

Chairman Patty Murray

Statement of Senator Patty Murray, Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Joint Hearing on Legislative Priorities of Various Veterans Service Organizations
March 22, 2012

I am pleased to be here this morning and to join all of you and our colleagues in welcoming each one of the Veterans Service Organizations here with us today.

I also want to thank my colleagues from the House for holding today's hearing on the legislative priorities for the VSOs in attendance today.

I look forward to the testimonies and perspectives provide here today.

I would like to also acknowledge those in attendance from my home state of Washington. With us are Ernest Butler, Dave Zurfluh, Mike Partridge, Tom Bungert from Paralyzed Veterans of America, and Bryan Winston, from the Air Force Sergeants Association.

As I continue to sit down with veterans from across Washington State, I hear many of the same concerns all of you who are testifying today hear from your members. Veterans are concerned that they hear too little, too late about services available to them, or wait for too many months to have a decision on their claim made, or simply cannot get the access to health care, including mental health care, when they seek it.

I also heard from veterans about obstacles to employment they continue to face. Having faced fear in combat, there should be no reason a veteran should fear identifying as a "veteran" on a job application when they return home. Last year's passage of the bipartisan "VOW to Hire Heroes Act" was a great first step in tackling the high rate of unemployment among young veterans, and much remains to be done.

We must focus on building partnerships with the private sector to ensure they have the information and tools they need to hire and train veterans. We need to take advantage of the broad support among businesses and employers across the country who want to do the right thing and hire a veteran. Employers must not assume all veterans are afflicted by invisible wounds. Instead, they should simply identify whether the veteran is qualified for the job at hand.

So I will continue to highlight the tremendous skills, leadership and talent that our veterans bring to the table. And, I will continue to work with employers across the country to ensure that our veterans can find careers here at home. While a great deal of focus has been on employment, we also cannot lose sight of the educational benefits our veterans are taking advantage of.

When veterans use their GI Bill benefits, we need to make sure they have the right information to make the best choices about their education and the school they choose. I will be introducing a bill next week that targets how educational institutions are recruiting our veterans, and ensures veterans are given a clear picture about an institution's track record with other veterans.

But whether it is education, jobs, mental health, or a claims system that just is not working, each of these persisting challenges serve as a constant reminder of the important work ahead to fulfill our obligation to America's veterans.

Another area I continue to be very concerned with is mental health. For servicemembers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, VA has projected an increased demand of over 200 percent for mental health care by Fiscal Year 2020. We need to take a hard look at whether the proposed five percent budget increase asked for by the Department is enough to meet the projected demand for mental health care. Not every veteran will be affected by such invisible wounds. But when a veteran has the courage to stand up and seek help, VA must be there every single time.

VA must be there with not only timely access to care, but also a suitable treatment plan. 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, get help, get better, and get back to their lives and families.

However, much more remains to be done. I will continue to work hard to highlight where VA must do better. Many gender specific concerns need to be addressed when providing care for those who have survived military sexual trauma. So we need to make sure every medical facility is able to meet the unique needs of women veterans. VA must also work to make sure that care is accessible to women when they need it, through timely appointments, extended clinical hours, offered child care, and convenient locations. I will continue to follow up on these issues and a number of others to ensure that women veterans see the improvements they deserve.

Fixing these types of challenges will not only require hard work and focus by VA, but it will require VA to dedicate sufficient resources to tackle these issues. Despite a tough fiscal environment, President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have 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.

Still, infrastructure remains a persistent concern. For the third year in a row, VA has proposed cuts in spending for major construction and maintenance. Last year, for the first time, VA's budget outlined the Department's construction needs over a ten year period. It is troubling that VA's budget request over the past two years has been a fraction of this clearly defined need. We know as more of our servicemembers come home the demand on VA's facilities will only continue to grow. We must make sure VA has the resources it needs to ensure its facilities are built to last.

It's also well understood that the claims backlog has been growing too large for far too long. If we're going to overcome the backlog, VA must transform its system. This year I will continue to closely monitor transformation efforts, as well as push VA to eliminate unnecessary practices and fix common claims processing errors.

I am concerned about the questions and uncertainty surrounding the effect of sequestration on our veterans. Veterans deserve clarity on this issue, and clarity is what I have been working hard to provide. I have taken my concerns directly to Secretary Shinseki and to the Acting Director of

the Office of Management and Budget. And, I have requested a formal legal opinion from the Government Accountability Office to help provide resolution.

The challenges facing our veterans are great. But so too are the opportunities to fulfill our obligations to these brave men and women.

I look forward to working with every organization here today to ensure we are doing all we can to better the lives of the few who have sacrificed so much for so many.

Thank you.