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JOINT HEARING TO RECEIVE THE LEGISLATIVE  
PRESENTATION OF THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS  
Tuesday, March 2, 2010  
House of Representatives,  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
joint with  
United States Senate  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
Washington, D.C.

The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 2:06 p.m.,  
in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Bob Filner  
[chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs]  
presiding.

Present: Representatives Filner, Michaud, Herseth  
Sandlin, Hall, Perriello, Walz, Adler, Kirkpatrick, Miller  
and Boozman.

Senators Akaka and Burr.

DRAFT

The Chairman. Good afternoon. Welcome. It is great to see all of you. We have got the biggest room we could, and you filled it up. Congratulations. We are really happy to see you. We know you have been seeing your own Representatives. And we are looking forward to hearing the testimony of Commander Barrera.

And we want to, by the way, thank you, Mr. Commander, and all the delegates here, for your Washington staff. They do a tremendous job. They keep us informed. But they lead a fight. For example, you all know that it was DAV I think that led the fight to get forward or advanced funding for the VA.

We think this is going to be a real change in the stability and the quality, stability of funding and quality of care.

We received the 2011 budget from the President, as usual, but we also received, for the medical budget, 2012. So people can start planning for that 2012 now. And no matter how late we are with the budget, as we seem to be each year, the VA medical accounts will be known and secure, and people can plan. And you and your comrades will get the quality care that we are trying to provide.

So, thank you, again, DAV, for that.

The budget request from the President was almost \$4

billion for the medical discretionary accounts. That was a second straight year of record proposals for the VA. And I think this administration has shown that supporting the troops and the veterans is not just a slogan but a mandate. In fact, since Senator Akaka and I have been Chairs of this committee, we have increased the health care budget by over \$20 billion, almost a 60 percent increase.

I think that we all can congratulate ourselves, but we can all congratulate you for making sure that your Representatives could only vote for the veterans and not to forget them.

So your being here is really, really important. And this funding, of course, will continue to be a top priority. The VA was one of the few agencies that was not put under the freeze that the President had asked for. So we have protected that.

The Congress will respond to the President's request I think in the coming week. We want to assure you that we are going to keep the independent budget in mind that, again, the DAV plays an important role in producing. We have exceeded the independent budget each of the last 3 years, and I think this year we will be close to it, and somewhere right near where the independent budget is.

We have to make sure that the funding is there, and then we have to make sure, as oversight committees in both

the Senate and the House, that we make sure that the money is spent right.

And all these billions of dollars that we put in health care, Senator Akaka, some of the medical centers seem to not be hiring at the same rate that we had expected. There are vacancies all over the place, and it is our job to see the oversight is there, because we have provided the money; we want to make sure it gets down to where you are.

I think, Commander, it is no secret that the top priority of the DAV and many of the other organizations is the disability claims backlog. It is a disgrace that we have such a big backlog, and it is an insult to the veterans, to all of you who have served our Nation. We are supposed to be the highest technologically proficient nation in the world, and we can't seem to get a claims process under control.

. So we are going to have to -- and we will talk about this after your testimony and your questioning. I think we have to change the whole paradigm, as it were, just cut through all the bureaucracy in new ways, and not just keep piling it up and doing it the old ways, because it doesn't seem to be working.

Chairman Hall from New York on the Subcommittee on Disability is working very closely and hard on that, and I hope he will be here to explain what he is doing.

We did also for the younger veterans overhaul the GI Bill program for the first time in a couple decades. It is under way now. We were proud, as a committee and as a Congress to pass that bill, with the full cost of college education included, and it did a couple things that had never been done before.

Number one, the Reserves and the National Guard Reserves, who have been doing half the funding in Iraq and Afghanistan, have access to the full privileges and full benefits for the GI Bill for the first time, and we thank our Reserves for that.

In addition, if a veteran did not want to use those benefits, did not need them, or did not find it appropriate for his or her life, they can pass those benefits on to spouses and children, again, for the first time in history. And we had some problems in keeping up with the demand. We had, I think, almost a quarter million veterans enrolled. I hope that that process can be timely, and we will fix some of the problems that we noted and you all noted in the first year with a fix-it bill coming up soon that we will be doing.

Lastly, the mental health issues of our young veterans and older veterans continue. We have to get this under control. Whether the military or our Nation as a whole does not fully understand the importance of mental health care,

we must in this Congress understand that. I know DAV does. And we will make sure that these heroes of our Nation get the adequate mental health care that they need.

So we are looking forward to hearing Commander Barrera. I would like to yield to my good friend and a great friend of veterans, Senator Akaka of Hawaii, for his opening statement.

[The attachment appears on p. ]

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DRAFT

Senator Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I want to say to Chairman Filner that it has been a pleasure and an honor to work with him and the members on the House side for veterans. He has worked hard all these years and continues to do so. And I look forward to working together in the best interests of our veterans.

Let me start off by saying rousingly, Aloha. I want to add my welcome to all of you who are here today, and especially welcome to our Commander Roberto Barrera and his senior officials.

I also want to welcome and ask to stand those who have traveled the farthest, from Hawaii to Washington, D.C.

And I would like to ask the State Commander Edward Keoho, Sr., to please rise.

Ed, way back there. Aloha.

Also, Ed Kawamura.

Ed, thank you.

I remain committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality of benefits and services. As troops return from battles in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must be prepared to care for them with the same dedication and commitment they have shown in battle. This means providing only the very best health care. It means compensating veterans for their injuries. In this time of war, we must



ensure that VA is equipped with all the resources it needs to serve those who have served now and in the future.

Last week the Senate committee held its hearing on the President's fiscal year 2011 budget for the VA, and later this week, we will be sending our recommendations forward to the Senate Budget Committee. Although many agencies are facing budget cuts, I am pleased that the VA budget, critical for meeting the health care and benefit needs of so many of our Nation's veterans, is increasing. Chairman Filner mentioned this.

This does not mean, however, that VA, our committees, and veterans themselves should not do their part in being a good steward of the taxpayers' money.

For the first time, we also see the fruits of our labor in passing the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act. We have before us a budget that includes the funding request for VA medical care into fiscal year 2012. We truly worked together to pass advanced funding for VA health care. Your efforts, the efforts of the DAV, made a difference in that, and you were invaluable.

The President's budget also includes an increase in programs for women veterans. This is a positive sign that VA is transforming to a 21st century organization. DAV understands the need for major changes in the way VA delivers services and has been a leading advocate for women

veterans.

On the benefits side of the ledger, timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims remains a significant problem. I know that the administration is committed to addressing this issue and is moving to add significant staff and resources to that effort. However, I believe we must be realistic about the backlog in claims and its processing, and admit that this situation will get worse before it gets better. It can take years for new staff to become skilled at processing claims. And technology and pilot programs can only do so much in the short term. I will work with VA to find ways to address the overwhelming impact on the compensation system that will occur as a result of the Secretary's recent decision on Agent Orange.

As we move forward, I must stress again that VA must become an organization that can respond to and absorb changes, so that when issues occur, as we know they will, VA is not paralyzed.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on the committees and in Congress as well as Secretary Shinseki and, of course, DAV as we move forward on the budget and legislation.

