

Chairman Patty Murray

## OPENING STATEMENT

Joint Hearing on The Legislative Presentation of AMVETS, Jewish War Veterans, Military Officers Association of America, Gold Star Wives, Blinded Veterans Association, Non Commissioned Officers Association, IAVA and the Fleet Reserve Association

March 16, 2011

This morning we will hear from representatives of The Blinded Veterans Association, The Fleet Reserve Association, The Gold Star Wives of America, The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, The Jewish War Veterans, The Military Officers Association of America, The Non-Commissioned Officers Association, and AMVETS. I want to welcome you all and I look forward to your testimony and perspectives. I also want to welcome my colleagues from the House who have come across the Capitol to be with us this morning. As the new Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I am eager to continue my work partnering with all of you to hold the VA to the highest of standards in providing quality health care, more timely and accurate benefits, and the oversight of the VA that our veterans deserve.

As many of you know, these are issues that I have worked hard on throughout my 16 years as a member of this Committee. They are issues that as the daughter of a World War II veteran, I have had a personal connection to for long before that. I know that when we send our young people off to fight a war, the last thing they should have to do is fight for the care and benefits they deserve when they return home. I know that ensuring that the VA is working for our veterans, and not against them, often begins with the VA budget.

Now, let me say that on balance, and given that other agencies are facing budget cuts, VA's 2012 budget is a very good starting place from which to work. The President has requested an overall increase of \$5.9 billion in discretionary spending over last year. While health care spending is in good shape in that request, there are some weaker points in the budget. The proposed cuts in spending for construction and non-recurring maintenance are very troubling. I'm also concerned about cuts to the VA Inspector General's office which, as you all know, plays a vital role in ensuring transparency and accountability at the VA. I will be working alongside many here to make sure we can improve upon that request. Because like all of you, I know the VA budget is more than just a spending document, it is a statement of our values and our goals for veterans care.

For me, the budget must reflect a simple fact: that VA care is a cost of war. This has rarely been as important as right now, as we are seeing more and more devastating injuries coming out of the war in Afghanistan. Over the past few weeks, we have seen new data that shows dramatic increases in amputations among casualties of the current conflicts. Some of the most shocking statistics include that twice as many wounded soldiers needed a limb amputated than in the

previous two years. The ever-increasing number and severity of these injuries mean more and more veterans will be coming home badly hurt and need a lifetime of care and services.

Among those services that we are working to provide is the caregivers' program, which provides support for those who are forced to leave careers and their health care behind in order to care for their wounded loved ones. I am heartened to see that many of you have identified this as one of your priorities as well. As many of you know, when the caregivers bill was voted on in Congress, not a single “no” vote was cast against it. Let me repeat that—in an environment that as we all know is too often overly partisan, every voting member agreed to this new benefit. Yet, we are now seeing delays and questions about who is eligible. That’s unacceptable and I am committed to working with Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Filner, and Senator Burr to change it. Once the caregiver program gets up and running in a manner consistent with the intent of Congress we will be in a better position to think about ways to expand the benefits to veterans of earlier wars.

I also saw that many of you cited the need to help our veterans find meaningful employment when they return home as a top concern, a view I very much share. Last Friday, we saw annual unemployment numbers that tell the story of the challenge we face: young veterans aged 18-24 coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan have an unemployment rate of nearly 22% and Reserve and National Guard members have an unemployment rate of 14%. One of my top priorities in this Congress is going to be improving outreach and services to our veterans to work to bring down these unacceptably high rates of unemployment. I introduced legislation in the last Congress focusing on vocational, apprenticeship and on-the-job training opportunities that became part of the new GI Bill. I am preparing a new measure for introduction in the very near future that will help provide additional outreach and assistance to put veterans to work. I will need your input and your help on this measure and look forward to working closely with you.

I don’t have to tell any of you that we have a lot of challenges that confront us, whether it’s ensuring women veterans have the facilities and care they need as they come to VA in higher and higher numbers, fighting to once and for all end the epidemic of veterans homelessness, addressing our broken claims system or ensuring that veterans who have all the skills and discipline to succeed in the civilian workforce get their shot. We’ve got to do more, and we’ve got to work together at every step.

Last month, I sat down in my home state with many of the veterans whose lives are impacted by the work we do here each day. I heard from a Vietnam veteran with PTSD whose son, a National Guard member, just recently committed suicide after returning from the battlefield with PTSD. I heard from a female Iraq veteran who told me that when she calls the VA she continually gets asked if she’s calling for her husband. I heard from veterans about the claims backlog, access to care, holes in the education benefit, barriers to employment, and, unfortunately, much more. Our work is not done—these veterans deserve better. I look forward to working with every group here today to ensure we are doing everything we can to improve the lives of those who have served and sacrificed for us.

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