news is that because of VA
6 decisions and the court actions, what the VA has said among
7 other things to Vietnam veterans, if you are exposed to
8 agent orange, we are going to open that door, and you can
9 walk in now and get claims that you otherwise could not get,
10 and hundreds of thousands of veterans did walk in that door
11 appropriately enough.

12 So, the good news is that processing a million claims a
13 year, far, far more than they used to. The bad news is they
14 are getting 1.2 million claims coming in. So, a backlog is
15 growing.

16 This is an issue, obviously, I feel very strongly on.
17 I know Congressman Miller feels very strongly on. We do not
18 want to see a backlog. We do not want to see veterans
19 having to wait months and months and months or years to get
20 their claims adjudicators.

21 So, this is an issue that we are going to be dealing
22 with in the Senate and we have a hearing that will be coming
23 out fairly shortly.

24 Second issue which is a tragedy hard almost to describe
25 is that we all know that the suicide rate for veterans is

1 higher than the general population. We know that many of
2 these suicides take place not just from younger returnees
3 from Iraq and Afghanistan but primarily from older veterans.

4 How do we deal with it, a complicated issue, but it is
5 unacceptable that the suicide rate for veterans is much
6 higher than the civilian population. It is an issue that we
7 have to address, and related to that issue is the very
8 serious crisis that we face right now from younger people
9 returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD and TBI.
10 Those are very, very serious issues and that is an issue
11 very high on my priority list in terms of addressing.

12 The third issue that I want to address, and we do not
13 talk enough about them, and I have experience in Vermont on
14 just this issue.

15 All of you are active in veterans' issues. That is
16 what you do. Some of you do it full-time. So, you know
17 about the benefits to which veterans are entitled.

18 My guess is there are millions of people out there who
19 have served our country honorably and bravely who do not
20 know the benefits that they are entitled to, and I think we
21 have got to do a better job in terms of outreach, explaining
22 to veterans what they are entitled to and bringing those,
23 not everybody wants to come into the VA system that is for
24 sure, but explaining veterans what they are entitled to and
25 bringing those people into the system who want to come into

1 the system.

2 The front page story today in the New York Times some
3 of you may have seen about rape in the military and what it
4 means to women who serve our country. Needless to say, that
5 is a horror, unacceptable, and we are going to work on it;
6 but we know now that one of the major changes in the
7 military is more and more women are actively involved, are
8 in the military.

9 They are going to be, as a result of the recent DOD
10 decision, going to be in combat; and we have to pay special
11 attention to the needs of women. We have a lot of catching
12 up to do in that area and I am proud that the VA has been
13 establishing womens' veterans' health care facilities all
14 over the country, but we want to pay attention to that.

15 Last two other issues that I want to touch on is the
16 issue of employment. I think everybody knows that we are in
17 the midst of a serious, serious recession, impacting
18 everybody. Real unemployment close to 14 percent.

19 For veterans, especially those returning from Iraq and
20 Afghanistan, it is even higher. That is wrong. People give
21 up their jobs, their livelihood. They go abroad. They
22 serve their country. They come back they cannot find a job.
23 We have passed some legislation but we have got to stayed
24 focused on that issue as well.

25 Last point that I would make is I am very concerned

1 about efforts on the part of a number of people in the
2 Congress and in the White House who want to move toward a
3 chained CPI which would cut back not only on benefits for
4 Social Security recipients but for disabled veterans also.

5 It is my view you do not balance the budget on the
6 backs of disabled vets. So, that is an issue we will also
7 be working on.

8 So, let me conclude by thanking all of you. We look
9 forward to hearing your testimony and now I am happy to
10 introduce the Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans'
11 Affairs, Jeff Miller.

12 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MILLER

13 Chairman Miller. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

14 Thank you everybody for coming here today. It is great
15 to be with you. I have a full written statement that I will
16 ask to be entered into the record so that we can move on
17 with the testimony.

18 Each of you here comes with a separate mission, but of
19 course, you also come with a unique mission and that is an
20 unyielding commitment to improving the lives of the veterans
21 in this country. So, we all on this Committee want to say
22 thank you for what you do, giving voice to the veteran
23 community here on Capitol Hill.

24 We did look at the testimony that you are going to be
25 presenting today and there is a universal truism throughout

1 all of your testimony that we know what needs to be done and
2 this Congress, both the House and the Senate, will work
3 together to make sure that we can make good things happen;
4 and hopefully, if there are some bad things out, there we
5 can help fix those too.

6 As the Senator has already said, our focus, you know,
7 in the House as well is going to be on access to mental
8 health care, certainly working on the backlogs claim that it
9 is out there, something else that Mike Michaud, our ranking
10 member, and I have introduced, you might want to write this
11 down. It is H.R. 813, Putting Veterans Funding First Act of
12 2013.

13 It will require Congress to fully fund the Department's
14 discretionary budget also one year ahead of schedule so that
15 we do not have these crises erupt at the very last minute
16 where folks do not know if they are going to get the funding
17 that they need.

18 Of course, this week it is certainly being illustrated
19 with sequester coming tomorrow. Even though it does not
20 affect the veteran community from the Department of
21 Veterans' Affairs standpoint, I will tell you that with the
22 House and the Senate worked hard for the last year to make
23 sure that the Administration agreed that the VA was exempt
24 from the sequester; and for that I am very, very grateful.

25 But certainly when it comes to budget uncertainty,

1 there is more that can be done to protect veterans and the
2 families; and we have taken what we consider on the House
3 side the first step to solve that particular problem.

4 So, I will say this. We will work together, the House
5 and the Senate, with the Veteran Service Organizations that
6 are here and that have also testified with us prior to this
7 and will be testifying afterwards. We will also work with
8 VA and the Secretary because it is a collaborative effort
9 that will come forward hopefully and solve many of the
10 issues that everybody faces today.

11 So, with that, I want to say thank you, Senator, for
12 hosting this today and I yield back.

13 [The prepared statement of Mr. Miller follows:]

14 / COMMITTEE INSERT

1 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

2 Richard Burr is the ranking member of the Senate

3 Veterans' Committee. Senator Burr.

4 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

5 Senator Burr. Mr. Chairman, thank you, and thank you
6 to our witnesses.

7 And, Mr. Chairman, welcome to your new role. I think
8 it is safe to say that Senator Sanders and I may differ on
9 what solutions might look like. Make no mistake about it.
10 We agree on what the goal is, and that is to fulfill the
11 promise that we made to veterans.

12 If, for many of you who are at the table, it is
13 frustrating for you to come back year after year and talk
14 about these same issues, let me share with you. It is
15 frustrating as hell for us to know with you what the issues
16 are, what the problems are, and not to have a willing
17 Federal partner to solve it.

18 You have heard the laundry list of things that we both
19 agree have to be fixed. What are most members here focused
20 to do? It is to try to move the VA into the 21st century.
21 It is to understand the realities that in some cases we are
22 dealing with a warrior from World War II and a warrior from
23 today's conflict and that their needs are different, their
24 expectations are certainly different, but we have got to
25 fulfill both.

1 We do not have a VA today that can do that quite
2 honestly. We have a cultural problem. We have got a
3 facilities problem. We have got a delivery system that does
4 not represent 21st century medicine.

5 This is not about owning the 60 percent of the
6 psychiatric space of providers. It is about having
7 providers that know how to treat the uniqueness of the
8 mental health needs of our veterans today.

9 I look forward to the input that you will share with us
10 today; but I also look forward on a continual basis to your
11 suggestions, to your experiences. I hope this is the last
12 year that we sit and talk about a claims backlog, but I got
13 to tell you, we are all dreaming if we think a software
14 program in 2015 is going to solve this. A million claims in
15 backlog is magically going to go away because of an IT
16 program?

17 It is time for us to focus on how we start to fix it
18 now and not look down the road and take a wish, a dream, and
19 a hope and believe that that is going to solve a problem
20 that directly impacts the lives of veterans all across this
21 country.

22 The list is pretty long as you all well know. I hope
23 we will focused on solutions and not just restating what the
24 problem is as we go through the balance of this year.

25 Thank you for being here. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Chairman Sanders. Thank you, Senator Burr.

2 Mike Michaud is the ranking member of the House
3 Veterans' Committee. Congressman Michaud.

4 OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. MICHAUD

5 Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Senator, for having
6 us here this morning.

7 Good morning. I would like to welcome the leadership
8 and members of the different Veteran Service Organizations
9 attending today this joint hearing. It is great to see so
10 many important organizations here today. I look forward to
11 hearing the priorities that are set forward in your
12 testimony.

13 Our Nation as a sacred trust with all veterans, a
14 national promise to care for and stand up for those who have
15 served and sacrificed. The VSOs represented here today has
16 helped to ensure that the most important issues facing
17 American veterans remain at the national stage. I
18 appreciate all that you are doing in that regard. You
19 fulfill a vital role in the community of support America
20 provides its national heroes.

21 As you know, the Administration has delayed the release
22 of the fiscal year 2014 budget proposal. While VA programs
23 are spared from efforts of sequestration, that does not mean
24 that veterans will be left unaffected in their capacity as
25 citizens.

1 State and local government services, services on which
2 our veterans who rely on, will come under additional strain.
3 In many ways, the VA is facing unprecedented challenges as
4 it continues to serve the veterans of the Second World War,
5 Korea, Vietnam, as well as those that just returned, are
6 returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

7 Together we must work to ensure that everyone who has
8 stepped up to serve this Nation is served by this Nation.
9 No one should be falling through the cracks.

10 So, I look forward to your testimony today and I want
11 to thank you once again for your continuous service in
12 providing the much-needed advocacy for our veterans and our
13 families so that we can do a better job in providing for
14 them.

15 So, thank you very much and I yield back, Mr. Chairman.
16 Chairman Sanders. Congressman Michaud, thank you very
17 much.

18 Now, we are going to hear from our panelists. In order
19 for us to have a good give and take discussion and to ask
20 you questions, I would very much appreciate if people will
21 keep their testimony to five minutes.

22 We are going to begin with Tom Tarantino. Mr.
23 Tarantino is the Chief Policy Officer for the Iraq and
24 Afghanistan Veterans of America.