In closing, I want to thank Commander Barrera. DAV has a long and proud tradition of service and dedication to this Nation and to its veterans. I thank you very much for what

you do, wish you well, and look forward with you to a great year.

The Chairman. Thank you, Chairman Akaka. We appreciate that.

And I know you are going to shift seats down there to introduce the Commander. So you will see him from the other direction in a second.

I would like to recognize, speaking for the minority side, Congressman Jeff Miller from Florida.

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

It is a pleasure to be here today. I do have a lengthy opening statement that I am not going to read and I want to have entered into the record. I am trying to be nice.

But, Commander, welcome back to the Hill.

I would especially like to welcome the Floridians that made the trip here to your Nation's Capital, and including Kay Egan, a Floridian, your national commander of the DAV Auxiliary. And then, two folks from my district, Larry Kaiser and Brian Moore. It is a pleasure to welcome you here to Washington, D.C.

The words have already been said, but without question -- and I know in your written statement today, Mr. Commander, we are going to talk about the claims backlog. There is no question that that has to be the area that we should focus on with laser precision. There is absolutely

no reason in 2010 that people should be lugging around file folders of information. We should go to a paperless system. We should not allow the VA to have the ability to use the excuse: We lost it. We lost it. We lost it.

And I know each and every one of you have run up on that before. In my congressional district, we do the best that we can to help the veterans work through the myriad of situations and problems that they encounter with the VA. We will continue to do that.

But I think the best way that we can, Mr. Chairman, is to work on the claims backlog process. And we have waited too long, tried too many different things that did not work. And, unfortunately, we have allowed some bureaucrats to say that certain things just won't work when we know that if we just try them, that they might work.

So, again, welcome everybody for being here today. And I yield back.

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The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Miller.

The ranking member on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Mr. Burr from North Carolina.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I thank my colleagues.

And I am going to be extremely quick in the hopes that Senator Akaka can make his introduction, and he and I can run back for a vote that was just called several minutes ago.

Commander Barrera, welcome, you and your leadership team. This is a tremendous opportunity for us to hear from you.

I also wanted to take the opportunity to welcome Commander Egan as well.

If I could be so bold, could I ask the North Carolina contingent here to stand up?

I know they are here.

Thank you for coming from North Carolina for this very special day.

Now, if I could also be so bold, if you ever served in North Carolina at one of our military installations, would you stand up?

You have made my case for me.

We have a rich history and a proud tradition of

grooming some of the best, the brightest, and the bravest from North Carolina, something that we can never forget.

Today we are here to listen to the DAV's priorities and to hear your thoughts on how to help improve the lives of veterans, their families, and their survivors.

But I do want to take just a minute to thank all of the DAV for what you do day in and day out on behalf of those DAV members across the country who have served and sacrificed on behalf of us all. Your work is vitally important to so many veterans, their families, all across this country and in my great State of North Carolina.

I also want to comment briefly on some challenges facing our Nation's veterans. More importantly, how we can work together to meet them? As you know, providing timely funding for the VA health care system has been a longstanding challenge. That is why I am pleased to have worked with Chairman Akaka and my House colleagues on legislation to create the process to fund VA's medical system a year in advance, and that is vitally important. As a result, VA's medical care budget is already set for 2011, and the President has requested funds for 2012. Our job now collectively is to make sure the amounts requested are an accurate reflection of the needs that exist.

Another longstanding challenge has been the complex, lengthy, and frustrating VA claims process which so many

have mentioned.

As I mentioned and as you mentioned in your testimony, Commander, it can take years to get an accurate decision on a claim for disability benefits, and I think the process takes too long. It is simply indefensible. To try to address this problem, staffing has been more than doubled in the past 10 years, and the VA is asking for another large increase in 2011.

But with all those resources, the problem persists. In fact, the VA is expecting the backlog to nearly double by the end of fiscal year 2011, and the delays to increase by almost 30 days. It is remarkable how we increased by 1,800 the number of individuals. We will now make them permanent and will add 2,000. Yet, if you look over the last several years, as we increased staffing on the disability claims side, the productivity per employee has decreased. The number of claims processed by an individual has fallen from above 100 to below 80. Clearly, staffing has not been the problem for the last several years.

I think staggering statistics like that demonstrate the urgent need to try a new approach. That is why I asked veterans organizations to come up with a blueprint for overhauling the cumbersome, outdated claims process. I am pleased that the DAV took that request very seriously and provided Congress with many thoughtful and constructive

ideas. I know that the DAV leadership is now in the process of finalizing a comprehensive package of proposed reforms, and I appreciate your continued dedication to this important issue. To tackle this longstanding challenge, it will take the effective effort of all of us.

So I look forward to working with the DAV, my colleagues, and other stakeholders on commonsense changes that will make the claims process work better for veterans, for their families, now and for years to come.

Again, I thank my colleagues for allowing us this opportunity.

And, Mr. Chairman, we have got a vote when you conclude with your introduction.

The Chairman. Thank you, Senator.

I would yield again to Senator Akaka to introduce our commander today, and again note for the audience, the Senators are in the middle of a vote and must get over to the Senate side after his introduction.

Senator Akaka. Thank you very much, Chairman Filner.

Ranking Members Burr and Congressman Miller, members of the committee, it is my very distinct honor and pleasure to introduce the National Commander of the Disabled American Veterans, Roberto Barrera.

Commander Barrera is a service-connected combat-disabled veteran who served with the Marines in



Vietnam. In September of 1969, while traveling in the armored personnel carrier, enemy forces exploded a 500-pound bomb land mine. A fireball that ripped through the vehicle and the force of the blast caused serious facial burns, the loss of his right hand and his left arm. He was medically retired, and left active duty in September of 1970.

Numerous physical and mental obstacles did not stand in Commander Barrera's way as he adjusted to his new life. He returned to his native Texas town of Del Rio, and completed degrees in education, guidance and counseling. He continued to contribute to the needs of his community and those serving in the military while becoming a role model and inspiration to those seeking to overcome the wounds of war and disabilities.

The lists of awards and honors bestowed on the National Commander is very long. His greatest legacy will be his strong love of country, love of veterans, and love of service to others.

Former Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jesse Brown wrote a book entitled, "The Price of Their Blood: Profiles in Spirit," one of the profiles was of Commander Barrera and the remarkable story of his experiences in Vietnam, his extended rehabilitation and recovery, and his personal philosophy on life. I strongly recommend that my colleagues take a look at this profile.

I was especially moved to find out that "Barrera" in Spanish means obstacle, challenge, or barrier; and, that the National Commander credits his strong sense of self and determination to get passed what happened to him and get on with his life, overcoming enormous challenges.

Commander Barrera is accompanied here this morning by his wife, Maricelia.

And I would like to ask her to stand and be recognized.  
Maricelia.

The Commander and his wife are the proud parents of three children and four grandchildren.

Members of the committee, it is with great pleasure and honor that I introduce to the committee and the committees the National Commander of the Disabled American Veterans, Robert Barrera.

