

# **Statement of Ranking Member Richard Blumenthal**

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee  
Joint Hearing to Receive Legislative Presentation of DAV

February 24, 2015

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to join you, and our colleagues in welcoming the Disabled American Veterans and its Auxiliary.

It is an honor to serve as Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. This is not an honor I take lightly. No obligation is more sacred than the debt we owe our military men and women, especially those injured during their service to this great nation. Serving veterans has been one of my highest priorities throughout my career, and I am looking forward to working with everyone on these Committees to improve the care and benefits that veterans receive.

I am pleased to hear from you, Commander Hope, and would like to recognize any DAV members who are here today from Connecticut. Thank you for traveling to be with us today and for all the important work you do on behalf of veterans in Connecticut.

DAV provides such critical services including assistance with compensation and pension claims, transportation to medical facilities, and advocacy on behalf of all disabled veterans and their families. DAV and its membership has been a valuable resource for all of us in Congress, as we continue our efforts to address the many opportunities to improve the care and benefits provided to veterans and their families.

In fact, the support of DAV, and other veterans organizations allowed this Congress to get off to a great start and see the Clay Hunt SAV Act signed into law just a short time ago. I am proud to have joined with Senator McCain in introducing this measure in the Senate. I would also again say thank you to Chairman Miller and Representative Walz for their leadership on this bill in the House. And, of course, to Chairman Isakson for making this the first piece of legislation considered by the Committee.

This law provides one more opportunity to deliver help –and hope – to heroes who need and deserve it. Every day in the United States, 22 veterans succumb to suicide – losing their personal battle to invisible wounds of war. The Clay Hunt SAV Act is named for a single brave veteran who lost that battle. By improving and modernizing VA suicide prevention programs, it honors every serviceman and woman who has struggled with mental health issues.

I know the crisis of suicide all too well – a friend of mine, Justin Eldridge of southeastern Connecticut – succumbed to suicide. He was deployed in combat to Afghanistan where he braved mortar fire and sniper fire and he returned to his family, his children and his wife—his very young family—suffering from a traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress. As brave as he had been on the battlefield, he could not win the war at home. He sought mental health care at the Connecticut VA facility. He had gone through a long battle for benefits. I helped him with

it. But there was a gap in the continuity of his medical care. He slipped through the cracks and eventually took his life.

As I have noted in the past, this bill is a down-payment. It is not the end of solutions to this problem. It is a worthwhile measure that takes limited, targeted steps. I plan to use my role on this Committee to ensure VA makes every effort to address mental health issues in the coming year. Access to timely mental health care is but one of the many challenges facing veterans and their families. There are many others I intend to focus on as Ranking Member.

The number of veterans is growing dramatically, as our nation winds down recent wars and our armed forces down size. We need to do as much as we can to make it easier for servicemembers to access earned benefits and health care as they transition out of the military and beyond. Whether we are: ensuring VA is properly implementing provisions of the Access bill Congress passed last fall as it continues to drive down the unacceptably long wait times; pressing VA and DOD to improve its ability to share information including medical records; examining potential solutions to the growing number of disability claims appeals; or providing proper care and benefits to those who suffer from the results of toxic exposures, it is clear that work remains to honor the sacrifice of the brave men and women who serve this country.

DAV continues to shine a light on challenges women veterans face when accessing VA care and benefits. Thank you for your continued commitment to this issue and for your extremely important study and report last year. We must ensure that we honor the service of women veterans by making the VA system more responsive to their unique needs.

Another way our Committee honors veterans is by carefully reviewing the President's budget request for VA. As the Senate Committee prepares to conduct our hearing on the VA budget Thursday morning, your presence and testimony here today provide us with a stark reminder that veterans' issues are about much more than just numbers on a piece of paper.

The budget is but one piece of how we as a nation honor the service and sacrifice of the men and women - as well as their families - who have worn the uniform and answered the call to serve. I look forward to working with DAV and all of the VSO groups to ensure the funding levels requested and policies proposed in the President's budget reflect the very real needs of the men and women who have served this country.

Commander Hope, again welcome. I look forward to hearing your testimony today and to collaborating with every Member of these Committees to keep faith with veterans of all wars and eras, and make sure that we leave no veteran behind.