25 Mr. Tarantino, thanks for much of being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF TOM TARANTINO, DEPUTY POLICY OFFICER,
2 IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA

3 Mr. Tarantino. Thank you, senator.

4 Chairman Sanders, Chairman Miller, Ranking Members Burr
5 and Michaud, members of both Committees, on behalf of Iraq
6 and Afghanistan Veterans of America's over 200,000 members
7 and supporters, I want to thank you for inviting me to
8 present IAVA's legislative priorities for 2013.

9 IAVA is the country's first and largest nonprofit,
10 nonpartisan organization for veterans of the wars in Iraq
11 and Afghanistan. Founded in 2004, our mission is simple.
12 It is to improve the lives of veterans and their families.

13 My name is Tom Tarantino and I am the Chief Policy
14 Officer for IAVA. I proudly served ten years in the Army.
15 Throughout those ten years, my most important duty was to
16 take care of other soldiers. And, although my uniform is
17 now a suit and tie, I am proud to work with this Congress to
18 have the backs of America's service members and veterans,
19 and military families.

20 Over the past several years, Congress has made caring
21 for service members, veterans, and families a priority; and
22 together Congress, the White House and my colleagues here in
23 the VSO community have redefined what has meant to have our
24 backs. For this, we sincerely thank you.

25 However, our work is not done. IAVA's 2013 policy

1 agenda is a blueprint for addressing all of the issues
2 facing new veterans head on. We are ready to work with you
3 to fundamentally change the way America supports its
4 veterans and to build the new greatest generation.

5 This year we believe Congress must focus on the
6 following priorities: break the VA claims backlog, end
7 veteran suicide, and improve the post 9/11 GI Bill.

8 Too many veterans are stuck in a growing VA backlog.
9 According to the VA's own estimates, 70 percent of claims
10 are backlogged by more than 125 days. Regionally, the
11 problem is worse with claims at the Oakland and Baltimore
12 offices above of 80 percent.

13 These long wait times have a devastating impact on
14 veterans and their families, and we understand the problem
15 is complex, and there is no magic bullet that is going to
16 solve this crisis.

17 Although we are cautiously optimistic that reforms
18 coming online at the VA should help, it is clear that this
19 is just a problem that the VA is not capable of solving on
20 their own.

21 We need leadership at all levels of government to call
22 upon every available resource to finally break this backlog.
23 This includes ensuring that the entire VA, not just VA
24 health care, is funded fully and one year in advance. This
25 will ensure that reforms underway and in the pipeline will

1 not fall prey to politics that has surrounded the budgetary
2 process.

3 The veteran suicide rate is a national crisis.
4 According to a recent report by the VA, approximately 22
5 veterans a day are taking their own lives. Unfortunately,
6 IAVA fears that these numbers might be lower as many states
7 do not report data to the VA.

8 One veteran or service member life lost to suicide is
9 one too many, and our country must swiftly and boldly
10 address the psychological wounds of war.

11 First and foremost, we must combat the stigma
12 surrounding mental health injuries. Secondly, the VA must
13 seek partnerships with nonprofit, military and local and
14 even private mental health services to fill the gaps for
15 veterans and their families.

16 Additionally, IAVA recommends that VA and DOD partner
17 with experts in the private and nonprofit sectors to develop
18 a robust and aggressive outreach campaign. This campaign
19 should focus on directing veterans to services such as Vet
20 Centers, local, private and community and state health
21 services and should be integrated into local municipal
22 campaigns such as 311 services. It should reflect the best
23 practices and expertise of experts in both the mental health
24 and advertising fields.

25 Today, IAVA in a partnership with Cisco Systems is

1 actually launching a website called Career Pathfinder. In
2 addition to providing innovative ways for veterans to match
3 their military experience to civilian jobs, it also connects
4 veterans with other services they need like local mental
5 health resources, things to continue their successful
6 transition. This is just one example of how the private,
7 nonprofit sectors can develop creative ways to help the VA
8 connect veterans to services.

9 The Post-9/11 GI Bill is the most significant piece of
10 veterans' legislation in a generation. It will enable
11 millions of veterans and families to transition home,
12 retrain for a new career and provide an education that will
13 build the new greatest generation.

14 It was a landmark achievement. However, our work is
15 not done. Student veterans still face significant
16 challenges when attending a public college or university
17 outside their state of residence. These out-of-state
18 students are charged a higher tuition rate by their college,
19 but the Post-9/11 GI Bill only compensates for the lower in-
20 state tuition rate.

21 These out-of-state students attending public schools
22 are not only being charged more for their education, but
23 they may also often receive fewer benefits than students
24 attending private institutions.

25 This problem has caused many students to accrue

1 significant amounts of debt or simply delay their education.
2 No veteran should have to wait to start his or her education
3 because of subjective state requirements for residency.

4 With many veterans unable to establish legal residency
5 in any state due to multiple deployments and military moves
6 to posts around the world, it is time that all states follow
7 the example of the 14 who already simply count veterans as
8 in-state residents when they go to school. Congress has to
9 fix this issue in 2013.

10 Caring for the men and women who defend freedom is a
11 solemn responsibility that belongs to lawmakers, business
12 leaders, and citizens alike. Our warriors fight long after
13 the war is over, and we must continue to fight for them.

14 Thank you for your time and attention.

15 [The prepared statement of Mr. Tarantino follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Mr. Tarantino, thank you very much.

2 Our next finalist is a Bruce McKenty. Mr. McKenty is
3 the National Commander of the Military Order of the Purple
4 Heart.

5 Mr. McKenty, thanks for being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF BRUCE G. MCKENTY, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
2 MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

3 Mr. McKenty. Thank you, Senator.

4 Chairman Sanders, Chairman Miller, Ranking Members, Mr.
5 Burr and Mr. Michaud, members of the Committees, thank you
6 for your efforts in the 112th Congress in support of our
7 veterans.

8 I am Bruce McKenty, National Commander of the Military
9 Order of the Purple Heart. It is an honor and privilege to
10 appear before this distinguished body on behalf of the
11 Military Order of the Purple Heart.

12 Our priorities for the 113th Congress are traumatic
13 brain injury. TBI is the signature wound of Iraq and
14 Afghanistan. The care that is provided to those that have
15 served be viewed as what it is the continued cost of war.
16 We urge Congress to continue to ensure that DOD and VA have
17 the dedicated providers and the necessary resources to
18 continue to perform research and provide the appropriate
19 medical and mental health services that those suffering from
20 TBI deserve.

21 Post Traumatic Stress. Many military members and
22 veterans are suffering with PTS to some degree, especially
23 after multiple deployments in a combat zone.

24 PTS not only affects the military member and veteran,
25 but it also affects the families as well. It is one of the

1 significant contributing factors to suicide, homelessness,
2 substance abuse, and acts of violence, to include domestic
3 violence and sexual assaults.

4 MOPH urges Congress to provide necessary funding to
5 ensure that additional specialists are available at DOD and
6 VA facilities to provide treatment to our veterans suffering
7 from PTS.

8 VA claims. Currently, the VA is backlogged at more
9 than 886,000 claims. MOPH is concerned that, given the
10 large numbers of military members returning from ongoing
11 conflicts, the load on the VA Claims' System will only
12 increase. MOPH urges Congress to ensure that VA has
13 sufficient funding to continue to update its IT systems and
14 to have qualified professionals to process these claims in a
15 timely manner.

16 Survivor benefit program and the dependent indemnity
17 compensation offset. The time is right for all members of
18 Congress to recognize that the dollar for dollar offset of
19 SBP DIC is wrong.

20 The military member paid for SBP; it was an insurance
21 policy to provide for the surviving spouse. DIC is a VA
22 benefit paid when a military retiree dies of a service-
23 connected injury or a disability.

24 Legislation has been introduced into this session of
25 Congress, H.R. 32, in the Military Surviving Spouse Equity

1 Act, which MOPH supports and urges Congress to support
2 also.

3 Joint Prisoners Of War, Missing In Action Accounting
4 Command. Although this issue does not come under the
5 purview of your Committees, MOPH addresses it to you as
6 members of Congress.

7 MOPH has an unwavering commitment to obtain the fullest
8 possible accounting of all Americans still listed as missing
9 in action or unaccounted for. Guaranteeing the return of
10 our fallen warriors from the many battlefields is a sacred
11 of missions. The fulfillment of this sacred mission is
12 important, not only to the families who seek closure, but to
13 our entire country.

14 MOPH urges Congress to provide full funding for JPAC
15 for as many years as it takes to bring them all home.

16 VA health care. Congress must ensure that there is
17 adequate funding to care for those veterans who are enrolled
18 in the VHA system to support the increasing numbers of
19 returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans requiring medical
20 attention.

21 The health care of America's veterans should not be
22 subject to the provisions of the Balanced Budget and
23 Emergency Deficit Control Act. This country sends our men
24 and women to war and we must recognize our responsibility to
25 care for them when they return.

1 Concurrent receipt. MOPH believes MOPH believes that
2 all military retirees, regardless of VA disability ratings,
3 should be authorized to receive both their earned military
4 retirement and their VA compensation, which is a benefit
5 that they receive for a disability as a result of their
6 military service.

7 Civilian retirees are not so penalized. They receive
8 both retirement pay and VA compensation. Please correct
9 this in equity. MOPH urges support of H.R. 303 and H.R.
10 333.

11 Education. Chairman Miller, MOPH is in total support
12 of the legislation you have provided in H.R. 357, GI Bill
13 Tuition Fairness Act of 2013. We share your opinion that
14 veterans who are attending public institutions of higher
15 education and that are approved for VA educational
16 assistance programs should be charged at the in-state
17 tuition rate.

18 Stolen valor. The First Amendment, which guarantees
19 free speech, is a very important article in the
20 Constitution. However, those who choose to hide behind this
21 Amendment to deceitfully claim military service, awards and
22 decorations that they did not either earn do not deserve any
23 protection under this Amendment. It is nothing short of
24 identify theft.

