

Ranking Member Richard Burr

Burr Opening Statement at the Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Hearing for Veterans' Programs

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to all of our witnesses. Mr. Secretary a very special welcome to you. As I have said in the past we are very fortunate to have a person of your caliber as head of VA, and I'm looking forward to working with you on our shared mission to serve America's veterans.

We're here this morning to learn more about the President's fiscal year 2010 budget request. There are very few issues that are more important than to ensure that programs and services for our veterans are adequately funded.

Mr. Secretary, I'm counting on you to be candid with us with this budget. More importantly, I'm counting on you to make sure that veterans' lives are improved with the resources provided.

We have very few details about what's within this budget. In fact, really all we have is a 134-page book submitted by the Office of Management and Budget, but only 2 pages of that book are about the veterans' budget.

Let me say that for the upcoming fiscal year this budget appears to be a strong one, with an 11% increase in discretionary spending. This is consistent with increases in recent years.

I am especially pleased that the budget appears to fund legislation I authored that was signed into law last year to help veterans who are at risk of becoming homeless. This new law, Public Law 110-387, authorized VA to make grants to non-profit organizations to provide supportive services to these veterans. I believe that when it comes to dealing with problems of homelessness, we approach it in a proactive and holistic way. My hope with this new effort is that we can end the cycle of homelessness by ensuring it never begins in the first place. I commend the President for making this a priority in the budget.

Although the fiscal year 2010 outlook appears promising, I am concerned about what the President's budget tells us for the subsequent years. I am concerned because I believe the President when he says his goal is to bring a new level of transparency to government. In fact, here's what the President had to say about his own budget, "But this Budget does begin the hard work of bringing new levels of honesty and fairness to your Government. It looks ahead a full 10 years, making good-faith estimates about what costs we would incur...."

That's why when I look at the table in the back of the budget and see a proposed 2.3% increase in fiscal year 2011; 2.6% in 2012; 2.7% in 2013; and 2.8% in 2014; I do get concerned. We all know medical inflation alone has been averaging around 4 or 5 percent per year. On top of that, we are expecting more veterans to enter the system in the near future, especially as troops return home from Iraq and as our weak economy is leaving many veterans out of work.

I don't know how these numbers add up to ensure our veterans get the quality of care they have earned. But, again, if indeed these are good-faith estimates, I am confident you will be able to defend them.

In closing let me also acknowledge the contributions of the veterans' service organizations on our second panel. Not only have they given us the benefit of their expertise in determining appropriate funding levels for VA for the upcoming year, but they have also given us a guide to reforming the broken budget process.

I joined the Chairman as an original cosponsor of the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act. I believe this bill will start the discussion in Congress on how we can deliver a timely, predictable, and sufficient budget for our veterans. It will also lend new transparency to the budget process.

Mr. Chairman, again thank you for calling this hearing.

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