

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

Joint Hearing to receive the legislative presentations of the Jewish War Veterans, Air Force Sergeants Association, The Retired Enlisted Association, Fleet Reserve Association, National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, National Guard Association of the United States, American Ex-Prisoners of War, Gold Star Wives and Wounded Warrior Project

Wednesday, March 18, 2015

10:00 AM

Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room G-50

Thank you, Chairman Isakson.

Good morning everyone, it is truly an honor to be here today with you, and with so many members of your organizations.

Before I begin, I would also like to recognize any members from my home state of Florida who are in our audience today.

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

Thank you all for leaving the sunshine state to join us here in Washington.

As you all know, it has been a challenging and tumultuous year for veterans and veteran advocates alike, and I thank you all for supporting our efforts and for continuing to be a tremendous voice for our veterans.

While we still have a long road ahead of us, it is vital that your organizations and your members continue to inform congress and the American people about what is really happening on the front lines at VA facilities across the country. We cannot do it without you.

Our charge, as it has always been, is to assist you and to oversee the Department of Veterans Affairs' efforts to carry out America's promise to those who have worn the uniform. This includes ensuring that veterans receive timely, accurate, and consistent decisions when seeking service-connected disability compensation; safe and high-quality health care; and prompt access to all earned benefits.

And while every organization here today has its own legislative priorities, you all share a common goal, one that our committees share as well: Providing the best services to our veterans; to those service-members who will one day transition out of the military; the families of our servicemembers and veterans; and to surviving family members.

We have made great strides to meet that important goal, but it is a constant challenge to ensure VA does not become complacent with the status quo. In advancing these issues, the need for oversight is crucial, but the need for true and effective accountability continues to be of the utmost importance. VA must be much more aggressive in holding its employees, especially its senior employees, accountable.

We must ensure that the Department of Veterans Affairs treats all veterans with the dignity and professionalism that they have earned through their honorable service to our nation. That mission will remain my focus this year as we continue our oversight of the department.

Among our oversight priorities will be the implementation of the Veterans Choice Program. As they say, the devil is in the details and we will ensure that VA follows the law and provides veterans with the same level of timely and coordinated care, whether the veteran stays within the VA healthcare system or chooses to be contracted out to a private physician for their care.

Another continued major focus will be the backlog of claims for disability benefits. The Department has said that this is the year that it will eliminate the backlog, and while I will do everything I can to support this goal, unfortunately we have learned over the past year that we simply can't trust VA's numbers.

We know that while the backlog of claims has been reduced, this has often come at the expense of accurate outcomes for veterans; production on appeals; non-rating work; and vocational rehab and education claims. We need to ensure, that these claims for compensation are not just viewed as numbers on a spreadsheet, but are representative of an individual who served this country honorably.

We all need to remember that VA and congress are here to serve you, our servicemembers and our veterans, and in the words of former VA administrator General Omar Bradley, "We are dealing with veterans, not procedures; with their problems, not ours."

As I said in one of last summer's hearings, VA is not sacred; veterans are. That is the culture we must have at VA, and we should expect nothing less.

So, to everyone present today, thank you for your military service, your families' service, and for your on-going work on behalf of veterans and survivors.

I look forward to hearing each of your organization's testimony.

And I now yield back to Chairman Isakson.