

LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF THE VETERANS OF
FOREIGN WARS

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TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2010

United States Senate,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
House of Representatives,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:35 a.m.,
in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Daniel
K. Akaka, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Akaka, Webb, Begich, Burr, and
Brown; Representatives Hall, Walz, Adler, Buyer, and
Boozman.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN AKAKA

Chairman Akaka. The hearing of the two Veterans'
Affairs Committees in a joint hearing will come to order.

Aloha and good morning, everyone. I am pleased to join
all the leaders of the Senate and the House Veterans'
Affairs Committees in welcoming you here this morning.
Welcome to Commander Thomas Tradewell and his senior
officials. I am also delighted to extend my warmest aloha
to those VFW members who have traveled from my home State of
Hawaii to be here today. If you are here from Hawaii, will

you please just rise? Aloha. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. As our troops return home from service in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must be prepared to care for them with the same dedication and commitment they showed in battle.

Just 2 weeks ago, the Senate Committee held its hearing on the President's budget for VA. Last Friday, we sent our recommendations to the Senate Budget Committee, recommending increases above the President's budget in some key areas, including research and construction. Although many agencies are facing budget cuts, I am pleased that the VA budget--critical for meeting the needs of so many of this Nation's veterans--is increasing. For the first time, in this budget we see the fruits of our labor in passing the advanced funding legislation. The President's budget includes a funding request for VA medical care into fiscal year 2012. We worked together to pass advance funding for VA health care, and I want you to know that your organization's efforts were invaluable.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Our Committees are finalizing a health care bill that, among other things, will include provisions

to provide critical support for family caregivers. These family members elect to take on the responsibility of providing care for seriously injured veterans. This commitment often creates serious financial, emotional, and practical hardships. Our bill will help families bear this burden.

On the benefits side of the ledger, timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims remains a significant problem. I know that the administration is committed to addressing this issue and is moving to add significant staff and resources to that effort. We must be realistic, however, about the claims processing backlog. It can take years for new staff to become skilled at processing claims, and technology and pilot programs can only do so much in the short term.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Committees and in Congress, as well as Secretary Shinseki, and, of course, your organization as we move forward on the budget and legislation.

In closing, I thank each of you for your work on behalf of our Nation's veterans, and, again, it is good to see all of you here today at this hearing. Again, thank you for past support and your continued support in what we can do for our veterans.

At this time I would like to call on Representative

Walz for his statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. WALZ

Mr. Walz. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and, Commander, welcome and thank you. From a Minnesotan to someone from over in Wisconsin, thanks for giving us Bret Favre. We appreciate that.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Walz. We appreciate it. On behalf of Chairman Filner and the entire House Committee and to the Senate, we want to extend our welcome and our thanks to each and every one of you for being here. I always say that the proudest day for me, as just said in this room, and I said if all Americans could be in here when our VSOs and when this great organization is here to testify on the care of our veterans and the security of this Nation, there is a real sense of pride, and I thank you for that. I thank you for being unwavering advocates for our veterans. That voice is unbelievable to hear. We are going to hear from your commander today and the national staff, who is always here, does an incredible job. And for that as a citizen, I thank you.

Your partnership on making sure, as the Chairman said, on the advanced appropriation--they told us it could not be done, and because you stood tall once again, because we stood together, we were able to do that. And when I go out

to my constituents in southern Minnesota, there is not a single one, there is not a single person I meet that tells me not to do what is right by veterans, not to get it done. And I am proud that over the last 3 years, under Chairman Akaka's leadership, Chairman Filner's, and this whole Committee, we have increased that health care budget by \$19 billion.

Now, we have some challenges ahead of us. There is no doubt about it. One of the challenges all of us up here need to come to grips with is that we have a budgeting situation that we absolutely have to get under control. We have to make sure we balance this Nation's budget. But I think I speak on behalf of Chairman Filner and others up here, and we are not going to do it on the backs of veterans. We are not going to balance the budget by shortchanging those who served to protect our freedoms. And we need to make sure that as we budget those dollars, we take absolute care in making sure they are delivered efficiently, make sure that they are targeted where they need to go, and make sure we provide those taxpayers accountability. And you have been there every step of the way to ensure that, so I thank you for that.

The President's budget for this year is being looked at. You are making your recommendations today and making your comments, and make sure that you understand very

clearly your word is the gold standard on these. You know where the care needs to be. You know what we need to make changes on, and you need to make sure that we are getting it done and getting accountable for those veterans.

I have to tell you, this last year was very rewarding for me also as someone, who used the GI bill to receive an education, watching the changes you advocated for in the new GI bill, making sure we took in our newest group of warriors, with an understanding it was not just fulfilling that moral responsibility to our veterans. It was capitalizing on the skills of the greatest Americans, those willing to sacrifice so much for this country. They are the ones who will help rebuild our economy. They are the ones who will come back and create new jobs. They are the ones who will be the next generation of leaders. And it makes sense for us to invest in them.