The Chairman. Thank you, Senator Akaka. Vote well and vote often.

Commander, you have the floor.

STATEMENT OF ROBERTO "BOBBY" BARRERA, NATIONAL COMMANDER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; ACCOMPANIED BY EDWARD R. REESE, JR., NATIONAL SERVICE DIRECTOR; JOSEPH A. VIOLANTE, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR; DAVID W. GORMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS; ARTHUR H. WILSON, NATIONAL ADJUTANT; MICHAEL J. WALSH, NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE; AND KAY EGAN, NATIONAL COMMANDER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS AUXILIARY

Mr. Barrera. A very kind thank you to Senator Akaka for that very generous introduction. Thank you so much, Senator.

Messrs. Chairmen, I want to also thank you for this opportunity to appear before you and before your committees.

Please also allow me to introduce those that are seated at the table with me as well as some of our distinguished guests: National Adjutant Art Wilson; Executive Directors Rick Patterson and Dave Gorman; Service Director Randy Reese; Legislative Director Joe Violante; Voluntary Services Director Mike Walsh; Auxiliary Commander, National Commander Kay Egan of Florida; auxiliary National Adjutant Judy Hezlep; DAV Senior Vice Commander Wally Tyson of North Carolina; junior Vice Commanders Donald Samuels of

Tennessee, Larry Polzin of California, Mary Bencivenga of New Jersey, and Joseph Johnson of Ohio. Also, National Judge Advocate Mike Dobmeier of North Dakota; Past National Commander Ray Dempsey of Illinois; chaplain, Charles Edwards of Texas; and my National Chief of Staff, Duke Hendershot.

Also, my wife, was already introduced.

But thank you for being with me, Maricelia.

I will also ask that the DAV National Executive Committee please stand to be recognized.

May I ask now members of the National Legislative Interim Committee to please stand.

And, finally, I would like to also recognize the entire DAV delegation from the great State of Texas, please stand.

Messrs. Chairmen and members of the Veterans Affairs' Committee, on behalf of the more than 1.5 million members of the Disabled American Veterans and its auxiliary, I am honored for this opportunity to discuss the agenda of our Nation's wartime disabled veterans and their families.

Senators Akaka and Burr, Representatives Filner and Buyer, I congratulate you on your leadership roles in the 111th Congress on legislation that is important to the Nation's service-disabled veterans, their families, and their survivors.

This year marks the 90th anniversary of the DAV. In 1920, veterans who had returned from what was then called

the Great War were concerned about the mess that our government had made of programs for veterans. One of these veterans was Judge Robert S. Marx, an Army Captain who had been wounded on November 10, 1918. This organization was born out of the special bonds and of the solidarity of purpose as they tried to return to a normal life upon their return from war.

As National Commander, I am extremely proud of the DAV's many accomplishments and the services that we provide to those who return from war wounded and disabled, and to their loved ones as well.

Messrs. Chairmen, since DAV was founded, advocating the meaningful and reasonable and responsible public policy for service-disabled veterans has been at the heart of who we are and of what we do. Today, our commitment in that regard takes on particular significance as America's brave young men and women have been sent into harm's way in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Each day new casualties return needing medical care and rehabilitation, and a chance for a rewarding and productive life.

Messrs. Chairmen, we must not forget that the citizens and the government of our country that sends its sons and daughters to defend the homeland and to fight its wars have the strong moral obligation to repay them for the burdens that they bear. Without their services and their

sacrifices, we would not enjoy the freedoms that so many Americans take for granted.

Messrs. Chairmen, I would like to extend our thanks to the leadership of this Congress for ensuring that the Department of Veterans Affairs has a budget that is sufficient to meet the needs of our Nation's disabled veterans, their families, and their survivors. One of the DAV's highest priorities for the past several decades, reform of the VA's health care funding, was enacted into law on October 22, 2009, when the President signed H.R. 1016, the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act.

This important legislation, overwhelmingly passed by Congress, requires the administration to conclude health care funding one year in advance. Further, it requires the Comptroller General to study the adequacy and the accuracy of the health care baseline projections for 3 years and to report these results to Congress.

Messrs. Chairmen, the veterans of this country owe you and your colleagues a debt of gratitude for the passage of this very important legislation. Now the VA will know ahead of time what its new budget will be. But, more importantly, health care services to veterans will not be disrupted by a lack of planning or untimely budgets. Messrs. Chairmen, Senator Burr, and others on these committees who sponsored this legislation, please accept our sincere thanks for

moving this funding reform proposal to its ultimate enactment.

Another area sorely in need of reform is the benefits delivery system. As you know, a core mission of the VA is to provide benefits to relieve the economic effects of disability on veterans and their families. For these benefits to effectively fulfill their intended purpose, VA must properly deliver them to veterans. Protracted delays in providing these benefits mean disabled veterans and their families suffer hardships. Protracted delays can lead to deprivation, bankruptcies, and homelessness. Disability benefits are critical for disabled veterans and should always be a top priority of our government, that the VA can promptly deliver the benefits to veterans only if it can process and adjudicate claims in a timely and in an accurate fashion.

If a claim is not properly adjudicated the first time, it can take years and even more than a decade to receive an accurate decision. No one should be treated this way, and this is especially true of veterans, who have earned the benefit to them through honorable service to our Nation. Therefore, reform of the veterans benefits approval system is the DAV's highest priority for this year. And you can be sure that DAV members and other veterans and concerned citizens are united to eliminate the log jam of claims, to

streamline the process, and to reduce the time that it takes to get a quality accurate benefit decision from the VA. Do it right the first time.

Our goals are simple. Claimants should be able to apply for benefits through a simple, uniform, and modern IT-based process that enables the VA to make accurate decisions within acceptable timeframes. Active duty service members should be able to apply for benefits before they are discharged through a simple and uniform modern system that enables accurate decisions by the time of their discharge.

But to do that, the VA must have adequate resources properly invested in a long-term strategy instead of short-term superficial gains. Only then can the claims backlog really be overcome.

The DAV was pleased that Secretary Shinseki has pledged to transform the VA into a people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking organization. For decades we have fought for improvements in claims processing. And while staffing at the Veterans Benefits Administration now appears to be sufficient, other core problems remain. What is also needed is better training and accountability for VBA employees. And the VBA must continue to upgrade its information technology to create a new electronics claims process so that the VA can get it right the first time.

Messrs. Chairmen, in the near future, DAV plans to



have, with the support of other service organizations and military organizations, a comprehensive package of both short-term and long-term solutions. Once we have those concrete administrative and legislative solutions, we will share them with your staffs, and we look forward to working with you to make the system work better for everyone.

Messrs. Chairmen, the DAV is also providing major support to the Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial Foundation in its work to construct a memorial to disabled veterans in Washington, D.C., to honor the brave men and women who have sacrificed so much to protect and defend our cherished freedoms. Several years ago Congress enacted legislation that authorizes the construction of the memorial in the shadow of the United States Capitol. And although Congress authorized the transfer of the land to the U.S. Park Service for this memorial, Congress did not provide necessary funding for street reconfiguration. I call upon all of you to support our efforts to appropriate the remaining \$2 million so that the property can be reconfigured.

