

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing: FY13 Budget for Veterans' Programs
February 29, 2012

“Welcome to this morning’s hearing on the Fiscal Year 2013 budget and the Fiscal Year 2014 Advance Appropriation request for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

As I do most weeks when I’m home, last week, I convened round table discussions with veterans from across my home state of Washington. During these discussions, I heard from the very men and women whose lives this budget will touch. While some veterans praised the care and access they were receiving from the VA, many more laid out concerns that must be addressed in this and future budgets.

I heard from veterans who still face unacceptably long wait times for mental health care, or are still not getting the type of mental health treatment they need in their communities. I heard from women veterans who are struggling to receive specialized care and from veterans who are fed up with the dysfunction of the claims system. I also heard from veterans who still find themselves confronted by obstacles to employment and who are even afraid to write the word “veteran” on a job application because of the stigma they believe employers attach to it.

Last year’s passage of the “VOW to Hire Heroes Act” was a great first step in tackling these problems and the high rate of veteran unemployment. But more remains to be done. As I’m sure Secretary Shinseki will discuss, now is the time to take advantage of public-private partnerships and the sea of goodwill that exists in corporate America towards our veterans. But doing so will also require beating back misinformation about the invisible wounds of war.

I’m so pleased that the Administration has showed real leadership in engaging private partners in this area and I will continue to highlight the tremendous skills, leadership ability and discipline our veterans bring to the table. I also look forward to learning more today about VA’s involvement with the President’s proposed Veterans Job Corps.

Any way that we can get our veterans both employed and more involved in bettering our communities is a program worthy of investment.

As everyone on this committee knows, with the end of the war in Iraq and the upcoming withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the budget challenges will only continue for VA.

Last year, this Committee held a hearing to explore the long term costs of war and what is 100 percent clear is that we have an obligation that will continue long after the fighting is over. Today, as we review this budget, fulfilling our nation’s obligation to our veterans not only today, but throughout the course of their lives, must be our most pressing consideration.

Now, let me say that as a long-time member of the Senate Budget Committee, and as someone who has seen just how difficult this year's budget is for many other agencies, when this budget arrived on my desk I was encouraged. Given the current fiscal environment, VA has done a good job putting together a budget that reflects a very real commitment to provide veterans with the care and benefits they have earned. Thank you, Secretary Shinseki, for your efforts.

I also want to applaud VA's ongoing commitment to end homelessness. This is an area where you are making real strides, and I'm encouraged to see that the Administration has again requested an increase in funding for homeless programs. I'm hopeful that we will continue to see a significant effort to reduce the number of homeless veterans and prevent those who are "at risk" from becoming homeless – but I also believe VA has some real work to do in the area of serving female homeless veterans.

But – while VA has done a good job putting together a budget that works to tackle the challenges our veterans face – there is also clearly room for improvement. For the third year in a row, VA has proposed cuts in spending for major construction and non-recurring maintenance.

These continued cuts are deeply troubling given last year was the first time VA's budget even outlined the Department's vision for a ten-year construction plan, with a price tag that approached \$65 billion. Yet, despite this plan, for the past two years VA has requested only a fraction of the amount it needs. I'm disappointed at the size of the gap between the funding we need to bring facilities up to date and the funding requested from the Congress.

In addition, this budget request proposes a series of initiatives intended to save money, including better controls on contract health care, better strategies for contracting, and cutting administrative overhead. I am pleased to see that VA recognizes the importance of efficiency, but I have concerns with these proposals.

A GAO report released on Monday showed that many of these initiatives, and initiatives from last year's budget, did not in fact generate the savings VA predicted. I will review each of the initiatives in this budget with an open mind. But I want to be clear: our first priority, our obligation, must be to ensure that we're fulfilling and honoring our commitment to our veterans.

If VA fails to meet the proposed cost-savings estimates, it will have to find a way to make up the difference so that veterans don't end up paying the price.

Medical care collections is another area where VA has to do a better job of both predicting targets and collecting funds. It's impossible to build a budget on funding that isn't collected.

Another area of concern is mental health care. At a hearing last year, VA witnesses acknowledged that they may in fact need more resources to meet the high demand for mental health care. I want a straightforward answer from VA about their actual needs, and whether the Department's proposed five percent increase is enough.

Last year I asked VA to conduct a survey of mental health providers, which revealed significant shortcomings. VA proposed a plan to fix the problems, and they must complete those steps as scheduled. But VA cannot stop with what was outlined in that initial plan. It must continue to

work to find ways to make real and substantial improvements. This year we will continue to be aggressive in our oversight of VA mental health care.

Not every veteran will be affected by these invisible wounds. But when a veteran has the courage to stand up and ask for help, VA must be there every single time. VA must be there with not only timely access to care, but also the right type of care. Challenges like PTSD or depression are natural responses to some of the most stressful events a person can experience. And we will do everything possible to ensure that those affected by these illnesses can get help, can get better, and can get back to their lives.

Finally, like Chairman Miller, Senator Tester and others, I remain concerned about the questions surrounding the effects of sequestration on veterans' health care. Throughout the Budget Control Act process that established sequestration, I made it very clear that including VA among those agencies that would receive automatic cuts is unacceptable, and repeatedly made clear that this should not be the case. And although I'm confident that all veterans programs, including health care, will be protected in the event of sequestration, I want to make sure that you know I will not accept anything else.

I believe our veterans deserve clarity on this issue – and if you cannot provide it today – I will continue to work for it. In fact I've already asked the Government Accountability Office to issue a formal legal opinion, which will provide some resolution to this issue.

Secretary Shinseki, as we all know, budgets are a reflection of our values. And thanks to your work this budget request demonstrates a strong commitment to our veterans. But while we're in a position to make sure VA has the increased funding it needs, we should also be mindful that the demand for services will continue to increase, no matter the number of troops deployed.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on this Committee, and on the Budget and Appropriations Committees on which I also sit, and of course, with Secretary Shinseki, his team, and the leaders from the veterans' community, to ensure this long-term commitment.

Thanks again to everyone for being here today. I will now turn to Ranking Member Burr for his opening statement.”