So I thank you for making the GI bill a top priority. I thank you for being unwavering in getting that thing through. Now we know we need to go back and make changes to it, and I think we will hear a little bit today on some of the things, voc rehab and some other things that we can do better on.

One of the things that I think many of you hear me, you hear Chairman Filner, you hear all of the members up here, is we have to do a better job on getting at the systemic

problems that caused the claims backlog. And I am convinced--and I think others may be also, and I want to hear from you today on this Commander, is the issue of making sure that seamless transition is not just a nice catch word, that every time you hear somebody talks about making sure we actually fulfill that responsibility, it just is the right thing to do for our veterans, and it is the right thing to do in terms of saving resources for this country, making sure that when you raise your hand and swear allegiance to this Nation there is a seamless transition all the way through your career, all the way through as you transfer to the VA, all the way until we bury you with honors for the service you gave. There should be no gap there. There should be no coming back and having to have an adversarial relationship with the VA and with other agencies. And we can fix that through technology. We can fix it through changing the culture to make sure that we do not have that drop-off. And all of those things are going to be a positive. So I look forward to working with you to make sure that happens.

And the last couple of things--and I know that Chairman Filner, who could not be with us today, really wanted to stress this, and he is taking a lead on two very, very key issues that I think we need to make sure that we stay focused on: delivery of care to our rural veterans,

something that impacts all of us in all of our districts up here--I have a sprawling 300-mile-across district in southern Minnesota. Trying to figure out how do we maximize the amount of resources we have to make sure that care is brought closer to the veterans, making sure that they do not have to, again, get on a bus and spend an entire day for an appointment that they could get locally or they could get through their CBOC. We need to figure that part of it.

And then the Chairman has been an absolute champion for understanding the demographics of our military forces changing, and our women veterans, and making sure that the VA is addressed and is a friendly place for them to be able to be seen, making sure that we understand. We have more women warriors right now, more female warriors than we have had at any time, and they are bringing back a unique set of circumstances that we have an absolute obligation to address.

So, again, Commander, I am look forward to hearing from you, again, cannot express my gratitude to all of you, not just for your service in uniform, but you chose to continue to make the process better. You continue to not become cynical. You continue to come here every year. And because of you coming here every year, the care for our veterans is better. The care for their families is better. And our Nation is stronger because of it, so thank you for that and

keep up the good work.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Representative Walz.

And now I would like to call on our Ranking Member of the Senate Committee, Senator Burr, for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

Senator Burr. Aloha, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Aloha.

Senator Burr. And my welcome to all our visitors today, and I want to thank Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Buyer, and I want to thank the leadership for convening to listen to the legislative priorities of the VFW.

Commander Tradewell, welcome. And welcome to those accompanying you at the witness table. Thank you for all the work you do on behalf of our veterans.

Mr. Chairman, I want to extend a special welcome to the North Carolinians who have made the trip to Washington. Hearing from the VFW gives us an opportunity to gain the perspective of a distinctive group of men and women. Your members have all been on foreign soil and many have seen combat. Many of them experienced the burdens of being apart from their family and their friends for extended periods of time and under some of the most difficult circumstances.

VFW members are uniquely positioned to let us know what benefits and services are working well for them and, more importantly, which need improvement. This insight, together with feedback from our constituents at home, helps guide our efforts to improve the lives of our veterans and their families across this country.

Commander, let me first comment on one issue that you raise in your testimony on the VA claims processing system. As we all know, this system takes too long and frustrates too many veterans, including veterans from North Carolina.

As you mentioned, with the increasing number of claims it is important for timely and accurate decisions which will reduce the growing backlog. I hope we can all work together to find common-sense solutions that will make this system work better for veterans and their families, both now and in the future.

In your testimony, you discussed provisions of S. 1963 which will provide more support for female veterans and family caregivers. I was pleased to join the Chairman in sponsoring the provisions of this bill.

Women play a vital role in our Armed Force. VA needs to be able to provide for their specific needs, especially with the growing number of women veterans accessing VA health care.

Family caregivers provide crucial, critical support for

seriously injured service members. S. 1963 would provide training, monthly stipends, health care, and other support for family caregivers. This is a step in the right direction to better the lives of those who have sacrificed so much, and I am confident it will soon become law.

VA has taken significant steps to improve its mental health programs as well as reduce suicides among our Nation's veterans. Last week, we had a hearing on this very topic. The Committee heard from an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran and the struggles he faced once returning from deployment. His testimony shows we still have areas that need significant improvement.

Finally, I agree with VFW that we need to end homelessness. I am encouraged about the progress that has been made, especially with the emphasis on prevention. In my view, we should stop the cycle of homelessness by ensuring it never begins in the first place. I commend the Secretary for his commitment to eliminate homelessness among our veterans.