25 MOPH fully supports S. 210 and H.R. 258, the Stolen

1 Valor Act of 2013, and urges Congress to move this
2 legislation forward.

3 Senator, this concludes my brief overview of my written
4 testimony.

5 [The prepared statement of Mr. McKenty follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Mr. McKenty, thank you so much for
2 your testimony.

3 Our next finalist is Sam Huhn. Mr. Huhn is the
4 National President of the Blinded Veterans Association.

5 Mr. Huhn, thanks very much for being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF SAM HUHN, NATIONAL PRESIDENT, BLINDED
2 VETERANS ASSOCIATION

3 Mr. Huhn. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member
4 Senator Burr, Congressman Miller and Congressman Michaud.
5 Thank you.

6 I am Sam Huhn. I am the National President of the
7 Blinded Veterans Association. We are 68 years advocating
8 for Blinded Veterans, and our first priority this term is
9 this beneficiary travel bill that passed the House the last
10 two sessions, got into the Senate as Bill 1755 and it kind
11 of died at the end of the year.

12 We would hoped that this bill would get resurrected
13 again this year. What it does, it provides the travel cost
14 for Blinded Veterans who are low income and non-service-
15 connected to go to blind rehabilitation centers.

16 Some of them come very long distance, some from Samoa,
17 Hawaiian Islands going to Palo Alto. Others from Alaska and
18 Montana and they go up to American Lake, the State of
19 Washington. And either New England, northern New England
20 states, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and they have to go to
21 West Haven. No easy way to get there except by some sort
22 of, you know, flying.

23 The VA transportation said they can absorb the cost.
24 All we need is the Congress to change the law for
25 beneficiary travel to permit these low income non-service-

1 connected veterans to have beneficiary travel in paragraph
2 11-1.1.1 of the veterans' benefits.

3 Our second priority, and this goes on now since 2008,
4 the DOD appropriation for the Vision Center of Excellence
5 and the Hearing Center of Excellence and Limb Restoration
6 Center of Excellence.

7 And it is really crazy because Secretary Gates,
8 Secretary Panetta put this down as one of their top
9 priorities and no money was never allocated until last year
10 and got a pittance of \$3,200,000 for research into traumatic
11 vision loss, an absolute smack in the face to the men and
12 women who we sent to war in Afghanistan and Iraq and come
13 back with traumatic brain injury which will affect their
14 eyesight and eventual loss of vision.

15 Last week they came up with some way to intercept some
16 of this loss and so they could restore some of their vision.
17 It can be done but it is going to take a little money and
18 three million bucks ain't gone and do it.

19 So, I cannot be more specific about it than that.
20 These guys are going to go blind and I know a lot of
21 congresspeople may have some hearing loss but there are
22 certainly none that are blind.

23 It is no day in the park especially for these young
24 kids coming back from a war that we sent them to. So, I
25 would hope that you guys would get with your colleagues on

1 the Armed Services Committee and see if we could get more
2 money for this traumatic vision loss research.

3 We can put hundreds of millions of bucks out for cancer
4 research but not nothing for these guys who lose their
5 eyesight due to IEDs over there in Afghanistan and Iraq.

6 When you get the VA up here for their hearings, I would
7 like to see you hold their feet to the fire on the 508
8 compliance of the American Disabilities Act. That has to do
9 with the information technology which keeps growing and
10 growing and growing and at the same time is not accessible
11 to the blind.

12 They are trying their best over there. They have
13 increased the number of people in the compliance area and
14 the amount of funding they get. So, I think they are doing
15 it but we have got to make sure that they do not quit on us
16 and make sure because one of the problems is we have
17 national service officers out there in our field offices
18 trying to do claims and a lot of this stuff like e-health
19 and stuff like that that they cannot access on the computers
20 and we need them to have that access.

21 So, I will conclude. I guess my five minutes is not up
22 yet. Is it? No. I cannot see the light but I have a
23 couple of seconds. I just want to tell you one other thing
24 I hear rumors that you guys want to pay \$35,000 for a guide
25 dog for veterans.

1 I have been around for a long time. I am 74 years old,
2 and I know a lot of blind people who have dogs, blind
3 veterans who have dogs. They have never ever paid a penny
4 for these dogs. People that tell you they cannot get dogs
5 because they do not have the money, they are not telling the
6 truth.

7 There is no reason for this government to spend \$35,000
8 for a guide dog when they are absolutely free, provided by
9 nonprofit organizations, Lions Clubs and other things.

10 Anyhow, I would like to conclude by testimony. Thank
11 you very much for inviting me here and God bless you all.

12 [The prepared statement of Mr. Huhn follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Mr. Huhn, thank you very much for
2 your testimony.

3 Our next finalist is Colonel Bob Norton, the Deputy
4 Director of Government Relations the Military Officers
5 Association of America.

6 Colonel Norton, thanks very much for being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF ROBERT F. NORTON, COLONEL, USA, RET.,
2 DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, MILITARY
3 OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

4 Colonel Norton. You, Mr. Chairman, Chairman Miller,
5 Ranking Member Burr, Ranking Member Michaud, members of the
6 Committees. I have had the honor to testify on behalf of
7 our 380,000 members for the past 16 years.

8 During that span, the leadership and support from the
9 Committees and Congress for our Nation's veterans has been
10 most gratifying and we sincerely appreciate it.

11 I would like to focus on three issues from my prepared
12 statement, mental health care and suicide prevention,
13 veterans employment and readjustment, and GI Bill programs.

14 First, mental health services and suicide prevention.
15 The VA has taken important steps to respond to the
16 heartbreaking crisis of suicides among veterans. They have
17 hired almost 1600 more mental health care providers among
18 other actions that have been taken. But frankly, much more
19 needs to be done.

20 A crisis of this magnitude requires a full-court press
21 at all levels in the government working with states and
22 community providers. Starting at the policy level, MOAA
23 recommends the Committees review and adopt for the VA the
24 mental health care access and resilience framework
25 provisions adopted in this year's National Defense

1 Authorization Act.

2 Senator Murray sponsored the original bill in the last
3 session and we recommend that the Committees take that up on
4 the VA side as well.

5 We also recommend that the Committees hold oversight
6 hearings on how the government is doing to implement the
7 Executive Order on improving access to mental health care
8 services for our veterans and their families.

9 The Executive Order directs the VA to expand community
10 partnerships and create 15 pilot programs to ensure outside
11 care is integrated into VA programs for our veterans, to
12 build a national research action plan and rapidly higher
13 even more qualified counselors among other objectives.

14 The second topic is veterans' employment and
15 readjustment. MOAA is very grateful for the Committees
16 passage of about to VOW to Hire Heroes Act, which is
17 beginning to make a difference for many veterans struggling
18 to gain meaningful civilian careers.

19 We must keep the momentum going on the VOW Act. The
20 deadlines set in the law need to be expanded for at least a
21 few years in order for veterans to realize the full
22 potential of these programs.

23 MOAA also recommends that the Veterans' Retraining
24 Assistance Program, VRAP, be opened up to four-year colleges
25 and universities that offer licensing and certification

1 training and that participating veterans be allowed to
2 extend past one year if their training goal requires that in
3 order to complete the training for a license or a skill
4 certification they must go past that one-year period.

5 We also recommend the Committees vigorously oversee the
6 roll out of the TAP redesign to ensure that service members
7 are getting meaningful and effective transition support.

8 The third area is GI Bill programs. MOAA strongly
9 supports, Mr. Chairman, your legislation to establish in-
10 state tuition rates for all veterans. Our warriors fought
11 for these United States, not any one state and they should
12 be able to attend any public college or university at in-
13 state tuition rates.

14 We also recommend the Committees review progress in
15 implementing the GI Bill consumer education transparency and
16 outcome feedback for veterans under the new Public Law 112-
17 249. It is a mouthful. It is Transparency of Education
18 Opportunities for Veterans Act that the Committees and
19 Congress passed last year.

20 MOAA recommends the Committees support rapid expansion
21 of the Vet Success Program on campus which is now fielded at
22 only 32 colleges. The VA can be a strong partner with
23 student veterans in schools by increasing its presence on
24 campus.

25 Finally, the surviving spouses of those who gave their

1 last full measure in Afghanistan or Iraq have been left
2 behind on the new GI Bill. They get no housing allowance or
3 book stipend for college attendance and the maximum rate
4 they can get for schooling is \$987 per month, hardly enough
5 to attend college these days much less raise a family.

6 Their children get the new G.I. Bill under the Fry
7 Scholarships and we believe strongly that surviving spouses
8 should have access to the same benefits as their kids.
9 After all, they will need good-paying jobs to prepare their
10 children to use the new G.I. Bill.

11 I thank you again for the opportunity to present our
12 recommendations to the Committees and look forward to your
13 questions.

14 [The prepared statement of Colonel Norton follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Colonel Norton, thank you very much
2 for your testimony.

3 Our next panelist is Sergeant Major H. Gene Overstreet,
4 who is the President of the Non Commissioned Officers
5 Association.

6 Sergeant Major, thanks for being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF H. GENE OVERSTREET, SERGEANT MAJOR,
2 USMC, RET., PRESIDENT, NON COMMISSIONED OFFICERS
3 ASSOCIATION

4 Sergeant Major Overstreet. Thank you, sir.

5 Chairman Sanders, Chairman Miller, Ranking Members Mr.
6 Burr and Mr. Michaud, and greeting to all the members of the
7 Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

8 The Non Commissioned Officers Association is pleased to
9 have the opportunity to present the association's
10 legislative priorities for 2013.

11 Chairman Sanders, you have inherited a great legacy of
12 advocacy to American veterans. Today we would also like to
13 publicly thank the former chairman, Patty Murray for her
14 past leadership as the Chairman of the Senate Committee. It
15 pleases us to see that she still serves on this Committee.
16 Most people serve on here and go away. It is great that she
17 continues to serve.

18 NCOA also recognizes the former ranking member of the
19 House Veterans' Committee and member of Congress for his
20 service and support of American veterans.

21 Your Committees have always listened to the concerns of
22 American veterans and the Veteran Service Organizations.
23 Not only have you listened to us, you have translated those
24 concerns and actions into effective needs of the veterans.
25 You might say you have become the veterans first responders,

1 and we thank you for that.