Messrs. Chairmen, your committees' support of these issues are greatly appreciated by the men and women who have sacrificed so much for our country. The DAV's nationwide core of 242 professional National Service Officers and 34 Transition Service Officers are the best in the business.

All of our NSOs and TSOs are wartime service-connected disabled veterans. About two-thirds of them are Gulf War veterans or veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who continue the legacy to provide the best benefits counseling and claims assistance available anywhere. Last year alone, our NSOs interviewed, free of charge, over 176 clients, and obtained for them more than \$4.5 billion in new and retroactive benefits.

Equally vital to the success of our mission are the activities of more than 14,000 DAV and auxiliary members who volunteer their valuable time to assist America's sick and disabled veterans. Last year, these men and women continued to serve our Nation by providing 2.2 million hours of essential service to hospitalized veterans, and our local veterans assistance program provides volunteers even more opportunities to assist veterans and their dependents in their own communities.

Last year, the DAV national organization and our departments and our chapters donated 150 vans free of charge as part of our nationwide transportation network. Since we began this free transportation program, the DAV has purchased and then donated 2,260 vans to the VA at a cost of \$46.6 million. This year, we plan to donate an additional 103 new vans to the VA at a cost to DAV of \$2.5 million. Since 1987, we have provided free transportation to more

than 12 million veterans in every State and in every congressional district in the country.

For all that they do, our volunteers in their communities, these magnificent volunteers are a source of pride and inspiration to us all, and I want to acknowledge their commitment and their compassion for our Nation's veterans. To our volunteers, I say thank you so much.

Messrs. Chairmen, and members of the committees, I ask that you remain mindful that the freedoms and opportunities enjoyed by all of our Nation's citizens has been paid for with the lives and the health of many brave Americans. All we ask in return for our sacrifices and for our service to our Nation is to honor the sacred contract with America's disabled veterans.

We must therefore honor and care for those who distinguish themselves in defense of freedom, whatever the cost might be. Disabled veterans and their dependents and their survivors deserve nothing less.

Messrs. Chairmen, this completes my testimony, and my staff will be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have. I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you on behalf of the DAV to share our proud history of service to veterans and to our country, and to discuss our agenda for the 111th Congress.

Thank you also for all that your committees have done

and will continue to do for veterans in the future.

May God bless America. May God bless America's soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, and Coast Guardsmen who have been placed in harm's way. And may God bless the work of these committees on behalf of our Nation's service-disabled veterans, their families, and their survivors.

I thank you so much for allowing us to appear before you.

[The statement of Roberto Barrera appears on p. ]

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The Chairman. Thank you, Commander. You have given us a lot of things to think about.

And I want to recognize first, for either questions or comments, the chairman of our Health Subcommittee, Mr. Michaud of Maine. And before he starts, I would like to thank him not only for his work this year that he is going to be doing on rural veterans and access to health care for our rural veterans, but I will tell you, at a time when the advanced funding proposal seemed to be losing some steam in the White House and other places, Mr. Michaud stepped in and said, no, we are going to do it this year.

Thank you, Mr. Michaud.

Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for your kind remarks. I had a good teacher on how to be persistent on certain issues. So I want to thank you.

I want to thank you as well, Commander, for your testimony here this afternoon and everyone who came out on the Hill to lobby Members of Congress on issues important to the DAV.

Before I begin, I also would actually like to ask the folks from Maine if they could stand up, and I want to thank them for coming to Washington, D.C. And we got some snow down here so you can feel at home.

So will the Maine delegation please stand?

And, Mr. Chairman, I want to really -- I appreciate your having this hearing and all your hard work making sure that we do what we have to do to make sure veterans are taken care of. And it definitely was a team effort on advanced funding. Everyone on the committee was very involved in it. But we could not have done it without the advocacy of the DAV. Joe Violante did a tremendous job in making sure that the committee had the information, that we had the commitment letter when the President was actually running for office, and when the Office of Budget wanted some statements as far as what effect it will have.

It was very difficult getting statements from current VA employees, but Mr. Violante actually produced testimony of individual former VA employees. So it is because of the DAV and Joe and what you have done that we were able to get that legislation passed through Congress and to the President's desk.

You had mentioned a backlog, and I do know looking at some of the different VSSNs, some VSSNs do a better job in dealing with claims than other VSSNs. Have you done an analysis of the more problematic VSSNs to find out whether it is just a philosophy change, or whether or not those are the VSSNs that might need some additional help as far as moving these claims forward?

Mr. Barrera. I think -- there are different areas that

have different statistics, and I think the staff has them available.

Mr. Reese. Mr. Michaud, we haven't had an opportunity to analyze all the data by VSSN. Normally that is a breakout of the Veterans Health Care Administration. But the Veterans Benefits Administration SDN, they provide a comprehensive breakout on the Monday morning workload. It does break out each different disability benefit package from original compensation and pension, entitlements, and so on and so forth, which we can certainly provide for you if you'd like.

Mr. Michaud. That would be helpful. Because I know one of the issues, when you look at the backlog, and part of the issue is, quite frankly, is we have actually dealt with some of the Priority Eight veterans issues and allowing more Priority Eight veterans into the system. And that leads me to my next question dealing with Priority Eight veterans. As you know, we have been tiering more veterans into the VA system. The first estimate is approximately 266,000 new Priority Eight veterans will be eligible. However, they are coming up short on that number. I believe it is approximately 193,000 that currently have access to the system.

What is DAV doing as far as trying to make sure that those veterans, new Priority Eight veterans, get the

information and hopefully get them enrolled into the VA? Do you have an aggressive program to help in that regard?

Mr. Violante. Mr. Michaud, most of our membership falls within the first three priority groups. Some of our members are priority group eight. We firmly believe that in order for VA to provide the full continuum of care that they have promised to us, that we need a certain number of veterans in the system and that priority group eights and sevens must be in the system also. But we really haven't done anything to reach out to those. VA has been doing their efforts to make them aware of that. But we do support having that critical mass available so that the full continuum of care can be provided to our members.

Mr. Michaud. Thank you.

My last question, since I am running out of time, is I know the DAV does a great job with the vans. I have talked to some veterans in Maine as far as the volunteers. It is a lot of work; a lot of time is put in. Do you see that there is an effort or there is a concern among the volunteers as it relates to the DAV vans, getting enough volunteers to provide that service for our veterans? And, if so, what do you think we should be doing with it to address the concerns?

Mr. Gorman. Mr. Michaud, that has always been a concern. We have always had more than a sufficient number



of vans out there, I believe, across the country at medical centers. Where we have had a difficulty is trying to secure volunteers. I think it is the local facilities have of recent date really ramped up their efforts in order to go out and recruit more volunteer drivers. And I think perhaps some of the economy is helping, in a perverted kind of way, us in doing that, because more people who perhaps are not employed at the current time are looking for ways to become useful and productive in their communities and at the same time trying to find employment. And I think driving vans and veterans back and forth is a very meaningful and useful way for them to occupy their time. So we have been ramping that up quite a bit.