Commander, as we collectively work on these and other important issues affecting our Nation's veterans, we should keep in mind that just funding programs is not enough. We must make sure that these benefits and services are meeting the needs of our Nation's veterans and their families and that they are actually improving their lives. I am

committed to working with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to accomplish just that end goal.

Commander, thank you and thank your leadership team.

Mr. Chairman, I yield the floor.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

And now I would like to call for the opening statement of Representative Buyer.

OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. BUYER

Mr. Buyer. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

To my colleagues, Commander, welcome, and to the auxiliary president, thank you very much for being here. I will recognize State Commander Andrews along with his team. I note that Art Fellwock, past national commander, is also present; and also a good friend of mine, John Damon. John, ever since I have been here, I have sort of risen through the ranks, and I have always tried to be a very good listener, even in times where we have agreed to disagree.

I think that is how I would note the relationship that I have had with Bob Wallace the entire 18 years I have been here. We have agreed to disagree at times. We have always, though, in the end moved the ball forward, Bob. And that is what I will look back as some of my greatest memories in working with you.

I also recognize that every time we feel as though we

have confronted and overcome some challenge within the VA, it appears that it never ends. It is the consecration of our forever duties of maintenance of a system to care for our brothers and sisters who find themselves in tougher circumstances than ourselves.

Today thousands of service members are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. We also face record levels of veterans' unemployment and the claims backlog. Fixing the claims backlog requires fundamental transformation, I believe, of the VA's business processes. It took me 7 years--7 years--working with all of my colleagues, and finally we were able to centralize the IT architecture within the VA. So the basis is laid for us to do some very important things, not only moving to a paperless system which can be done through the advancing of information technology, but also what is next that we are working on is procurement reform. And these are very, very important things for us to do because when we can make these IT improvements, the VA then can place higher priority on accuracy and accountability at every level.

Commander, I also note that your visit is very timely with regard to the budget process. Republican views and estimates were submitted just this last Friday on the House side, and generally we agree with the President's overall request. I did, though, in the end recommend an additional

\$2.66 billion and have some sharp differences on how the funds should be directed, especially with regard to veterans' jobs.

For instance, the President calls for a reduction of voc rehab counselors. I call for a plus-up of over 200 FTE. I think this critical program helps wounded warriors regain occupational footing in new careers, and I think it is unthinkable to cut voc rehab when troops are in harm's way.

Careful oversight--

[Applause.]

Mr. Buyer. Careful oversight is essential in every aspect of the VA care and services. This requires greater emphasis of the Office of Inspector General than the President calls for. I think over the years there must be this budget game regardless of which administration occupies the White House. They always seem to cut IG and we always plus-up the IG. And I guess we believe here in the House and Senate, we recognize the importance of oversight and the good deeds that are done by the Office of Inspector General. So we continue to increase the IG budget.

I was, though, very bothered when I looked back here, some of the VA hospitals did not follow procedures, and egregious medical errors have occurred. I was appalled that VA hospitals improperly sanitized equipment to perform colonoscopies. Veterans were possibly denied potentially

fatal diseases, and that is absolutely wrong. In other mistakes, improper radioactive treatment of prostate cancer left veterans terribly disabled. Our veterans, I believe, deserve better than this.

We must be very proactive and once again, by example, the IG office has done a very good job at investigating these careless errors. But the inspection cycle for VA clinics is once in every 20 years, and that is unacceptable. Our funding recommendation would increase the number of inspectors and reduce the inspection cycle to 5 years and place greater emphasis upon medical directors to do their jobs in accountability. We must demand that the VA services and benefits are superior, and veterans earned and deserve nothing less.

With regard to other recommendations that I had made, I added an additional \$50 million with regard to medical and prosthetic research, and I believe that that will probably be a number that will be agreed to by both sides of the aisle in the House.

With regard to prosthetic limb program modernization, I added \$20 million, and I added \$89.4 million for more rural health initiatives. These increases would be funded through a fee basis care recovery program estimated to secure at least \$200 million annually from VA billing errors.

Along with high-quality health care and benefits, we

must make sure that veterans have ample career opportunities. Unfortunately, in this job market, the challenges are very real. Very few Americans have been sheltered from the economic crisis, but veterans have taken the brunt of the impact. The unemployment rate for veterans is at an all-time high, more than doubled over the past year. And for those who are finishing their first tour of duty, the unemployment rate is 24 percent. The President's budget does not, I believe, focus enough on jobs with regard to veterans and those of whom are returning to include veterans-owned businesses.

I have made repeated calls to this growing issue starting with the stimulus bill beginning back--gosh--well, over a year ago, working with Richard Burr and others, and it was ignored. And then with this so-called jobs bill that just passed the House and Senate, I made repeated calls. Once again, the jobs bill with regard to veterans unemployment was passed by. I will continue to work with anybody that wants to take on this issue.

