

Senator Bernie Sanders

Statement for the Record of Senator Bernie Sanders at the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs' and Senate Committee on Armed Services Joint Hearing on DOD and VA disability rating systems

April 12, 2007

Chairman Akaka, Chairman Levin, thank you for holding this very important hearing today. I think it is very clear from everything we have heard so far today that it is crucial for our two committees, where there is so much overlap in the area of soldiers and veterans' care, to work very closely together so that we can make sure that our servicemembers get the treatment and benefits they deserve.

Mr. Chairman, in reviewing the prepared testimony of our witnesses and hearing what they have said this morning I am struck by a number of things. First, the men and women of our Armed Forces are having to endure what some have called "a second battlefield" when they return home here to the US and try to get the care and benefits they are entitled. This is unacceptable. For veterans already dealing with the pain and trauma of their injuries to have to deal with bureaucratic red tape and foot dragging is shameful. Not only that, but these soldiers have often suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury and/or are experiencing symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other conditions. It is a moral outrage that we have a system that forces these soldiers and veterans to fend for themselves, keeping track of all the complicated benefits, paperwork, and appointments that currently exist in our system. Haven't these soldiers sacrificed enough? Clearly, much more needs to be done to reduce these confusing layers of paperwork and to provide more caseworker support to help veterans and their families navigate the system and know what benefits they are entitled to.

Many of our witnesses today talked about all that we are doing to make sure that soldiers and their families are fully informed. I am glad to hear that improvements are being made but clearly, we were not doing a good job of this previously and we need to look no further than Walter Reed for examples. The full range of benefits and options both through the DoD and the VA need to be clearly laid out and explained to our soldiers, veterans, and their families. Also clearly reforms are needed to the Physical Evaluation Board Liaison Office or PEBLO case managers at DoD. While well intentioned, it does not seem that the staff in these positions currently have the proper training they need to be able to help soldiers through the bureaucracy. We need to reexamine the PEBLOs so we can improve the training, caseload to soldier ratios, and discuss what rank of soldier should be assigned to this position.

Second, Mr. Chairman, I am concerned that we seem to be reinventing the wheel when a soldier moves from the DoD to the VA. Soldiers, having just completed all the medical evaluations and paperwork needed to be processed through the Defense Department show up at the VA, often have to start from scratch all over again. New evaluations, new paperwork. Now I understand that DoD and the VA have different functions and criteria they use when providing benefits but clearly, far more needs to be done to streamline these efforts so that our veterans do not have to endure two battles with two bureaucracies. There needs to be more consistency between the

evaluation and diagnostics used to rate a soldier and a veteran. This is both the right thing to do from a moral perspective and also from a policy perspective. Removing the duplication will improve efficiency and save resources we so desperately need for veterans' care. There was also a lot of talk from the VA and the DoD about electronic records and sharing of information. But when it comes down to it, for all the panels and working groups the DoD and VA have about seamless transition, the reality is that these two agencies can not and do not share all of their information electronically and this is hurting our soldiers and veterans. Mr. Scott's testimony made that very clear. We here in Congress can not let this continue. In the 21st century it is unacceptable for our agencies not to be working in the electronic world, sharing information in real time. We have pressed for full electronic records in the DoD but clearly that is not happening. We need to get to the bottom of this problem immediately.

Third, Mr. Chairman, I am concerned about the troubling trends discussed by Mr. Scott today regarding the discrepancy between the disability ratings given to soldiers in the different services and how this differs between the services themselves and as compared to the VA. My office has heard from soldiers and read in the media about soldiers, who, when they return from deployment and try to get service and treatment for PTSD for example, are being told by the DoD "oh, you had a mental condition before you entered the service, what you have isn't PTSD" or that it is not service-connected. In a 2005 article in Salon one soldier stated "When you get [to Walter Reed], they analyze you, break you down, and try to find anything wrong with you before you got in" the Army,..." Now from my point of view, it is unconscionable that we are raking these soldiers and veterans over the coals when they return to make very sure that they aren't being treated for a condition they may have had before. We were very happy to take these soldiers when they were ready to go serve our country but now when they return we are going to try and find a reason to reject their need for care. This is unacceptable. We don't need these soldiers to be fighting the DoD over so-called pre-existing conditions. These soldiers need care and not to be unfairly questioned in the hope that the Defense Department can save some money by not providing them care.

Chairman Akaka, while there are many challenges that our veterans and their families face and that we as a Congress face to live up to our promises to them, I do think that under your leadership the Veterans Affairs Committee is moving in exactly the right direction, and this Congress is beginning to give our veterans their due. As you know Mr. Chairman, you authored and the members on this side signed onto a recommendation for significant increases in the veterans' budget for next year. And those strong recommendations were incorporated in the budget recently passed out of the U.S. Senate.

Of course, while adequate funding is a critically important issue, it is not the only thing we need to pay attention to. We must have oversight and legislation to fix some of the systemic problems that this hearing has exposed. And of course we must demand bolder action from the Bush Administration and the relevant agencies who are responsible for the care of our soldiers and veterans. I look forward to working with you and the rest of the members of our Committee and the Armed Services Committee to resolve these issues and ensure that those who have sacrificed so much already are treated with respect and dignity by a grateful nation.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.