2 By immediately scheduling oversight hearings provides
3 the leadership where those concerns are and you do that for
4 veterans and that does not go unnoticed during and
5 appreciated. We thank you and we say well done.

6 You have accomplished a lot in this past year; but like
7 you said, Mr. Chairman, there is a lot left to be done. I
8 suspect if I took everyone's agenda and passed it down line
9 here, we all have the same agenda and probably have
10 basically the same priorities. But, I would like to mention
11 a couple of other things, if I may.

12 First of all, we certainly support and endorse the
13 expressed budget concerns addressed by everyone for the
14 Independent Budget and for the advanced budget for 2015.

15 Adequate funding is, as you know, going to be the key
16 for taking care of our veterans and all of these issues and
17 agendas that we are looking at.

18 Just to mention a couple of things here, we would like
19 to see that fully integrated implementation of veterans
20 benefit management, the VBM system, in securing the goals of
21 the VA to adjudicate those claims in 125 days. We think
22 that system is going to greatly help that and lower the rate
23 of mistakes that we have out there. We would like to see
24 that 89 percent completion within those 125 days.

25 Like you said, Mr. Chairman, we also would like to see

1 timely access to all veterans even in rural areas, and we
2 think that they should have the same menu as everyone else
3 to a full service of all the veteran issues there as well.

4 I would like to point out a couple of things here. We
5 talked about claim delay. I think there is, I am going to
6 make a suggestion here that there are a couple of things
7 that we can do in claims delay.

8 When you have a young, and in my written statement to
9 you, you will see a couple of examples that we have given
10 there. For example, if we have a young soldier, he has got
11 hit with an IED. His legs are blown off or he has got
12 spinal injury, and we have a couple of those examples in our
13 written statement.

14 And when we know we are surveying him to where he has
15 gone through the entire system, he has gone through the
16 military, he has gone through the VA system, and he is going
17 out, and we are looking at that backlog, and we are looking
18 at those other things, we get calls almost repeatedly from
19 communities and churches and civic leaders out there about
20 what we are doing to take care of these young men.

21 For example, they are out there. They are living in
22 the community now, and actually the churches and communities
23 are ponying up the money for their utilities and ponying up
24 money for various things like that.

25 If we see a young man or a young lady is rolling out of

1 the system, they have no legs. We know they are going to
2 get a certain amount of care, maybe we should say, okay, if
3 we think he is going to get 50 percent maybe we should start
4 giving him 30 percent as they go out the door so when they
5 get there they are getting something.

6 We know that we can do just that. We can catch that up
7 later on. So, you know, maybe we should look forward to
8 something like that and do that.

9 On another note there, I would like to see some parity
10 between Federal services across the board. For example, in
11 other Federal survivor programs, they get 55 percent of the
12 base pay. We give ours 43 percent. It did not seem quite
13 right.

14 The same thing when they get married. We hold ours to
15 57 years old. They can get married at 55 years old. It
16 just does not make sense.

17 There are too many things and, like I said, I am at my
18 time limit here. But one more point that I would like to
19 make to you, Mr. Chairman, and I know it is important that
20 we transition these young men and women out of there and we
21 get them jobs. The Non Commissioned Officers Association
22 held 47 job fairs last year and this year we are holding
23 more than that in all the major military installations
24 around the countryside to make sure that our servicemen and
25 women make that smooth transition.

1 Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you
2 this morning. I look forward to your questions, sir.

3 [The prepared statement of Sergeant Major Overstreet
4 follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Sergeant Major, thanks very much for
2 your testimony.

3 Our next panelist is Richard Delaney, the National
4 President of the Retired Enlisted Association.

5 Mr. Delaney, thanks for being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF RICHARD J. DELANEY, NATIONAL
2 PRESIDENT, THE RETIRED ENLISTED ASSOCIATION

3 Mr. Delaney. Mr. Chairman, thank you.

4 Chairmen Sanders and Miller and Ranking Members Burr
5 and Michaud and members of both Committees, good morning.

6 It is an honor to speak today about the concerns and
7 goals of TREA's members and indeed of all enlisted members
8 and their families and survivors. I ask that my full
9 written testimony be made part of the record.

10 I am Richard Delaney, the President of The Retired
11 Enlisted Association. It is my honor to hold this office
12 this year as TREA celebrates its 50th anniversary. We were
13 founded to give a voice to the concerns of the men and women
14 who have served in America's enlisted ranks, and there is no
15 more urgent time than now to hear these concerns.

16 These are difficult times. The VA is facing both new
17 and growing challenges that must be successfully handled if
18 our country is to keep its commitments to the men and women
19 who have served us so well.

20 The vast majority of our military personnel in
21 Afghanistan will return by the end of 2014, and clearly the
22 Administration is planning further downsizing of the
23 military. This means that the VA's job and obligations are
24 going to get larger. It is crucial that wise, long-term
25 plans are created and implemented to deal with these

1 approaching duties.

2 Unfortunately, our testimony today was given prior to
3 the release of the Administration's proposed budget.

4 Therefore, we respectfully request that we be allowed to
5 submit to your Committees additional written thoughts and
6 suggestions after we see the proposals in the fiscal year
7 2014 budget.

8 Still there are several areas that we hope to be worked
9 on this year. First, the VA must continue to improve the
10 speed and accuracy of its adjudication process. We have
11 known for years the VA has been working to improve both
12 aspects of the system, and we are grateful for their
13 dedication.

14 However, the problems have not been solved. In fact,
15 they continue to grow worse. On their own website, VA shows
16 that there are presently over two million claims awaiting
17 adjudication.

18 A second issue of great concern is the abrupt end three
19 weeks ago of the effort to create a single lifetime
20 electronic health care record that would follow a service
21 member from enlistment throughout his or her life.

22 We know that the House VA Committee held a hearing
23 yesterday on this issue, and you are clearly as concerned as
24 we are in the changes. So, please do not let up your
25 efforts.

1 A single electronic health care records system would
2 make medical treatments easier and more successful. It
3 would make adjudication of claims easier. It would help us
4 recognize and trace war-time injuries and new illnesses
5 quickly and it could save countless hours of work keeping,
6 finding, and distributing data.

7 Third, while the VA must adapt to a surge of young
8 veterans coming to it in greater numbers than in the past, a
9 dramatic change in the demographics of military personnel
10 will result in an increase of women veterans seeking VA
11 services.

12 Women veterans clearly have many different needs than
13 their male counterparts. These are not only health care
14 need but also needs child care since the majority of new
15 women veterans are also mothers.

16 They are less likely to self-report their veteran
17 status. So, clearly new methods of outreach are needed when
18 trying to reach women. It is crucial that the VA continue
19 to focus on understanding their fastest growing demographic
20 and serving their needs.

21 Fourth, the Nation is rightfully worried by the
22 dramatic increase in the number of veteran suicides. A new
23 VA report showed that the number of veterans committing
24 suicide had grown to 22 a day in 2010. This obviously is
25 unacceptable.

1 But, while the VA is working to help new veterans re-
2 entering the civilian world with any mental health issues
3 that they may be experiencing, we must not forget about
4 older veterans.

5 The VA's two-year study found that over 69 percent of
6 all veterans committing suicide are over the age of 50.
7 Indeed, starting at age 50, the suicide rate of veterans
8 first surpasses that of the US population in general.

9 These veterans' problems are not the same as those
10 recently returning from war zones. The VA must study and
11 help both groups with their different problems.

12 Fifth, a special thank you for the work that you, your
13 staffs, the staffs of the VA and the DOD do and all the VSOs
14 and how they are focused on how we can help veterans find
15 jobs and careers and start businesses so they can reap the
16 joys and benefits of the Nation they have sacrificed so much
17 to protect. These efforts must continue.

18 Sixth, among veterans bills that I have been introduced
19 so far this year, we urge passage of House Resolution 679,
20 Honor American's Guard and Reserve Retirees Act. This
21 bipartisan bill would grant recognition as veterans of the
22 armed forces of the United States to members of the Guard
23 and Reserve who have served a career of 20 years or more but
24 were never, through no fault of their own, called to active
25 duty long enough to be recognized as veterans.

1 This is a no-costs bill. Individuals covered by this
2 bill are already military retirees. They receive military
3 retiree benefits and a number of veterans benefits. Yet
4 though they receive the veterans benefit, our government
5 does not recognize them as veterans.

6 The House of Representatives passed this legislation in
7 each of the past two years and we urge passage again this
8 year by the House, and also urge the Senate to also adopt
9 it.

10 Expanding on a quote by Abraham Lincoln, we cannot
11 escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today.
12 Those are wise words as you consider the responsibility of
13 our Nation that we have to take care of our veterans in
14 these challenging times. Again, thank you for your
15 attention. I look forward to trying to answer any questions
16 you may have.

17 [The prepared statement of Mr. Delaney follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Mr. Delaney, thank you very much for
2 your testimony.

3 Our next panelist is Charles Susino, National Commander
4 of American Ex-Prisoners of War.

5 Mr. Susino, thanks for being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF CHARLES SUSINO, NATIONAL COMMANDER,
2 AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

3 Mr. Susino. Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of
4 the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. House
5 Chairman Jeff Miller and Ranking Member Michael Michaud,
6 Senate Chairman Bernie Sanders and Ranking Member Richard
7 Burr, I applaud your efforts as you navigate your Committees
8 through the
9 113th Congress during these challenging times.

10 Over the years our organization has watched closely
11 your Committees grapple with hard
12 decisions aiming to provide the needs for America's
13 veterans, their families, and their survivors. Thank you
14 for your tireless work, but, further work lies ahead.

15 Number one, we need your commitment to hold a hard line
16 as Washington looks to solve its budget problems. The
17 solution does not lie with the men and women who have
18 defended our country. Since the overall budget is large,
19 the White House may be tempted to reduce veterans' benefits.
20 This would be unconscionable.

21 Two, timely processing of disability benefits. We have
22 previously discussed constructive ideas at this meeting.
23 However, despite best efforts by the VA staff, the
24 processing continues to take an extended period of time. We
25 recognize there has been an increase in filings with

1 soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan. However, an
2 ever increasing wait is not fair.