Along with adding \$12 million for existing employment programs, the budget takes \$2.3 billion of the President's \$100 billion job creation and economic recovery package in his existing budget, and we use it to fund H.R. 4220, Promoting Jobs for Veterans Act of 2009. It provides funding incentives to veterans to access employment training

and expand opportunities for veterans-owned small businesses.

Veterans, I believe, are the perfect candidates for entrepreneurship. They are motivated, they are self-disciplined, and they are goal-oriented. Veterans using the GI bill after World War II created what we now know is the greatest prosperity our country has ever known. I believe they are best suited to providing the economic spark that puts our entire Nation on the road to economic recovery.

We had an opportunity to listen to the sergeant major. It is a treat and a real pleasure to have a sergeant major serving on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I believe, here in the House and Senate. They are implementers, and they are "no BS" kind of individuals. And they focus, and as I leave Congress, I will look back with great regret, Sergeant Major, if we are not able to eliminate the SBP-DIC offset with regard to the widows.

[Applause.]

Mr. Buyer. It is one of those things that, you know, when we talk about our values and our virtues--and I will close with this, Mr. Chairman--we like to talk about our buddy, and when we lose our buddy, you know, if we have those last words with them, generally it is going to be, "Take care of my wife," or "Take care of my husband," or, "Take care of my children for me. Do the very best you

can." And I do not believe we have been able to fulfill that pledge of our buddies, and that is why I say I will look back with some great regret.

As I leave, I will look back at the last 18 years, and I think about the VA and the way it looked like when I first came to Congress. I was a young captain that came out of the first Gulf War, and when I would tour the VAs--you know, there was a movie that came out called "Born on the Fourth of July," and it did not depict our VA hospitals well. And I look back, and working with members of the Committee--in particular, Chairman Akaka, Richard Burr, Sonny Montgomery, Bob Stump, and others--we have come a long way. And I am very proud of the VA system for which we have today, Bob.

And I want to conclude with this: All of us in this room, as members of the VFW, we look and see the world in a dimension for which the protected do not know nor understand. Our responsibility is to ensure we convey that so others can understand what freedom and liberty means and the sacrifices for which our buddies gave.

So when you think about all the places we have been, we have been able to see great sights, we have seen great architecture. We have explored new levels and depths of fear and of courage. We have seen the horrors of nature, and we have witnessed the horrors of man's inhumanity toward mankind.

But in the process, we have learned much about ourselves--as I said, new levels of fear, new levels of courage--but more importantly, we have also learned to embrace hope.

So I submit that the art of man is able to construct monuments and awards far more significant than the narrow span of our own existence. It is the silent lapse of time that allows us to understand how frail and fallible we are as a people. There are lyrics of a song, heard but not listened to by many, and it is that life is about more than who we are. It is about what we do with the time that we have that matters most.

So let us rise with the sun, humble servants of God, properly using the talents that have been given us for the betterment of others. For I believe that is the path of providence that will carry us to higher ground as a Nation.

So it is the prescription for our Nation, for our community, but, more importantly, my comrades, in the end ourselves. It has been an honor. Godspeed.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much for that statement, Representative Buyer.

Before I introduce the panel, I would like to introduce the other members who are here. From the Senate, our newest member on the Committee, as well as for the Senate, let me

introduce Senator Scott Brown.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Also, to my left we have Senator Jim Webb.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. And Senator Begich.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Representative John Hall.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. And also one who was here earlier, too, was Representative Adler.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. I would now like to welcome Thomas J. Tradewell, who is the Senior Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, to today's hearing. A very warm aloha to you, and welcome, Commander Tradewell.

Accompanying Commander Tradewell, we have Robert E. Wallace, who is Executive Director of VFW; William Bradshaw, Director of National Veterans Service; Eric Hilleman, Director of the National Legislative Service; and Steve Lawrence, Chairman of the National Legislative Service.

Commander Tradewell, your prepared remarks will, of course, be made part of the hearing record. Mr. Wallace, I understand that you will be introducing Commander Tradewell. Please begin. When you are finished with the introduction,

Commander Tradewell may begin with his statement.

Mr. Wallace. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Members of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees, I am honored to have the privilege of introducing the national officers of the VFW and our Ladies Auxiliary prior to introducing Mr. Tradewell:

National President of the Ladies Auxiliary, Jan Tittle, from South Carolina; Cortina Barnes, National Senior Vice President, Ladies Auxiliary, from the District of Columbia; Sharon Tradewell, the Commander-in-Chief's wife, from Wisconsin; Theresa DeNoyer, from Massachusetts, the wife of the Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief; the Adjutant General's wife, Becky Kent, from Arizona; Judy Maher, from Missouri, the Quartermaster General's wife.

