

Chairman Patty Murray

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Patty Murray

Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs

United States Senate

Hearing on Pending Legislation

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Good morning, and welcome to today's hearing. Today, we have a very ambitious agenda, which reflects the hard work of members on both sides of the aisle.

We have numerous challenges to meet for our nation's veterans and I am pleased that this Committee has worked – and will continue to work – to develop legislation that substantially improves their lives and the lives of their families, especially during this time of war.

The Hiring Heroes Act of 2011

There is much on the agenda that is important, but I want to speak briefly about one item – the Hiring Heroes Act of 2011.

Ensuring that our veterans can find employment when they come home is an area where we must do more.

For too long, we have been investing billions of dollars training our young men and women to protect our nation, only to ignore them when they come home.

For too long, we have patted them on the back and pushed them into the civilian job market with no support.

This is simply unacceptable, and does not meet the promise we made to our men and women in uniform.

Our hands-off approach has left us with an unemployment rate in February of over 27 percent among young veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan.

That is over one in four of our nation's heroes who can't find a job to support their family.

Over one in four of our service men and women lack the stability that is so critical to their transition home.

That's why last month I introduced the bipartisan Hiring Heroes Act of 2011, which now has 19 cosponsors. This legislation will help us rethink the way we support our servicemembers as they return home and search for living-wage jobs.

I introduced this critical legislation because I've heard first-hand from the veterans for whom we've failed to provide better job support.

I've had veterans tell me that they no longer write that they're a veteran on their resume because they fear the stigma they believe employers attach to the invisible wounds of war.

I've heard from medics who return home from treating battlefield wounds who can't get certifications to be an EMT or to drive an ambulance.

These stories are as heartbreaking as they are frustrating.
But more than anything they're a reminder that we have to act now.

The Hiring Heroes Act would allow our men and women in uniform to capitalize on their service, while also ensuring that the American people capitalize on the investment we have made in them.

For the first time, it would require every servicemember transitioning from active duty to participate in the Transition Assistance Program.

This program supports our veterans by providing them with broad job skills training before they separate from service.

This bill would also allow servicemembers to begin the federal employment process prior to separation.

It would also require the Department of Labor to take a hard look at what military skills and training should be translatable to the civilian sector.

This is a much needed step toward making it simpler for veterans to obtain much needed licenses and certifications.

And finally, my legislation would allow for innovative partnerships between VA, DOD and organizations that provide mentorship and training programs designed to lead to job placements for veterans.

All of these are real, substantial steps to put our veterans to work, and they come at a pivotal time for our economic recovery and our servicemembers.

Veterans Programs Improvement Act of 2011

The second bill I'd like to mention is the Veterans Programs Improvement Act of 2011, which would allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to:

- Continue the important work of ending veteran homelessness,
- Improve the quality of the fiduciary programs administered by VA,
- And also provides for a number of other VA enhancements.

VA has made great strides in the effort to eliminate homelessness. In a report released jointly by VA and HUD in January 2010, VA estimated approximately 76,000 veterans were homeless on any given night – this is down from 131,000 the previous year.

Yet clearly, more must be done.

This bill would:

- Expand assistance for homeless veterans by improving the grant and per diem program;
- As well as providing tools such as health care services, Community resource centers;
- And case management to homeless veterans.

It will also direct VA to provide further details about its comprehensive plan to eliminate veterans' homelessness.

Additionally, the bill addresses the needs of some of our nation's most vulnerable veterans by improving oversight of fiduciaries, and by eliminating procedures that have unnecessarily contributed to delays in claims filed on behalf of incompetent veterans.

Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2011

Lastly, all across the nation, too many veterans and their families continue struggling to make ends meet.

The Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2011 – cosponsored by all members of this Committee – may provide some much needed relief.

This bill increases the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans.

Conclusion

We know there is much to be done as we continue our work on behalf of our nation's veterans.

And I am glad to see that we are considering a wide array of bills to address these challenges.

I am eager for a productive discussion about the items on this agenda, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and I want to thank you all for joining us this morning.