3 Is the problem our approach to processing or limited
4 resources of the VA administration? It needs to be a
5 priority to examine the problem, establish a solution, and
6 implement.

7 Three, health benefits for veterans. With the ongoing
8 conflict in the Iraq and Afghanistan, we need to stay ahead
9 of the demand for health services for our returning
10 soldiers. Health care professionals must be provided to
11 maintain the high level of service. Critical to that
12 objective is those incremental resources must be there in a
13 timely manner.

14 Health care. A significant change was made in health-
15 care eligibility in 1986. Congress mandated VA health care
16 for veterans with service-connected disabilities as well as
17 other special groups of veterans, such as former prisoners
18 of war, veterans exposed to herbicides and ionizing
19 radiation and veterans of World War I.

20 We believe it is timely to expand the special groups to
21 include the World War II veterans, Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf
22 War veterans. While we recognize this is a complex issue
23 since it would add tens of thousands of new veterans to the
24 existing VA facilities and potentially overwhelm a system
25 whose primary requirement is treating service-related

1 injuries, we believe Congress should examine ways to
2 accomplish this objective in an effective manner. In
3 addition, please remember those warriors serving our country
4 with tours in the Middle East as well.

5 The American Ex-Prisoners of War are proud supporters
6 of The Independent Budget. The fiscal year 2013 edition
7 represents the 26th consecutive year that our partnership of
8 Veteran Service Organizations has joined together to produce
9 a comprehensive budget document that highlights the needs of
10 every generation of veterans. During that time, The
11 Independent Budget has improved significantly while
12 gaining much more respect and recognition.

13 I want to thank the 112th Congress for passing the
14 National Defense Authorization Act and the Veterans
15 Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act. We appreciate
16 your efforts on behalf of veterans and our military.

17 Although we were very disappointed the previous
18 Congress could not agree on the Stolen Valor Act, H.R. 258,
19 we thank this new Congress for reintroducing this bill to
20 protect the honor and value of the hard earned military
21 medals. We do, however, question the omission of the United
22 States Army Air Corps Air Medal from the
23 listing of combat medals.

24 We are also appreciative of your efforts on behalf of
25 veterans with the introductions of new Bills in 2013, H.R.

1 153, H.R. 241, H.R. 369. We give a special attention to
2 H.R. 241.

3 Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear
4 before you and on behalf of the American Ex-Prisoners of War
5 to share our input to the 113th Congress. God Bless Our
6 Troops. God Bless America. And, remember.

7 [The prepared statement of Mr. Susino follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Mr. Susino, thank you very much for
2 your testimony.

3 Our next witness is Dawn Halfaker who is the President
4 of the Board of Directors for the Wounded Warrior Project.

5 Ms. Halfaker, thanks very much for being with us.

1 STATEMENT OF DAWN HALFAKER, PRESIDENT, WOUNDED
2 WARRIOR PROJECT

3 Ms. Halfaker. Thank you, sir. Chairman Sanders and
4 Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Michaud, and Members of the
5 Committees, thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project
6 to discuss our 2013 policy priorities at this joint session.

7 As the President of Board of Directors, a woman veteran
8 and a Wounded Warrior, I am honored to be here today to
9 advocate on the half of the estimated 400,000 warriors who,
10 like me, have served and sacrificed proudly and continue to
11 fight through the challenges of readjustment and
12 reintegration every day.

13 As you know, our policy priorities are shaped by our
14 daily interactions with Wounded Warriors who take part in
15 one or more of our 18 independent programs focused on
16 readjustment in mind and body and economic empowerment.

17 Additionally, we survey our warriors annually to
18 understand their needs and concerns and to constantly
19 measure the effectiveness of our efforts. To that end,
20 Wounded Warrior Project remains focused on areas where
21 progress has been slow, where gaps and barriers remain and
22 where there is still work to be done.

23 We are heartened by the knowledge that the Committees
24 are partners in this effort and recognize the substantial
25 record of accomplishment of both the Senate and House

1 Veterans' Affairs Committees in this last year.

2 In addition to the vital program oversight you
3 provided, you enacted in an important new law aimed at
4 improving both mental health care and long-term
5 rehabilitative care for veterans with traumatic brain
6 injury.

7 Despite these efforts, the work is far from done.
8 Further steps must be taken to help wounded warriors not
9 simply to survive but thrive as they readjust and transition
10 to civilian life.

11 While we acknowledge the passage of important
12 legislation to improve care of both TBI and mental health
13 conditions, we know it will be a struggle to get the VA to
14 fully implement these laws.

15 This is not new. We saw this after Congress passed
16 TSGLI a few years ago and even more recently the caregiver
17 law. If additional evidence is needed I have only to cite
18 the fact that our policy recommendations for 2013 closely
19 mirror those we discuss with you in this setting a year ago.

20 It is not for the lack of creativity, Mr. Chairman. It
21 is because tangible progress has been frustratingly slow.
22 Given this lack of progress and the growing need, our
23 highest and most critical priority remains focused on
24 closing the gaps in the VA's mental health system.

25 In a survey of our wounded warriors last year, 69

1 percent of respondents screened positive for posttraumatic
2 stress, and 62 percent indicated they were experiencing
3 symptoms of major depression. More than two thirds of those
4 surveyed said that emotional problems had interfered with
5 work or regular activities within the previous four weeks.

6 Some acknowledge getting help from VA therapists but
7 more than one in three reported difficulties in accessing
8 effective mental health care.

9 WWP acknowledges some of the progress with the VA in
10 hiring additional mental health providers, but increased
11 staffing alone will not close the gaps in the VA's mental
12 health system. With half of veterans not even seeking
13 mental health care, clearly the challenge is not purely one
14 of improving access, mental health care must also be
15 effective.

16 At a minimum, that requires building a relationship of
17 trust between the provider and the patient. But that trust
18 can be quickly broken when a veteran who needs one-on-one
19 therapy is simply given medication or put into a group
20 therapy prematurely or is only offered therapy that requires
21 reliving the painful trauma of war when he or she is not yet
22 ready for that type of intensive approach. Such experiences
23 leave warriors to drop out of treatment.

24 Compounding the issue, the VA is not measuring whether
25 patients who do seek care are actually getting better.

1 There has been a lack of transparency on how they will
2 resolve this issue.

3 VA's measures and performance requirements only track
4 processes not progress. PTS and other war related mental
5 health conditions can be successfully treated. WWP has
6 demonstrated through our world class mental health program
7 increased success rates which are attributed to peer-to-peer
8 support which is often a first step toward engaging in
9 treatment. Requiring VA to provide peer support and
10 outreach as called for in law and executive order is
11 critical step and we urge the Committees to press the VA to
12 launch this program in full and on time.

13 Our second priority focuses on long-term rehabilitation
14 for traumatic brain injury. Just last year your Committees
15 acted to require VA to set a far higher bar in providing
16 rehabilitative services for veterans with TBI, but the job
17 is not yet done. It is incumbent on the Committees to
18 provide strict oversight and require the VA to fully
19 implement the current law.

20 Studies show that 45 percent of individuals with severe
21 TBI are poorly reintegrated in their communities. These
22 warriors must not be denied the fullest recovery possible.
23 WWP itself has gone an extraordinary distance to demonstrate
24 the kinds of support warriors with severe TBI should be and
25 must be getting to achieve maximum independence.

1 With this goal, we created our own independence
2 program. It is a team effort that helps severely wounded
3 warriors achieved genuine community reintegration. VA can
4 and should provide full rehabilitative services to warriors
5 with TBI to help them reintegrate and to thrive.

6 Our third priority focuses on ensuring the economic
7 empowerment of all our warriors. It is critical that they
8 are afforded the resources and support they need to secure
9 employment and to develop fulfilling careers.

10 Education is often a first step on this path. Two
11 primary benefits as you are all aware of warriors are using
12 are the post-911 GI Bill and VA's vocational rehabilitation
13 and employment programs.

14 Unfortunately, warriors continue to experience
15 obstacles in realizing the full promise of these programs.
16 The WWP urges Congress and the VA to make the VR&E program a
17 greater priority and help this generation of student
18 warriors make a successful transition from combat zone to
19 campus and then to employment.

20 Our full policy agenda and written statement highlights
21 several other important issues on which critical action and
22 oversight are needed.

23 Time precludes me from sharing the stories of wounded
24 warriors and their families like the Espys whose son Jason
25 lives with severe TBI and Angie Peacock, who is overcoming

1 battles with MST and PTS, who both join me here today in the
2 hearing room as well as many others whose experiences and
3 struggles are highlighted in our policy agenda which
4 illustrate the gaps between VA's promise and the on-ground
5 reality.

6 That is why our advocacy and the advocacy of the other
7 organizations here and the vigilant oversight of Congress
8 are critical. Wounded Warrior Project considers it a
9 privilege and a responsibility to actively engage in this
10 endeavor and work with Congress and the VA to close the
11 gaps. This will be especially true when combat operations
12 then.

13 Wounded Warrior Project will not tire in our efforts to
14 honor and empower wounded warriors and ensure this
15 generation of warriors is the most well adjusted and
16 successful generation in our Nations history.

17 Thank you for your time and I look forward to your
18 questions.

19 [The prepared statement of Ms. Halfaker follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Ms. Halfaker.

2 What we will do now is have questions from the members
3 of Congress. Let me begin by raising the contentious issue.
4 Everybody in America knows that we have a serious national
5 debt, over \$16 trillion. We have a deficit of \$850 billion.

6 There is a great debate taking place, being manifested
7 right now by the so-called sequestration which many of us
8 think is not the way we should be going.

9 But be that as it may, there is a proposal out there,
10 as I mentioned in my opening remarks, called the chained CPI
11 which is well-known within the Beltway, not so well known
12 outside the Beltway.

13 What it does is it reconfigures inflation for seniors
14 and for veterans, people who are on Federal programs,
15 suggesting that the current formulation is too generous,
16 that we are giving too much and we are overestimating what
17 beneficiary should receive. It would mean very significant
18 cuts for Social Security beneficiaries as well as for
19 disabled veterans.