Mr. Barrera. If I may add to that, and that is something that would alleviate the concern that you have, sir, and that is something that happened in my hometown of Del Rio, is the setting up clinics within the local communities where some of the need for driving these additional miles. In my case, the veterans from my community drive 150 miles one way. And with the help of Chairman Filner, he even made a visit to Del Rio, Texas, with our Congressman, and now, last month, we started a clinic in Del Rio, which will reduce the need for all the mileage and the drivers that we had in our organization.

And I thank you for that, sir.

Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much.

And, once again, I want to thank all DAV folks here for coming out today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Michaud.

Our committee has been blessed with a lot of first-term Congress people. They have added a level of energy, enthusiasm, and commitment to us. And one of those is Ms. Kirkpatrick of Arizona, who represents one of the largest districts by land in the Nation and therefore has been a leader in making sure that we provide access to our rural veterans and our Native American veterans.

Thank you. Ms. Kirkpatrick.

Mrs. Kirkpatrick. Thank you, all of you who made the journey to Washington. Whether you came by air or rail or drove here, it is a long trip. So I just want to thank you for making that sacrifice.

And on behalf of all of your members, I am honored to be able to continue a long Arizona tradition of service to the Veterans Services Committee. I represent a large portion of the district formerly served by the Honorable Bob Stump.

On behalf, Commander, of all the lifetime Arizona members, I think it is about 16,000 you have in Arizona, thank you and your panelists for your leadership.

I thank the folks from Arizona who visited with me today. And continuing with the tradition of this committee, will the Arizona folks stand and be recognized?

Thank you.

As Chairman Filner mentioned, I represent a large rural district. It is actually the 10th largest district in the country, and that includes the other districts that are entire States, like Alaska. But something unique, it is a largely rural district. It is bigger than the State of Illinois. But like Illinois in the 1800s, we have small towns, not much communication, and we have a lot of veterans. We have a higher proportion of veterans, but a greater underutilization of veterans services. And so I thank you for working with me to reach out to those underserved areas. I can already see some progress, and I thank you for your leadership on that.

About a year ago, I met Dr. Norman Jones, a veteran, here. And he said, Representative Kirkpatrick, I just want to remind you to fight for veterans with all your might for they have already paid the price. And I went back from the committee meeting and wrote that down on a little piece of paper. And if you come into my office, you will see it taped right above my desk.

And, Commander, I thank you today for reminding us to keep our sacred contract with our disabled veterans. I am

humbled by your service. I am honored to be here to continue our work on behalf of this committee. But my heartfelt thanks goes to you and all of your disabled veterans and everyone who is here today. Thank you.

The Chairman. Thank you, Ms. Kirkpatrick.

Another energetic, committed, enthusiastic first-termer is Mr. Perriello of Virginia. Virginia has one of the largest concentrations of both active duty folks and veterans, and he has taken a strong role in representing them all. Mr. Perriello.

RPTS KESTERSON

DCMN MAGMER

[3:03 p.m.]

Mr. Perriello. Thank you very much.

We are a very proud State in terms of our tradition of service. I have the honor of representing, among other areas, Bedford, Virginia, the home of the Bedford Boys, from World War II; and we have the D Day memorial there which we hope you all have had a chance to visit.

Would all of those who have served and reside in the State of Virginia, please stand.

I just want to note that I certainly echo many of the things that have been said. It has been a pleasure working on the advance appropriations and other issues, the rural access issues that have been mentioned.

One other thing I want to commend you for and then ask a question is the tremendous intergenerational work that DAV has done. As one of the younger Members of Congress, I certainly have a lot of friends who are coming back OEF/OIF veterans. And because of the great advances in battlefield medicine we are seeing, we are blessed to have the challenge of an increasing number of folks coming back with a range of disabilities; and I think you have done a wonderful job of making sure that, rather than some of the old divisions

between generations within the veteran communities, you have really been a bridge builder. And I want to commend that and I think we are stronger as a Nation and particularly the veterans' advocacy efforts are stronger for that ability to speak across generational lines in very powerful ways.

And a quick follow-up question on top of that: In looking at some of the benefit issues you have outlined and other things, are there some specific concerns you have with regards to disability benefit and other issues for the new generation coming back that we should have on the forefront of our minds?

Mr. Violante. One of the things that concern us is having a different tier of benefits for different generations of veterans. We believe that the benefits that are provided should apply to all veterans. It is a problem of how they receive those or don't receive them in many cases, as we pointed out. But when we do find gaps such as caregivers and women veterans and we point that out and try to make it intergenerational and not just for new veterans -- because we don't want to, as I said, have a two-tiered system. It has always been that way with the GI bill. There has always been new GI bills with each generation.

With regards to regular benefits, we believe that the system is set up to encompass all the things that are out

there that affect veterans because VA uses an analogous rating. So we just want to make sure that all veterans receive all of the benefits that are available.

Mr. Gorman. If I could just add something to that also from DAV's mission statement of service to disabled veterans and their dependents.

The committee mentioned in its testimony that we have about 34 what we call transition service officers. Those men and women are exclusively limited to doing their work on military installations across the country, trying to make sure that the new generation of veteran who is being discharged is made aware of, knowledgeable, and learned about the benefits that they are entitled to from the VA. So there is a big shift in DAV's perspective to making sure that new generation of veteran is taken care of. Our national service offices take care of, also, the new generation of veteran but also continue to provide service to veterans who have been out of service for sometime. So there is the recognition that there is an educational perspective to the new veterans' needs, making them aware of what they are entitled to; and we are striving to do that.

Mr. Barrera. If I may add just a personal observation. I was once asked what I perceived to be my most important job as national commander. And in spite of all the things that come with the position, I think the most important is

to visit hospitals as our young troops return and to embrace them, to make sure that we become united and they become aware of the entitlements that have due to their service to our country. And that is something that I will fulfill as long as I wear this cover.

Thank you.

Mr. Perriello. So much of the best support for veterans comes from veterans. One of the reasons we tried to do a lot of support for veteran business owners is we know veterans hire veterans, and that continues to be one of the best support networks we have.

I have certainly been a leader and a supporter on efforts to support caregivers of disabled veterans. We know that this is an issue that we have to look at the entire military family and not just the man or woman who served. So we really appreciate that.

We also know right now, with the unprecedented unemployment of our returning veterans, that we are looking at issues related to that as well. So I just wanted to thank you so much for your efforts.

We know that at the same time that we try to fix things on the policy level, there are always going to be gaps. And I know the amount of work that you all have done in terms of volunteering, in terms of charitable donations, in terms of looking out for one another has truly been a lifeline to so



many of our disabled veterans and their families, and I just want to thank you again for your leadership and support.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Perriello.

I want to recognize Mr. Boozman from Arkansas.

Mr. Boozman is the ranking member of our Economic Opportunity Committee and took a leadership role in making sure that the GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century met the needs that we had for this Nation. Thank you, Mr. Boozman.

Mr. Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, so much; and it really is an honor to see you all up here again. The only sad thing is seems like you were just here yesterday. The time gets by so quickly.