The National Officers of the VFW Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief, Richard Eubank, from California; Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief Richard DeNoyer, from Massachusetts; Adjutant General Allen "Gunner" Kent, from Arizona; Quartermaster General Larry Maher, from Missouri; Judge Advocate General Vito DeMarco, from Vermont; Surgeon General Dennis Guthrie, from Oregon; National Chaplain, Reverend Valentin Obregon, from Alabama; National Chief of Staff Earl Banks, from Wisconsin; Inspector General Rick Barg, from South Dakota.

And I would also like to recognize the fact that we

have in our presence many of the past leaders of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

Chairman Akaka, Mr. Walz, Ranking Member Burr, and Ranking Member Buyer, and members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees, I am honored to introduce to you today the Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States. Thomas Tradewell, Sr., was elected Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States on August 20, 2009. He is a resident of Sussex, Wisconsin. His theme of honoring America's heroes was instilled in him while serving in Vietnam with the United States Army, B Company, 26th Engineers, 198th Light Infantry Brigade, of the Americal Division, 1967-68. His military occupational specialty was a demolition specialist, so he has a close affinity to the service members of today who are tasked with dealing with IEDs in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On March 23, 1968, Commander Tradewell's life changed forever. That night, a mortar round hit around him and several of his unit. Three men were killed, and he was wounded. He says, and I quote, "Surviving Tet 1968 was an experience I will never forget, and I consider every day after March 23rd a gift of life."

Since that day, Commander Tradewell has dedicated his

entire life to truly living up to his theme of honoring America's heroes. His work with his community and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States is a stellar example of what so many veterans do when they take off the uniform of the armed forces. They work for the betterment of their fellow veterans and citizens.

He joined the VFW in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1968 and has been involved in all aspects of the Veterans of Foreign Wars on all levels ever since. He retired from Briggs and Stratton in 1998 after 30 years of service. He holds an associate's degree in industrial safety, and Commander Tradewell married his high school sweetheart, Sharon. They have two sons and five children.

Members of the Veterans' Affairs Committees of the United States Senate and House of Representatives, I am honored to introduce to you the Commander-in-Chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, Thomas J. Tradewell, Sr.

[Applause.]

STATEMENT OF THOMAS J. TRADEWELL, SR., COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS; ACCOMPANIED BY ROBERT E. WALLACE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR; WILLIAM BRADSHAW, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE; ERIC HILLEMAN, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE; STEVE LAWRENCE, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE SERVICE

Mr. Tradewell. Chairman Akaka, Mr. Walz, Ranking Members Burr and Buyer, Members of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees, Distinguished Comrades of the VFW and our Auxiliaries, and Special Guests, especially my wife, Sharon:

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of my entire organization, I want you to know how much the VFW appreciates your leadership and the work of your Committee members and staff on making advanced appropriations for VA health care a reality. Your hard work and commitment will enable the VA to better serve millions of deserving veterans with the health care that they have earned. I offer our sincere thanks for what you have done and for your recent views and your estimates.

The VFW is very pleased with the administration's fiscal year 2011 VA budget request, and we are especially pleased that the administration exempted the VA health care and benefits programs from the proposed 3-year Federal

freeze on most non-defense discretionary spending.

We are also very pleased to see a proposed increase of 4,000 more claims adjudicators to help the Veterans Benefits Administration get a handle on the VA backlog of claims.

Along with the growing claims backlog, the VFW is concerned about the proposed funding request for construction and information technology (IT) systems.

VA faces a huge backlog of necessary construction projects for an aging infrastructure that really cannot be ignored. Transforming the VA into a 21st century model of efficiency will also require a significant investment in its IT programs, which are critical to the proper medical recordkeeping, accurate claims processing, telemedicine incentives, and the Seamless Transition initiative that the Department of Defense has schedule.

The most important issue facing America's veterans today is the unacceptable VA backlog in claims, and equally unacceptable is the processing error rate.

The VA currently has more than 1.1 million individual claims and appeals for compensation, pension, and education benefits. This massive backlog has resulted in a 6-month average wait for an initial rating decision and a 2-year average wait for an appeal decision. That is completely unacceptable.

We commend VA Secretary Shinseki for adding B-cell

leukemia, Parkinson's disease, and ischemic heart disease to the herbicide exposure presumptive list. That was the right thing to do for Vietnam veterans. We also applaud his decision to review VA policies regarding disabilities arising in our Gulf War veterans; that demonstrated the Secretary's leadership and the vision that he has for his organization to be open to new evidence concerning conditions related to war. It is particularly noteworthy that he made these decisions knowing full well that new claims will result--perhaps by the tens of thousands--which will further add to the backlog.

The VFW realizes there is no silver bullet to fix the VA, the Board of Veterans Appeals, but there are opportunities for steady and deliberate improvement.

Unfortunately, it may be years before the VBA will be able to reduce the backlog and improve the rating timeliness and accuracy. While regrettable, this has become a fact of life.