20 Let me start with Mr. Tarantino. Do you think that is
21 a good idea?

22 Mr. Tarantino. Absolutely not, Senator. I think it is
23 a terrible idea actually. It astounds me to the extent to
24 which we try to find creative ways to keep asking veterans
25 to sacrifice more and more.

1 You know, this is particularly troubling because you
2 are trying to couch cutting veterans' benefits in this very
3 complex, wonky sounding thing. Chained CPI. You can talk
4 about market forces and all this stuff that is just meant to
5 confuse the basic issue, is that, yes, we need to balance
6 the budget but we want to do it by cutting veterans'
7 benefits, and doing it on the backs of the people who have
8 sacrificed the most over the last 10 years. That is
9 completely unacceptable, Senator.

10 Chairman Sanders. Okay. Other comments.

11 Sergeant Major Overstreet. Mr. Chairman, when I came
12 into the Marine Corps, I made less than \$100 a month. I was
13 married. I was already married and had to make it on those
14 kind of funds.

15 So, I think one of the reasons that we stayed in the
16 service, one of the reasons that a lot of veterans stay in
17 the service, because of the camaraderie and because of the
18 association that we have. I think they have pretty much
19 paid their dues.

20 I mean, I had not deployed as much as some guys or gals
21 have but I have five trips to Okinawa one-year
22 unaccompanied, a couple of trips to Vietnam unaccompanied,
23 not to mention all the regular deployments and everything
24 else.

25 So, I think they have paid their dues. Like I said,

1 many veterans have paid them more than I have but I think it
2 is a bad idea too. We think that the veterans have paid
3 their portion of it.

4 And, when I look at my civilian counterparts on both
5 sides, they were making a lot more money and they were not
6 deploying and all of those other things.

7 So, once again, I think that is one of the reasons we
8 think veterans have paid their dues, sir.

9 Chairman Sanders. Essential arguments for the chained
10 CPI is that the COLAs over the years have been too generous.

11 Mr. Susino, do you think the COLAs have been too
12 generous?

13 Mr. Susino. They said and I state it is
14 unconscionable. I restate that because I do not understand
15 why they even look at the veterans, disabled veterans and
16 think they are getting too much. That word did not sound
17 right to me, getting too much.

18 The sacrifice that they gave maybe was too much, and
19 you are saying it is too much now? They took their time.
20 They were asked to do what they did; and to even think about
21 it or sit in the back room and think about cutting the
22 veterans, disabled, unconscionable. They gave their best
23 and the government should do their best for the veterans,
24 period.

25 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

1 [Applause.]

2 Chairman Sanders. Just for the record so you all know
3 it, as I understand it, virtually every veterans'
4 organization has come out in opposition to the chained CPI.

5 In the remainder of my time, Ms. Halfaker, you raised
6 something that interests me very much, the work that Wounded
7 Warriors are doing on mental health.

8 Could you say a few words about that?

9 Ms. Halfaker. Absolutely. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

10 One of the programs that, you know, we try to come up
11 with innovative ways. I mean, simply accepting the fact
12 that, you know, VA struggles to hire enough clinicians or to
13 give the right treatment, that is unacceptable. And so, we
14 decided, you know, we are going to go out and we are going
15 to find programs that work.

16 One of the things that we have done particularly around
17 peer-to-peer engagement is really focusing on one of our
18 programs called Project Odyssey where we bring a group of
19 warriors together for about a week's time period and we give
20 warriors an opportunity to come together in a safe
21 environment and go through kind of a series of self-
22 discovery and safe environment to interact with one another
23 and really take a journey of self-discovery for about a
24 period of a week and come out on the end of that with a
25 renewed sense of self and what they are capable of doing.

1 And then, you know, continuing to follow up with that.
2 I mean, that is just the typical spear is getting them
3 engaged and, you know, coming up with a creative program
4 that, you know, that is acceptable to them.

5 Chairman Sanders. I am out of time but this is an
6 issue. I think your point was that we want and need as many
7 clinicians as possible but there are other things that we
8 have to learn, the quality of the work that we are doing. I
9 think you are into something and I would love to talk to you
10 about it in the near future.

11 Ms. Halfaker. Yes, sir.

12 Chairman Miller.

13 Chairman Miller. Thank you, sir.

14 Everybody up here has in one way or another talked
15 about the disability claims backlog. There is a goal
16 obviously out there that the Secretary has put forth of
17 eliminating that backlog by 2015 and I would like to hear
18 from some of view as to whether or not you think that number
19 is actually attainable given the large number of claims that
20 are there.

21 Colonel Norton. Mr. Chairman, we do not think that is
22 attainable by the year 2015. I would add, sir, that to us a
23 part of this dynamic as recently revealed in the stories
24 about the huge problems at the Baltimore regional office has
25 to do with recruiting, training, and retaining a high-

1 quality workforce.

2 So, you can have the best VBMS system in the world. We
3 can field it this year. We can get it out there, and we can
4 start using technology as effectively as possible.

5 But, at the end of the day, just like in the Armed
6 Forces, you have got to recruit quality people. You have
7 got to train them to standard. You have got to offer them
8 incentives to do it is difficult to business, and you have
9 to have excellent supervisors to guide them and mentor them
10 along the way.

11 The regional offices that are failing in this business
12 are the ones that have personnel problems; and that, we
13 believe, is not being fully addressed by the VA at this
14 time.

15 Chairman Miller. Mr. Susino.

16 Mr. Susino. In my experience as an NSO and getting
17 rejections on many of the claims and then some claims being
18 reassessed, somehow I think the VA system when they
19 adjudicate and look at the claims they should stay going,
20 looking at the claims not going back to look at old claims
21 and try to say, not try, they do take away some of the
22 disabilities.

23 Now, I think their projection needs to go forward, not
24 to look backwards. And, they are wasting their time looking
25 at old cases and saying this does not deserve 20; we will

1 give them 10.

2 It is mind-boggling that they do that. It was done.
3 They made their mistake. It should stay there. The veteran
4 is done. Go on with your cases that are piling up in front
5 of you. They are going a Catch-22 and that is all I have to
6 say.

7 Chairman Miller. Mr. McKenty.

8 Mr. McKenty. Sir, I agree with Colonel Norton. I
9 think the quality of the workforce is probably the smartest
10 decision or the smartest way to solve that problem.

11 I know I had a tangle with the IRS here last year over
12 my 2009 taxes, and I went back and forth with this
13 individual five different times before he finally said,
14 yeah, you are right. But, that ate up a lot of time that he
15 could have used on another IRS problem or, in the case of
16 the VA benefits another VA claim.

17 So, if you do not have the educated workforce and the
18 quality people, then all you are doing is going to spin your
19 wheels and you are going to spend five or six hours on
20 something you could spend 15 minutes on.

21 Chairman Miller. Mr. Tarantino.

22 Mr. Tarantino. We are not optimistic that they are
23 going to make a 2015 deadline. In fact, if I were a betting
24 man, which I am not, I would say they are not going to.

25 This is a very complicated problem. We all understand

1 the issues involved with the claims backlog; but at some
2 point, where do we see the turning point.

3 You know, I have been hearing for five years that, oh,
4 we are working on the problem; we are working on the
5 problem. I am starting to feel like Charlie Brown with a
6 football here. At what point do we get the sense of self-
7 awareness in the VA of where their problems are.

8 You know, we study the problem. My colleagues here
9 study the problem. The GAO studies the problem. Congress
10 is calling for hearings asking for solutions but what we do
11 not see is a real comprehensive analysis inside the VA that,
12 hey, we are self-aware of our problem and here are the 20
13 things we are going to do to fix it.

14 And, maybe they are doing it but they are just not
15 telling anybody. At the end of the day it does not matter
16 until we see the results; and frankly, my membership is sick
17 and tired of hearing that it is getting fixed and not seeing
18 any results.

19 Chairman Miller. My time is up but I concur the VBMS,
20 electronic medical record are all tools. They are not a
21 total solution and I think that there is a culture within a
22 large bureaucracy like VA of 300,000 employees, most of
23 those employees are very hard working individuals that are
24 doing great work and deserve recognition from this Committee
25 and others.

1 But, we have got to get past that culture of not
2 getting rid of those who cannot do the job. So, we are
3 going to need your help to deliver that message to the
4 Secretary and to the department because I think that that is
5 another answer to the solution.

6 Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and we have a series of votes
7 that have just been called so some of us will be leaving
8 shortly.

9 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Chairman
10 Miller.

11 Ranking member Mike Michaud.

12 Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

13 I just have one quick question to follow up on the
14 Sergeant Major Overstreet's comments about the partial
15 payment, and you are absolutely right. You could have a
16 claim that is in. The VA could approve nine out of the 10
17 but the 10th one is really complex. So therefore, he gets
18 none or she gets none.

19 I guess my question to each of the VSOs: Do you know
20 of any regions where they are approving partial payment of
21 claims, and if so, where?

22 Sergeant Major Overstreet. I have not heard of any,
23 sir.

24 Colonel Norton. Mr. Michaud, we have not heard of any
25 either; but I would just add that we understand the VA

1 already has authority to make accelerated or advance
2 payments; and I would like to reinforce the sergeant major's
3 message.

4 We believe that, as a baseline, there could be advance
5 payments made for wounded warriors that have TSGLI
6 conditions. So, if you have lost a leg in your service in
7 Afghanistan, you are automatically eligible for TSGLI.

8 You may have seven or eight other conditions. You may
9 be a poly trauma victim. You may have lots of things going
10 on but certainly it should be easy and quick once you have
11 been identified to have one or more TSGLI wounds or injuries
12 that you should get an advance payment immediately for that
13 according to the TSGLI schedule of listed disabilities.

14 Mr. Michaud. Thank you. I yield back.

15 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Mr. Michaud.

16 Because of House votes, we are going to change the
17 order of questions if that is okay with folks. Congressman
18 Walz.

19 Mr. Walz Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And, once again
20 thank all of you for being here. I concur with everything
21 that has been said. And, Tom, I am with you. I am at the
22 end of my patience with some of this and I think we need to
23 demand that.