I know it is a difficult trip, but we are all called to do different things. We have our positions here in the situation that we have been thrust in, working on both sides. We have the leadership of the DAV that does such a great job. But I will tell you, the glue that kind of holds it altogether is you guys. And I know it seems like a little thing to climb on a plane or get in a car and drive up here, but I cannot tell you how important it is as you make your Hill visits and you look your Member of Congress in the eye and say, this is important to me; we expect you to be on board. That is a big deal. So, again, thank you for doing what you are doing.

I would like for our group from Arkansas to stand.

They have already been up in the office, grabbing me by the throat.

Steve Gray is back here. Steve is my senior advisor in military affairs, but he is also my senior advisor, period. And he does a tremendous job for us, and we really do appreciate him.

I have got a question to ask real quickly. In looking at the testimony, Commander, one of the recommendations was to extend the 12-year limit on vocational rehab and unemployment benefits. My understanding is that, in general, a veteran has 12 years from discharge or notification of service-connected disability to participate in the vocational rehab and employment program and that VA has the authority to extend that limit under certain circumstances. Could you all provide some details why the 12-year limit is not appropriate and do you have a suggestion as to what we need to do in that regard to perhaps strengthen that?

Mr. Reese. Mr. Boozman, while it is correct that there is a delimiting date there of 12 years, unfortunately, with the wars we have right now in Iraq and Afghanistan, the catastrophic injuries that are being sustained sometimes will remove a person from their eligibility for those benefits for 3, 4, or even 5 years. So 12 years gets reduced instantly to 7 years. And even with a decision made

by VR&E to extend that timeline, it is usually something along the lines of 12 to 24 months. So 12 years certainly could be extended.

It would be nice to have some more flexibility in the regulations for VR&E to be able to utilize. But we definitely want to make sure that veterans get to use the benefits as they were intended by Congress.

Mr. Boozman. Good. Very good. Thank you very much. And, again, I appreciate the hard work of the guys that represent you so well up here. Thank you, Commander, for being here and all that you represent, and we really do appreciate it.

I also want to thank the auxiliary that does -- when I am at the groups, the gatherings, the auxiliary is the backbone of the group; and it just doesn't function without you guys.

I was at a similar group saying the same thing. I have told this story before but, driving home, my wife was with me. I have a wife and three daughters. So there is lots of drama at my house. But she looked at me and she said, John, they are not only the backbone, but they are the brains of the group, also. Again, thank you all very, very much.

The Chairman. I want to recognize Mr. Walz of Minnesota. Sergeant Major Walz is the highest ranking enlisted man ever elected to Congress. Thank you.

Mr. Walz. Well, thank you for that.

I remember the first time the chairman said that in a room just like this. One of you stood up and said, it is about damn time. Now take care of the soldiers. So I very much appreciate that, Chairman Filner. Thank you.

And I think the importance of having you here -- and we had a bit of a hiatus there and brought you back. The importance of having you here can never be overstated. When I listen to you, Commander -- and, by the way, congratulations. You have worked countless years in enabling better lives for our veterans, and this is the right place for you.

But listening to your passionate and eloquent words of wisdom, I think when you are here it is like the conscience of the country is here. And I said, when I listened to you speak, you weren't speaking just about veterans. You were speaking as a country as a whole, something bigger than each one of us. So having you back here and, Chairman Filner, I thank you for doing that.

DAV has always led from the front. You did it in battle, and you do it now for our veterans. You have been a voice across the table. When times were tough, you were still there, and you continue to push. Each and every one of you, when I meet with you, there is a clear understanding of this. This job will never be done. We are never going

to get it all right. We are never going to have it perfect. Because what we always understand is no matter how much we wish that we would never have to send our men and women off to fight again, we are pragmatic. We know that day will probably come, and we will be ready. And when we do, that commitment from the day they raise their hands until the day we bury them with honor will never lighten on us. We must be there. And I said it is always encouraging for me to know you are there every step of the way. So thank you.

Just a couple of things, Commander; and I think, again, your words make this very clear. I know you talked about the street reconfiguration, and I certainly don't want to play down difficult economic times. We have a responsibility both here at the State levels and local levels to take control of budgets, make sure we balance our budgets and get them in shape. But it never, ever can be done on the backs of veterans. And the simple idea that we are waiting on \$2 million to start making this happen or to get it there, I know that the chairman and the rest of them --

I see my colleagues here. The one thing in listening to Mr. Boozman speak, I often wish and I think it can be that way, because it is our responsibility, if every part of Congress functioned like this committee did with the camaraderie, with the sense of purpose and the sense of

respect that goes on both sides, I think we could get this done. So this one I want to take a look at.

What I want to leave you with is just something -- many of you have heard me say this, and I feel like I am becoming a broken record. Many of you have been on this for a lot of years. We keep functioning and working on these issues, whether it is a backlog of claims, simplifying the system, making sure our veterans, they see us as advocates not adversaries. And we have been fighting, we have been making progress, and then we take a step back. A couple forward and a step back.

I have been convinced for years that the problem in listening to you, Commander -- you had it dead on right -- is the issue of the two big bureaucracies of DOD and VA having those barriers up between them. And this issue of seamless transition I think is a systemic fix. We are starting to get there.

The last time we had a hearing, I went back to my office and my staff said, well, I think you have to call a couple of your colleagues after that rant and apologize for that. And I was thinking to myself, as a sergeant major, I said, that was not a rant; I was talking pretty nicely in that. But they were probably right. My point on that was taken.

As we were sitting there yelling at Secretary Shinseki

and the VA about how come they can't get together, and our colleagues over in Armed Services aren't in the room with us. And we are not talking about them, how we make sure what the commander said, a commonsense thing. We have the claims process already started. So by the time they discharge, the claim is done, and there is a truly seamless transition in their lives, in their finances, in their job search, in their rehabilitation and everything else that goes to that.

Because, again, Commander, you were absolutely right. There is a moral obligation to do that, and it is also in the benefit of this Nation. You and all those other veterans that come back possess a wealth of knowledge that can build this Nation, that are economic drivers. These are the best employees we can get, and yet we let them fall off a cliff. Then we fish for them, then we try to pull them back into the VA, and then we try and get the process started.

So I am going to continue to ask your help on this, and you have been there, that I think the time has come, the Nation is there. There is not a single person that would disagree with a single word the Commander said. We should take the will of the American public, turn that into legislation, turn it into policy, and get this seamless transition done using the technology, using the will that we

have and make sure that every soldier from the time they raise their hand until we bury them with honor, it is seamless all the way across and cut down on the --

So thank you for your time, and I yield back.

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Walz. When the Sergeant Major talks, we better listen.

Mr. Adler from New Jersey is one of our very energetic and committed first-termers. Thank you, Mr. Adler.

Mr. Adler. Chairman, thank you; and, Command Sergeant Major, I am ready to drop and give you 10. That was good. That was good. Thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish my four sons were here. They love action movies, they love to see thrillers, they love to see sci-fi movies, they love to see superheros, and I wish they were here to look at you. These are superheros. You all put a uniform on, and that would have been enough. Many of you were disabled in the line of duty, and that would have been enough to make you really, truly heroes. And we would have had a debt of gratitude from the Nation to each and every one of you.