The VFW is working with our Independent Budget co-authors to develop constructive ideas which the VBA could use to mitigate the backlog, while improving timeliness and reducing errors. We will share what we believe are win-win solutions with Secretary Shinseki and with your Committees as each one of these are developed.

The VFW believes that claims accuracy is a key to

reducing the long-term growth of the backlog. The poor quality of initial rating decisions just adds to the overall backlog.

Quality claims decisions cannot take a back seat to production. Of special concern to the VFW is the number of veterans who do not know that they have received an incorrect decision and those who simply give up because of frustration. The VFW believes that the VA has the undeniable responsibility to properly review and take corrective action on claims processed at regional offices that have abysmal quality standards. We call on your Committee to assure that.

The primary mission of the Veterans Health Administration is the care of our Nation's sick and disabled veterans. Veterans must have timely access to quality health care, and the VFW will stand for no less.

We must be mindful of the long-term care needs of veterans. We must also ensure that the gaps in care are recognized and filled, especially for veterans with specialized needs--such as spinal cord injuries--and the veterans living in rural or remote areas. Telemedicine opportunities must be expanded, as well as additional points of care, so veterans can be served wherever they live.

The health care issues that Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans face varies from

routine to high-interest injuries, such as mental health, PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, suicides, and the proper care of our women veterans.

Approximately 15 percent of the military today is comprised of women. VA estimates say that 44 percent of those women have enrolled in the VA for health care. VA must continue to expand their gender-specific and primary health care services that are tailored toward women.

The VFW supports improved training and certification of female veterans' mental health care providers, as well as improved programs to treat post-traumatic stress disorder and military sexual trauma.

Explosive blasts from the roadside bombs and other improvised explosive devices are causing devastating and often permanent damage to the brain tissue of our forces. TBI can often occur without any other form of physical injury, making it very difficult to detect. It is likely that thousands of OIF/OEF veterans may be suffering from blasts and may be totally unaware of their condition. The VFW strongly urges Congress to ensure proper funding for additional studies into the treatment of TBI.

A recent OIF/OEF update shows that more than 48 percent of all patients treated at the VA suffer from some form of mental impairment--a staggering number. Among the more than 243,000 OIF/OEF veterans who have been diagnosed with some

degree of psychological symptoms, more than half are suffering from PTSD.

VA must adequately train its staff to ensure that they know how to deal with the unique needs of these veterans. Access to care must be made as convenient as possible.

The rate of veteran suicides is a national tragedy. While the VA and Department of Defense have improved their outreach efforts, more must be done. I cannot imagine how depressed someone must be to take their own life, but I do know that war is an experience that is never forgotten.

VFW members know that coming back to the Real World is not easy for any generation. That is why I continue to urge VFW members everywhere to reach out to our newest veterans, welcome them home, thank them for their service, and extend a hand of friendship and understanding and support. We must do all that we can to ensure that every veteran, regardless of age, does not feel alone.

Family caregivers for veterans from all wars share the same sacrifices and strains of caring for their loved one. We need to properly recognize their dedication and their continuing contribution to the severely injured veterans with special programs. The VFW supports assistance for all caregivers, but we strongly oppose a program that will mandate on caregivers without the necessary funding.

Veterans homelessness, again, is a nationwide problem

that cannot be cured in Washington. It must be addressed at the local level and supported with resources and services of our Federal Government. We strongly support the national call to end veterans' homelessness.

When service members transition into civilian life, they deserve a seamless system in place between the Department of Defense and the Veterans Administration that expedites the veterans' benefits that they have earned by virtue of their honorable service to our country.

The VFW has for two decades called for a system in which an electronic medical record and personnel file is created the day that a service member enlists. This electronic record would follow them wherever they are stationed, and when they separate or retire, the file would automatically be transferred to the VA to help facilitate and expedite the veterans' health care and disability claims.

While the VA and Department of Defense have made some progress, seamless transition remains a problem that generates sometimes more talk than measurable results. The VFW calls for veterans' employment to be part of the final jobs bill. The unemployment numbers are shocking: 213,000 or 12.6 percent of our current war veterans are unemployed. Veterans deserve to be at the forefront of all congressional efforts to get America back to work.

Before concluding, I would like to emphasize the VFW's unwavering commitment for the Nation to obtain the fullest possible accounting for all warriors still missing and unaccounted for from all wars. This is the most sacred of missions, and none of our members will truly rest until we know the whereabouts of everyone who has not returned home from war.

Mr. Chairmen, again, I want to thank you for the honor to present the Veterans of Foreign Wars priorities to you. Please know that the VFW looks forward to continuing to work with your Committees and Secretary Shinseki to improve the quality of life for America's veterans and for their families, and I would be happy to answer any questions.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Tradewell follows:]

DRAFT

Chairman Akaka. Thank you for your statement, Commander Tradewell.