24 I do not need to encourage you to do so but you need to
25 speak with the moral authority that you all have but I think

1 you need to reject this idea for excuses on why we cannot do
2 something because I think everyone here and everyone outside
3 of this room needs to thank God that your members did not
4 decide something could not be done and just choose to take
5 the easy path.

6 So, we can break this. I have to tell you I have seen
7 glimmers of hope on the electronic record out in San Diego
8 with Kaiser Permanente and some of the things they are
9 doing.

10 But, I went to that hearing yesterday and I think, you
11 know, decades of thinking I knew this and think I understand
12 it. I left that hearing not knowing what the hell was going
13 on with the record. And, I do not know if any of you felt
14 that way but that was a very discouraging way to go.

15 And so, I think now is the time the authority of the
16 public is with us to crank this up. We need to just blast
17 through this claims backlog process. We need to make sure,
18 Dawn, you were right again. It is not just about volume.
19 It is about quality of care.

20 I keep seeing numbers put on paper. But, if we are not
21 seeing people get healthy again, reintegrate with their
22 family and community, then all we are doing is wasted. So,
23 I can say that.

24 My final point is, Mr. Delaney, thank you for the
25 support on the vets status bill. I would encourage, Mr.

1 Chairman, if the Senate could take a hard look at the vets
2 status bill. It does not cost a penny. It is for many of
3 us in the National Guard and other Reserves who trained the
4 lawyers that went over but for no fault of their own were
5 not called to 180 days, did 179 in Kosovo or whatever, were
6 denied the simple dignity of calling themselves as veterans
7 and applying to their state for a veterans' license plate;
8 and they pay for it themselves.

9 So, this thing is stuck on some type of hold or
10 something. If there is anything you can do, Mr. Chairman, I
11 implore you to but thank you all. Keep the good fight up.

12 We are certainly on the side of righteousness on this.
13 Even if you do not care about that, it just makes good
14 economic sense to get folks back working and do the right
15 thing.

16 So, I yield back.

17 Chairman Sanders. Thank you for much, Congressman
18 Walz.

19 Senator Heller.

20 Senator Heller. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks for
21 holding this hearing. I want to thank all that have
22 testified in front of us today. Thanks for your service and
23 thanks for the work that you do for men and women who have
24 served so diligently.

25 We talk a lot about the VA here, and the VA has, in my

1 opinion, done some good things. I have a father who is
2 going to turn 80 this year and I am one who believes that
3 without the VA service he would not be turning 80 this year.

4 Someone who had a lung replaced, lost a few ribs,
5 missing parts of his stomach, intestines, and so on and so
6 forth, if it were not for the VA, he has had heart surgery,
7 back surgery, we can go down the list. But, they have
8 provided some good services at the hospital in Reno, and I
9 am real pleased actually that we have the new hospital in
10 Las Vegas.

11 And, I am certain that with the veterans that we have
12 in Nevada, we have nearly 300,000, nearly 300,000 veterans
13 in Nevada, I think that that hospital will serve those
14 veterans well.

15 I also do appreciate, Mr. McKenty, you bringing up the
16 stolen valor bill. S. 10. I will be the often this year of
17 that particular piece of legislation and the companion bill
18 by Congressman Heck on the House side.

19 Also, Mr. Susino, thank you also for making note in
20 your comments about this piece of legislation. I do believe
21 it is an issue of respect, and it did pass the House last
22 cycle. It did not pass the Senate, and I hope some form,
23 either this one or something similar, will pass in this
24 cycle.

25 Anyway, thanks for bringing that up. If you have any

1 further comments you would like to make about it, I am right
2 there with you.

3 Mr. McKenty. No, sir.

4 Senator Heller. Okay. I want to move on because the
5 tone, there is room for improvement I guess is the bottom
6 line we have been talking about the VA.

7 Our backlog again, as I mentioned, is about 10,000.
8 And I have, like Utah, been to the VA and chatted with them
9 and chatted with them over the last five years, literally
10 over the last five years; and I have asked them what they
11 need. Just tell me what you need.

12 Do you need more money, do you need more resources, is
13 that what you need? The answer is no. Do you need more
14 people to help get this backlog taken care of? They will
15 tell me no.

16 If it is not resources and it is not people, what else
17 can we do? What else can we ask for and provide because we
18 all want to do it? We want to take care of this problem.
19 If it is not resources and if it is not bodies, what is it?

20 Tom.

21 Mr. Tarantino. First of all, it is updating your
22 business practices. I mean, the thing that really astounds
23 me is that this is a process, the physical process of taking
24 a claim from start to finish was obsolete before most Iraq
25 and Afghanistan veterans were born.

1 There are buildings in the VA system that are being
2 condemned because of the weight of the paper is buckling the
3 structure of the building. It is this intractable
4 resistance to modernization. This is not something we did
5 not know was coming. I mean, we could have figured this out
6 in 2004 had we thought about it a little bit but it really
7 was not until 2009 that the VA really put the gas pedal on
8 this stuff.

9 So, you know, things like digitally processing claims,
10 things like rating a lower hanging fruit first and giving
11 temporary ratings, things like doing a fully developed
12 claims process.

13 The problem is is that they are not implementing it in
14 the most efficient way possible and they are not going out
15 into the community, in the business sector, into the private
16 sector, into the non-profits to find stakeholders to help
17 them change.

18 Senator Heller. Tom, I was told by a veteran this week
19 that upon exiting, and he just retired last year, to submit
20 a claim right away because it is going to take a year and a
21 half, a year and a half. He said he has received four
22 letters since apologizing, apologizing that their claim has
23 not been processed at this point. If you can send four
24 apology letters, can you not just process the claim?

25 Mr. Tarantino. I mean, it is difficult to do medical

1 evaluations. That is why we have claims processing because
2 you have to evaluate someone's medical condition. That is
3 why it is not like the IRS which is essentially just a math.

4 But, at the same time, the process is opaque. If I am
5 a veteran, if I really knew stuff that I know because I am
6 paid to know this stuff, I can find the rating scale on the
7 Internet. It is actually kind of difficult to do but you
8 can do it.

9 I do not see why every veteran cannot get some sort of
10 clarity on the front of what to expect because if the VA can
11 manage their expectations and say, look, based on your
12 injuries you can look up and get a reasonable expectation of
13 what you are going to get and how much time it is going to
14 take. That is going to reduce a lot of the resistance and I
15 think that would help a great deal.

16 Senator Heller. Thank you. I am out of time.

17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Chairman Sanders. Thank you, Senator Heller.

19 Senator Blumenthal.

20 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
21 you for holding this hearing, and most important thank you
22 to everyone of our witnesses today and for your service to
23 our Nation but also for the service that has been so
24 valiantly and graciously provided by the millions of men and
25 women whom you represent.

1 I want to begin with Ms. Halfaker if I may. You very
2 persuasively call attention to the mental health issues and
3 on page 6 of your testimony detail what needs to be done.

4 One of the points that you make is that there needs to
5 be greater collaboration between the Department of Defense
6 and the VA on that kind of health issue.

7 As I am sure all of you know, the collaboration on
8 mental health and on health issue generally is stymied by
9 the fact that there are two separate computer systems and
10 the objective has been to combine them.

11 I am putting it in layman's terms. I am sure that the
12 computer folks in the crowd will have a better technical way
13 of describing it but that project has now been abandoned at
14 least in the form or layout that was originally designed.

15 I do not know whether any of the folks who are here
16 today have any observations on whether that system would
17 make sense. In my view, it does because the two have to be
18 combined, it seems to me, so that they are seamless.

19 To call them interoperable is fine but ultimately the
20 objective has to be to make sure that somebody who is in
21 uniform goes to a VA hospital and that the hospital, the
22 docs, the staff have access to all of the records about
23 injuries, treatment, diagnoses from the DOD files.

24 Let me just throw it open first perhaps to you, Ms.
25 Halfaker, because you raised this issue, at least you have

1 alluded to it in your testimony.

2 Ms. Halfaker. Yes, sir, and thank you for bringing
3 this up. I think obviously the joint record would be a huge
4 step forward in being able to share information and, you
5 know, theoretically close some of the gaps we see.

6 But, yeah, there is definitely an attrition rate as we
7 have seen our warriors, you know, as they come off of active
8 duty and go into the VA system, you know, really I think the
9 big issues is the wait time on VA side.

10 And then, you know, we have talked about kind of the
11 different treatments and whether or not those are effective.
12 But certainly, understanding the veteran or the wounded
13 warriors history, you know, is extremely critical in
14 developing an effective treatment program and getting them
15 in there in a timely manner.

16 So, you know, we would absolutely love to collaborate
17 on this issue and discuss it in further detail.

18 Senator Blumenthal. Anyone else have points?

19 Yes, sir.

20 Mr. Delaney. Having been a computer geek for 40 some
21 years, I have found over the time that taking two different
22 systems and combining them is often a lot more expensive
23 than writing a new system.

24 I go to visit my doctor in Georgia and he routinely
25 walks around his office with a little laptop, makes all the

1 entries on there; and if I need prescriptions, he tells it
2 print the prescription.

3 If they can do it for a doctor, I am sure there will
4 have to be some enlargement made for the VA but being able
5 to track information, track injuries that would allow a
6 better response, I believe, from the VA since they are going
7 to have a better feel for what is going on with the
8 veterans.

9 Senator Blumenthal. By the way, on the issue of cost,
10 as you know, about \$1 billion have already been spent on the
11 effort to create a single system which apparently now will
12 be abandoned.

13 Mr. Delaney. I think too that that is probably penny
14 wise and pound foolish and there should be something we
15 could do to stop that. They have obviously made some
16 progress because they are spending money.

17 Senator Blumenthal. Well, as much as I would like to
18 believe that is true of the government, they have made some
19 progress because they have been spending money, not always
20 so. But thank you.

21 Yes, sir.

22 Sergeant Major Overstreet. Sir, let me just say that
23 we are very disappointed in that because that would be a
24 great way to track a service member from the time that they
25 went through recruit training or OCS all the way through

1 until they terminated at the end and an easy handoff to
2 somebody that is going to adjudicate at all in the end.