But those of you who have the cap on as a disabled American veteran are here not just so fight for yourself but to fight for folks like you who don't have the strength, who don't have the voice to do it. That is what really in my book makes you heroes, to keep fighting for the next



generation of heroes for our country, to remind all of us in Congress and all the people around this country that we have to stand up for them, not just with parades but with words and deeds that matter in terms of education, in terms of psychological and medical care, in terms of economic opportunities.

I couldn't agree more with my friend, Mr. Walz, that what you stand for is special for America. And we are not here as Democrats or Republicans. We are here as grateful Americans. You have given us freedom. You have given us safety. We have to give back to you and all of the disabled American veterans the sort of actions that Congress can do to make your lives whole, to make that seamless transition a reality for you and for the next generation of warriors for our great country.

So I am going to be with you, I will be with our chairman, our ranking member, Mr. Walz, and all the people on this committee and, as he said, on the Armed Services Committee members to try to do what is right by you and all the other warriors wounded otherwise that serve our great country.

Thank you and God bless America. Thank you.

The Chairman. I would like to recognize Mr. Miller from Florida. Mr. Miller represents the Pensacola area of his State and has apparently the greatest concentration of

veterans in this Nation.

We thank you for your commitment, Mr. Miller.

Mr. Miller. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Commander, real quickly, I think all of us have already expressed that we are with DAV and glad that you have elevated the claims backlog issue to the top of your list.

One of the things that has been worked on recently is the business transition lab where there are two current prototypes, if you will, pilot programs that are going on I think in Connecticut and Arkansas as well; and I am interested in knowing from DAV's position what you think about these pilot programs? Are they working, are they moving in the right direction, and do you think this will get us to a place where we can see a resolution?

Mr. Reese. Thank you, Mr. Miller.

My deputy service rep had an opportunity to travel to Arkansas, take a look at that pilot; and we also plan to go up into Providence, Rhode Island, and look at the pilot that is there. Both of those are individual components of an overhaul of the IT infrastructure. Ultimately, they are going to bring to bear both of those components in Baltimore in a virtual regional office setting.

However, there has been no solidification of a plan, if you will, of how they are going to use the component in Arkansas and how they are going to use the component in

Rhode Island to improve any quality measures when it comes down to claims processing. While they may streamline it, quality seems to be the missing component across the board in every endeavor the VDA has undertaken, and that is certainly something that concerns us all.

Mr. Miller. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, I apologize. I see Mr. Hall has just come in, so I am going to yield my time to him. I have to skip out. I have two folks from DAV that are coming to the office, and I don't want to make them wait. So I am going to leave. Thank you very much for being here.

The Chairman. Good sense of priorities.

I would like to recognize Mr. Hall from New York, who is chairman of our Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Committee and has taken the lead in dealing with the disability claims backlog.

We thank you for your efforts, Mr. Hall.

Mr. Hall. Thank you, Mr. Chairman; and thank you all and thank you for your testimony, which I will read in its entirety. I am sorry to say I had to be across the street. I was speaking on behalf of a piece of legislation of mine that was scheduled over there on the floor.

So I want to thank Mr. Chairman and the chairman of the Senate committee for holding this hearing. Mr. Barrera, thank you for being here today and for your presentation.

Thanks to the other members of DAV who made the journey here today, including our strong New York delegation. It is extremely important for us as Members of Congress and of this committee to hear from the veterans we represent.

I was honored and happy and well-fed this morning at the DAV legislative breakfast, honored to spend time with you then. And I don't want to take up a lot of time now but comment briefly on your discussion on the VA claims backlog.

I am fully in agreement with your concerns. The District Attorney, obviously, has a long way to go and much work ahead to cut down the inventory of claims.

As the Secretary says, there is good news and bad news. The good news is we are hiring more claims processors. The President and his budget has put in still more money to hire still more claims processors, sort of the old-fashioned way of getting the numbers down by applying more person power to it. At the same time, there are pilot programs going on to try to computerize and use IT solutions to deal with as many of them as possible.

But, nonetheless, we have still more claims coming in, partly as a result of the three new Agent Orange-connected diseases -- ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's, and hairy cell leukemia -- which are now automatically service connected for those who served in Vietnam and, of course, the osteoporosis automatic service connection for prisoners

of war.

The expectation of the Secretary, as I understand it, is somewhere around a quarter of a million new claims will come just from those diseases suddenly becoming automatic. So veterans, of course, when they hear that, who may have been holding back, will file a claim; and that number will be rising even as we are trying to drive it down.

So we all want the number down, the number of days to process a claim to be as low as possible, to be something that the public would accept, that we who are not veterans and are not dealing with the VA would accept from a private insurer, for instance; and I don't think we are anywhere near that, but we are moving in the right direction. It is my number one priority for this year, as is passing the legislation, H.R. 952, which has been voted out of the full committee on the House side, as well as the subcommittee to provide an automatic service connection for posttraumatic stress disorder, or injury, as some would prefer it to be called.

I would echo the statement in your rallying cry: Do it right the first time to save time, resources, and lives. I look forward to working with all of you and the other veteran service organizations to address this issue and the other challenges in the coming year.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman; and thank you all for the

service that you --

The Chairman. Thank you, Mr. Hall.

Thank you to all the committee members.

I just want to make a few comments if I may, Mr. Commander, for your reaction.

I know the answer I am going to get, but how many of you are Vietnamese veterans?

Virtually everybody. We thank you so much.

Let me just say, as someone who has been now studying this for 18 years, this country made a large error when we did not welcome you home as heroes. We did not do the job we should have done. Many of us who opposed the war -- and I was one of them -- failed to distinguish between the war and the warrior. The warriors were heroes, and we are paying a very heavy price for not doing that job right when you all came home. I mean, the homeless on the street, half are Vietnamese vets. The suicide rates are just incredible for veterans of the Vietnam era. So we have a lot to say we are sorry for. And I think we should not just say that I am sorry or thank you. We should do things in deeds.

Let me give you the best example that I can think of and a few others. Let me hear from you. The Agent Orange situation has been, as Mr. Hall said, has been improved somewhat lately. But we have set up a whole set of obstacles and hoops for our Vietnamese vets to jump through,

and people have been fighting that situation sometimes for decades, and fighting a bureaucracy sometimes is more damaging to your health than the original injury. It seems to me we should get rid of all those barriers.

I have a slogan like: Get it right the first time. I have a slogan that says, if you were there, we should care. I don't care if you were -- if your boots were on the ground, if you were in the blue waters offshore, if you were in the blue skies up above, if you were in Cambodia or Laos or you were handling Agent Orange in Guam or on our soil, there was damage done. We should pay the disability claim now, in my opinion.

Now, I have two pieces of legislation, one that expands the boots-on-the-ground requirement to everybody else who was in theater and could or possibly could have been exposed to Agent Orange. But I also have one that says, let us just end the -- I will say the suffering of all of you and your comrades who have had injuries which could be traceable to Agent Orange or you think are traceable. The suffering should end for you all, and we should pay these claims now. That would, I think, bring the backlog by half or something like that. So if we are talking about the claims' backlog, honoring the Agent Orange ones now would be an incredible move toward fixing that situation.