There is a series of votes scheduled to begin at 11:00, at which time all Senators will need to go to the floor. So that others may have the opportunity to make statements or ask questions, I will defer my questions and would like at this time to call on Senator Burr for his questions.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I will be brief with you, Commander. Again, welcome. Thank you for your insight. If I could, I appreciate the VFW's willingness to be part of the solution on the claims processing backlog. I would like you to share with all of us publicly where that issue ranks from the standpoint of its priority for the VFW.

Mr. Tradewell. As you know, the heart of our campaign is to get the backlog down, but we do not want anyone throwing up some new ideas that may work in one area. You know, our country is very large, and what works in one center does not necessarily carry over to work well in another center.

So we would like to see, even though there are pilot programs going on in small areas throughout the country--and some of them may be very successful in one area--we would like to see them tried in other areas of the country, whether it is bigger populated areas, less densely populated

areas, to find out that those things can work before we throw them out there and say this is the way you are going to do it and find out that the cure is worse than the disease.

Senator Burr. I cannot agree with you more, and for my colleagues and for yours, let me share some sobering facts about where we are today. We have had almost 2,000 temporary new adjudicators. We are going to add a little over 2,000 more, for a total of 4,000.

When we started this ramp-up in personnel, a typical claims processor was processing a little over a hundred claims annually per FTE. When we started to ramp up personnel, we dropped to 80 claims being processed per person. We are on a trend of increase employment like this while we decrease the number of claims per individual.

So I think you would share my concern at looking at this, and as I have told the Secretary, I am not in any way, shape, or form trying to throw water on the increase of claims processors. I believe we need to be there.

Mr. Tradewell. If I may comment.

Senator Burr. Absolutely.

Mr. Tradewell. I have been in many regional offices where the new claims adjudicators were hired, and the ones there with the experience are so enthusiastic to help the new claims representatives and really dedicate a lot of time

to help them, and that is going to pay off in a short period of time. And we have to be patient. I hate to say we have to be patient, but we do.

But the claims processor that yesterday could do four claims in a day has taken the time that it takes to do two claims to dedicate to teaching his fellow employees, new employees.

Senator Burr. Commander, I think we have all displayed the patience of Job.

Mr. Tradewell. Yes, we have.

Senator Burr. But as I shared with General Shinseki, Secretary Shinseki, my patience is running out. And everybody who has walked into the job has said, "It is people, it is people, it is people." Well, I am willing to go along with it, but if it does not work this time, at some point when do we look at the process and try to figure out is that is what is broken.

If you look at the GAO estimates of the new adjudicators, they are expected to process four claims per year. Now, I can tell you, adding 4,000 people and the expectations are for the ramp-up period that you are going to process four claims a year, I may not even be here when we get this thing solved.

[Laughter.]

Senator Burr. So I appreciate that it is a priority

for the VFW. I hope that solving it is the priority, and not just walking away from an increase of 4,000 adjudicators and us all feeling good. Because at the end of the day, I believe it is about the effects that it has on the veterans and on their families and on their lives. And I am sure I have got your commitment that that is the case of VFW.

Mr. Tradewell. Senator, you do, and I would like to thank you because we do take it seriously. Thank you.

Senator Burr. I thank you, Commander.

I yield the floor, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

Let me call on Senator Webb for your questions.

Senator Webb. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Commander, welcome.

Mr. Tradewell. Thank you.

Senator Webb. I noted from Mr. Wallace's introduction that you were at the Americal.

Mr. Tradewell. Yes.

Senator Webb. I was with the 1st Marine Division approximately the same time. The Americal was just south of us, so we probably stared at each other's illumination flares from time to time. I appreciate your service very much.

Mr. Tradewell. Thank you.

Senator Webb. As you know, I think, and many of you

know, my father was a member of this organization, I am a member of this organization. My brother was a marine; he is a member of this organization. I am very proud of my son and my son-in-law, who are both marine infantry veterans of Iraq. And, actually, my son-in-law is now an infantry sergeant on his way back to his fourth tour, one in Afghanistan, two in Fallujah, and now back to Afghanistan. So we know full well as a family the price that goes along with stepping forward and serving your country honorably, and I am very grateful to everyone in this room for having stepped forward and served their country during a time of need.

I also first began working in organized veterans law 33 years ago as a committee counsel on the House side, and some of you share that institutional memory of the personalities and issues that were involved at that point. The VFW had some real lions at that time, people like Cooper Holt, who was a legend up here in terms of veterans law; and Smokey Stover, who had come to the House Veterans Committee as a staff person from the VFW. And we had great mentors in terms of teaching those of us who had served in Vietnam, what the priorities were and how we should be approaching these issues, people like "Tiger" Teague, who was Chairman. and Sonny Montgomery and John Paul Hammerschmidt, and many, many others.