3 And, it was advertised to be that way; and like I say,
4 we are extremely, you know, ticked off, if you will, that
5 they canned the system before we got to the end of it.

6 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you.

7 Colonel Norton. Senator, it is just really astounding
8 to us, it is hard for us to believe that after all of these
9 public declarations by the secretaries of the Department of
10 Defense and the VA that all of a sudden without alerting you
11 or the Armed Services Committees, they are walking away from
12 this commitment.

13 At the end of the day, abandoning this project is going
14 to be much more costly because one of the biggest cogs in
15 completing disabilities claims effectively and efficiently
16 is that they have to rely upon shipping paper records back
17 and forth between the military service and the VA. It is
18 complex. It is confusing. It is inefficient.

19 We would strongly recommend that you and all the
20 members of the Committees working with the Armed Services
21 Committees direct the VA and DOD to move forward and get
22 this done. It is really unacceptable. Thank you.

23 Senator Blumenthal. Mr. Tarantino, did you have a
24 point?

25 Mr. Tarantino. I just did. This is the exact type of

1 thing that makes veterans lose faith in the ability of the
2 VA and the ability of the DOD to take care of them.

3 This is not putting a veteran on Mars. This is not
4 difficult stuff. I understand the internal mechanics,
5 whatever. I am going to put a point on that right now.
6 This is about leadership. This is about leadership.

7 If someone, I do not care if it is the secretaries, the
8 President of the United States, puts them in a room and says
9 pick one system. Tell me how much it costs to implement it.
10 You have a year. I bet your money it will get done. But
11 right now we do not have leaders stepping up and making
12 decisions and the VA fumbles the ball on something that the
13 private industry does pretty easily. This is not new ground
14 we are blazing. This is the type of thing that makes people
15 not have faith in the health care and benefits system to get
16 the help that they need.

17 Senator Blumenthal. Well, I appreciate all of your
18 comments which in a way mirror or echo I think my own views
19 on this subject. I raised them with the Secretary of
20 Defense in a hearing with the Armed Services Committee and I
21 would try much welcome your collaboration moving forward,
22 your assistance especially from the folks who are computer
23 geeks and know a lot more than I do.

24 But I agree with you that it undermines faith in the
25 system and it also very practically and importantly

1 undermines the quality of care that our veterans receive.

2 So, thank you for your great work, and my time has
3 expired but I appreciate your excellent testimony today all
4 of you. Thank you.

5 Chairman Sanders. Senator Boozman.

6 Senator Boozman. I would like to echo the Senators
7 also, your great work. I could start with Mr. Tarantino and
8 go down to Ms. Halfaker and again point out the tremendous
9 things you are all doing for veterans in helping to the
10 Committee, helping spur this along.

11 I think one of the things that we lose sight, you know,
12 my dad did 20 years in the Air Force, retired as a master
13 sergeant. I like to be around Sergeant Major Overstreet.
14 He reminds me of my dad. He makes me want to shape up when
15 I am around him.

16 But, you know, the thing that we forget is these are
17 earned benefits. These are things that were committed to;
18 you earned. It was part of the package. And, that is
19 something that I, as a member of the Committee, tries to
20 educate other members.

21 One of the real challenges that we have right now, when
22 I was a kid on the 4th of July and they asked everybody that
23 served, the whole church stood up because you had World War
24 I, you had World War II, you had Korea, you had the Cold
25 War, you had the draft, Vietnam. Now, you do that and it is

1 surprising because you stand up and a few others but there
2 has been a whole generation that has not served and, you
3 know, the real challenge is educating people about what the
4 military is all about. So, we do appreciate your service.
5 I get really frustrated.

6 Tom, you mentioned the fact that year after year, you
7 know, we say this is going to get better and you are all in
8 the same boat; it is not getting better. We are right kind
9 of where we are at.

10 And, the other frustration is when you look at Social
11 Security, the job they do, it is not perfect but it is much
12 better and they have got many of the same, you know, many of
13 the same challenges that we have with the VA disability
14 claims.

15 The other thing that I get frustrated at is you all
16 inquire about your memberships when they are having problems
17 trying to find out where they are at in the process, there
18 is virtually no ability to do that at all, again, unlike
19 Social Security where you can at least know where you are
20 at, have a reasonable as to what to expect in the future.

21 So, we have simply just got to do a much better job.
22 It was pointed out leadership does come into play regarding
23 that.

24 One of the things I would like for you to comment on,
25 because I think this is important, I am really concerned, I

1 know that all of you are very concerned about veterans'
2 unemployment. If we do a good job of getting our veterans
3 employed as they separate, those who are being separated,
4 you really avoid so many of the problems that you are going
5 to have in the future with distracted behavior which is a
6 good thing for those families. It is also a good thing for
7 the government because it is a lot cheaper, you know, in
8 dealing with those problems the line.

9 But, I am concerned about discrimination, you know, you
10 might talk about, you know, if you are seeing more of that
11 these days. I am concerned about USERRA not doing a good
12 job. I am also concerned about the government with the
13 guidance we have done as far as veterans preferences not
14 being followed.

15 And then, you might also touch real quickly on, we are
16 trying to get a situation where we can translate these
17 skills that the men and women are learning in the military,
18 whether they are medics or this or that, truck drivers, we
19 are able to do that with pilots and things like that with
20 their log books. Some of the ideas that you have got, how
21 we can do a better job of making it such that those skills
22 translate so that they can pick up and get the benefit of
23 having a tremendous amount of experience as they transition
24 into the civilian world.

25 Why do we not start with you, Tom.

1 Mr. Tarantino. Senator, I will be brief, and thank you
2 very much for your leadership on this issue.

3 You know, it starts with training the veteran. It
4 starts with training the service member what to expect and
5 what to expect in the civilian work force. We have found
6 that through surveying our members and veterans that they
7 have too high expectations.

8 They do not understand the civilian work force because
9 we do not do a good job of training them, and we do an even
10 worse job of training the civilian workforce about what
11 value veterans bring.

12 This is doing things like we have done in the last
13 years such as making TAP mandatory, improving TAP, making
14 sure, Senator, that veterans can take TAP which was your
15 bill from last year after they leave service so they can get
16 retraining.

17 We have introduced this career pathfinder website that
18 launched at 10 o'clock this morning that does that skills
19 translation, that does that match-making, and there is a lot
20 of public-private partnerships that are going on.

21 But the issue is that this is the first generation of
22 business leaders that has never served in the military. So,
23 we have to go back and do the math for them that we have
24 never had to do before because chances are the guy hiring
25 you totted a machine gun around for two or three years.

1 That is just not true anymore.

2 And so, we have to do a better job of training veterans
3 and training the workforce. And my last point, since we are
4 talking about USERRA, sequestration hits; USERRA enforcement
5 is gone. Half of all DVOPs and LVERs will be cut.

6 This is serious business. The VA is protected but the
7 Department of Labor's Vets Employment and Training Service
8 is not; and if we want to keep making progress in veterans'
9 employment, we just cannot let that happen.

10 Senator Boozman. Very good. Anybody else?

11 Sergeant Major Overstreet. Senator, we are probably in
12 the job fair business. As a matter of fact, we do a lot of
13 that. At one time, we were putting on about 200 job fairs a
14 year years ago; and then when it seemed like the military
15 transition picked it up, we just kind of pushed it over to
16 them and let them do it.

17 Our main concern was that we have a transitions program
18 for these young servicemen and women and maybe not so young
19 that are getting out. Our theory is they are all going to
20 get out sooner or later so we need to make sure that they
21 are ready to get out.

22 As Tom said, there are several programs that you can
23 use out there to translate those words. In the old days we
24 had a guy work for us that had written a book and the book
25 was does your resume wear combat boots.

1 And, we realized that we had to change that jargon. We
2 had to change that terminology to the modern day; and even
3 today, those things continue to change.

4 It appears to me that in a lot of times that we bring
5 all of these high-speed, low-drag companies, you know,
6 government contracting companies to these job fairs and
7 everything but one thing that comes clear to me is that a
8 lot of these young guys and girls that are getting out but
9 do not want to be boxed into a cubicle.

10 That is not their forte. They would rather be
11 landscapers. They would rather be carpenters. They would
12 rather be pipefitters. They would rather do the things that
13 their family and their folks did because those are the
14 things that they understood.

15 They just do not want to sit in a cubicle and punch a
16 computer even though it looks like the benefits are good and
17 a lot of other things are there.

18 So, what we are struggling with is trying to get the
19 right mix. Let us get the right guy for the right job and,
20 you know, move forward with that.

21 And when we bring those companies to those job fairs,
22 we try to bring a menu of companies all the way from service
23 industries to government contractors to everyone that you
24 can think of there. So, we offer a wide menu for somebody
25 to get a job there.

1 Colonel Norton. Senator, if I may, our prepared
2 statement, Senator, goes into some detail about re-
3 employment rights for members of the Guard and Reserve.

4 But, I would just say in general we would like to see
5 the Committee take a look at the ongoing pilot project that
6 is with the Office of Special Counsel. They are looking at
7 claims for veterans who are working in the Federal
8 workforce.

9 The idea would be how were they doing compared to the
10 vets program run in the Department of Labor. Vets has
11 really not been successful over the years and we have been
12 generally supportive of the idea of moving Vets out from
13 under Labor and moving it over into the VA.

14 But, a lot more has to be done on this re-employment
15 rights business. We think that the Federal Government needs
16 to be a model employer for veterans in order to set the
17 standard for the rest of the private economy.

18 Senator Blumenthal. Thank you all right much. Thank
19 you Mr. Chairman.

20 Chairman Sanders. Thank you, Senator Boozman.

21 This ends the hearing. I just want to not only thank
22 all of you for being here and for all the work you are doing
23 for veterans and what you have done in your own personal
24 lives the sacrifices you have made.

25 You have made a lot of very important points this

1 morning, and I promise you that our Committee will take a
2 hard look at your written testimony and what you have said
3 here today and we will try to move as fast as we can in
4 implementing the sensible ideas.

5 Thank you again all for attending.

6 This hearing is adjourned.

7 [Whereupon, at 11:43 a.m., the Committee was
8 adjourned.]