So I am trying to find ways to say thank you to our

Vietnamese vets in concrete ways. We can never repay, I think, the damage we have done by not welcoming you home as heroes. But we have to try to do the things that you are going through now to say and finally thank you so much, our Vietnamese veterans.

After your disability claim priority which you have, Mr. Commander, there is another tier of issues that this committee is working on and will work on this year. We are going to look at homeless veterans in a really focused way. Our Secretary, Secretary Shinseki, has announced a plan to end veterans homelessness in 5 years. And I think we can do that. We should do it. It is a disgrace for anyone to be on the streets in America, but to allow our homeless -- I mean, our veterans to be homeless is a double or triple tragedy, and we should try to end that immediately.

We have talked several times about access for our rural veterans. We are going to pay a lot of attention to that.

And what these new wars have done, of course, is to raise to a whole new level the participation, the courage, and the heroism of our women veterans. And we have not paid much attention to them. We are going to soon, I hope, pass what I am calling a bill of rights for women veterans. It will be posted on every facility. We have asked all of the auxiliaries to participate in that process. Since the men haven't solved it, we are going to get --



And I will tell you, we need your help; and I am going to talk to all of the members here. The VA was set up as a men's institution. It is a cultural -- I mean, that is what the culture is. And from little things to big things, we have got to make some major changes.

But one of the things we have to change is when a woman veteran walks into a health center, all the guys sitting there have to show respect and not -- we have got things to do, from privacy rooms and changing curtains, because it was not set up for women.

But all us men have to change our thinking. If a woman comes in with an arm missing from Fallujah, let us make sure we didn't think, well, that is a woman; she probably had cancer or something. We have got to show respect and honor for this new group of veterans, and we have to change our heads up here. And I hope that the auxiliary will give some lectures to these guys.

We need your help in changing this culture. There has to be gender-specific doctors. There has to be -- if a single mom has children, there has got to be a place for children, frankly.

By the way, adding children to a VA medical facility changes the whole ambiance. I mean, it is incredible. All the grandpops are playing with the kids, and the kids love the grandpops and the grandmoms. But it changes everything.

But we have got to meet the needs of our new veterans, and we are going to do it. I promise you that is going to happen.

Lastly, Mr. Commander, on the disability claims, we have witnessed in certainly the years I have been chairman an incredible growth of staff members. Thousands and thousands have been added. But, as we heard -- I mean, the claims keep piling up. It takes several years to train these new people. Meanwhile, other people have dropped off. So what our Secretary has called meeting this problem by brute force in my opinion is not working, and we could keep adding thousands.

I don't think, frankly, it is going to do the job. I want to change the whole -- I said earlier I think -- paradigm, the way we do it; and, for a lot of reasons, the veteran groups have not been enthusiastic about my change. So I am going to go over your head to your membership.

We used to think -- most of you can remember when the IRS was the most dysfunctional agency in America. You didn't know if you were going to get your refund. Nobody was respectful of you when you called. It was a runaround. It was one of the most dysfunctional agencies we had, the IRS. Yet now when you file your 1040, you have got until April 15th, guys, and you have a refund coming, you will get it in 3 weeks guaranteed.

Now, how did they do that? How did they go from this completely unresponsive thing that would take -- that you never knew when you would get your refund, if you got it at all.

They set up a new system which said, when you file your return, we are going to accept it subject to audit. We are just going to accept the claim, send you the refund within weeks. And then by their manpower and stuff they could figure out who to audit. And whatever they do, it takes whatever time they want, but they are going to trust you. Trust, as President Reagan said, but verify.

Now, I think we could apply that principle to the VA. Now, if your claim was aided by one of your great veteran service officers who worked for you -- how many of you guys help people file their claims?

Voice. Two hundred and seventy.

The Chairman. You have got hundreds of people around the country. Other VSOs have their hundreds. The counties have theirs. The States have theirs. The VA has theirs. These are certified. They are certified, right? They are certified to help you. They have had a certain amount -- they are tested, I guess, on the information that they are supposed to know. Well, what if your claim was helped by one of these VSOs?

I say, accept it subject to audit. Who can we trust

more than veterans, in my opinion. Now, there will be some trying to game the system, but we have got hundreds of thousands that are waiting. People have died before their claims have come back. People have lost their homes because they didn't have the money. If it has been helped by one of your guys, subject to audit.

Now, I know there are certain rules. Your guys have to, I think, help even if they don't think it is that. But maybe we need a more rigorous view of that to institute this new system.

But I don't think the brute force is going to work. I just don't think -- if we did things like honor the Agent Orange claims. Send out -- and there are variants of what I am suggesting, that is, accept the claim subject to audit. There are variants. You could do a minimal amount immediately, and then see what the real claim should be. You could take the most serious one and look at that quickly. There are variants that we could do this.

But we can't just keep hiring people and then training them and then other people fall off and then on and on.

Mr. Burr said, by the way, that he was upset that the quota had gone down. But the quota going down, I think, is in line with getting it right the first time. That if you have a big quota, you are anxious to get it off, and it is easier to deny, right? And then it takes years for the

appeals. So if you had a more realistic quota, then even though that, quote, brings down the productivity.

But I think a whole new culture has to be done. I want to trust the veterans. I want to trust you guys who are certified VSOs to help a veteran and then let us send it out and we will verify it if we have to later.

I would like to -- I will be honest with the membership here. I have not had an enthusiastic reaction by all the VSOs, and I am not sure why. But I will give you a chance, Commander, to comment on what I am commenting on.

I have legislation to do that. Chairman Hall and I are working on this stuff. He has got stuff to speed up the PTSD situation. But I think we have to change the culture here.

And, by the way, if we didn't need all of those thousands of people working on benefits, why not use them on health care, those resources? Because that is where our needs are.

So I am going to give you the last word on any of the things you have heard from any of us and from me. Commander, we thank you. We thank all of your members. You have come at a very important time. We are in the middle of the budget discussions. We can't do our job up here without all of you. You tell us what is going on in the facilities, what is going on in the clinics, how your claims are being

treated.

Without you, we couldn't do our oversight job. So, Commander, Commander of the DAV, you have the final word. And you can say anything you want, except if it is opposite to me.

Mr. Barrera. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I think something that was pointed out earlier is the fact that we need to work together. I will speak for our organization. We are not Democrats. We are not Republicans. We are Americans. It gives me great pleasure within the last years to see the progress, the direction that we are going on; and to me the most critical job that we have now is to ensure that this direction is maintained, that we don't fall back to what it was years ago, that we understand that the sacrifices that our veterans make is what we are all about. I can tell you -- and I bet you that I speak for everyone that sits behind me at this table -- is that, despite our disabilities, if we had to do it all over again, we are ready to do it.

Thank you so much.

The Chairman. With that eloquent conclusion, this hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 3:42 p.m., the joint committee was adjourned.]

DRAFT