I feel especially well trained when we look at these issues and grateful that we had some continuity there. And I would like to say to those VFW members here in the room today that you are extremely well represented by your national staff. We have had tremendous relationships as we built the support for the GI bill. You know, Bob Wallace, William Bradshaw, Eric Hilleman, and Steve Lawrence, and many, many others. It was vital that we had the credibility of this organization when we were trying to explain to people the difference between the Montgomery GI bill, which was a viable recruiting alternative during peacetime, but between that and what the people who came back from World War II had received, which is very similar, thankfully, now to what we are seeing for those who have been serving since 9/11.

It has been mentioned up here from the podium this morning that the World War II GI bill was a tremendous part of where this country came economically after World War II, and the statistic that we kept coming back to was that for every dollar that was put into the World War II GI bill, the American people got \$7 back in tax remunerations because people were able to build a different kind of professional future, people who never thought that they might be able to go on to college.

That is what we are looking for here. That is what I

think we are going to see with the GI bill that we were able to put in place for those who have been serving since 9/11. I am very proud to have been a part of that, and I am especially grateful to this organization for having helped us make that happen.

I have one question I would like your insights on, Commander. As we look at this issue of homeless veterans, there seem to be two different approaches to this problem, neither of which are negative, but I am curious as to your thoughts as to which actually would be most helpful in terms of actually transitioning veterans out of homelessness into productive lives.

The approach we seem to be moving toward is these individual vouchers to Section 8 housing where veterans would essentially have an independent living arrangement, and there are advantages to that. But as someone who was able to spend some time looking at more organized living arrangements as a traditional way of helping solve their problems, I think there are a lot of advantages to that as well.

I have a long-time friend, Tommy Lyons. Those of you who are here from Massachusetts may know Tommy Lyons. He ran the veterans' programs for the city of Boston for about 10 years, a Marine Corps veteran. He ran the New England shelter for the homeless for 7 years, and they had a very

structured program where they would bring people in, and inside this facility you would have the camaraderie of being around people who had also served. They had a place to bring structured programs to the use of those who were in the situation of being homeless. And I tend to think that that is a more productive way. I am curious as to what you and your organization think about those two alternatives.

Mr. Tradewell. I would refer it to Mr. Wallace.

Mr. Wallace. We agree with you 100 percent, Senator Webb. You have got to get the person into the system. You have got to take care of the system. There are medical needs. There are mental health needs. You have got to give them training, the opportunities to excel, to get into the GI bill, and you have got to give them that camaraderie because that camaraderie is so important through a veteran's life. To all of us it is important. That is why we are in the VFW. That is why we talk about our experiences at times. It is very important. But it is more important even for someone who needs help, and we really support the model that has been so successful in Boston for so many, many years.

Senator Webb. Well, I look forward to having a further dialogue on this as we move these ideas forward. I tend to feel very strongly in the way that you just mentioned, so thank you for that comment. And I thank all of you for your

service.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Senator Webb.

And now I would like to call on Senator Brown for his questions.

Senator Brown. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I just want to obviously thank you, Mr. Chairman, for any effort you had in allowing me to be on this Committee, and certainly the Majority and Minority Leaders for their allowing me to serve on this Committee, which I served on back in Massachusetts in the State Senate. Being in the military, I certainly understand a lot of the needs that our men and women who have served and are serving need. It is important to me as an individual. It is important to me as a service member. And, obviously, Mr. Chairman, being new, I do not want to misspeak or assume I know more than I do, so I am going to read the Commander's testimony and try to work with the Committee to do what we can for our men and women who have served and continue to serve.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Brown.

Senator Begich, your questions?

Senator Begich. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being here today and testifying. First, a

special thank you to the Alaskans. As the Chairman has introduced his folks from Hawaii, Alaska is also one of the farthest places, so we appreciate when they come here to Washington. So, again, to the four or five or so that are here, thank you for being here and thank you for your service.

Mr. Chairman, I do have a couple questions, but I want to make just one quick comment. I know we have votes, and I am also on the Armed Services Committee, so actually, after I comment, I am going to try to run over to the Armed Services Committee to work with some of the active military issues that are on our docket.

One thing I know, in your testimony, Commander, and as we for the last year have been engaged in the issues of health care, I want to reassure you and your members here, as I do when I am back home on a regular basis, reassure you that the efforts that are being done in health care reform in no way, at least in my interest, has any interest in changing the way we are doing the VA delivery system.

Some people are concerned that it might all be one big program at the end of the day. That is not my interest. I think the veterans deserve the program they have. They worked hard for it. And I think there are a lot of improvements we have to do in the VA, as we all know. But I want to reassure you that at least from my perspective, and

many of my colleagues, there is no interest in consuming it into a larger, kind of bigger program. I know that is a concern not only for the veterans but also for another group that I represent in Alaska, Indian Health Services, which is another group that is very concerned. But I want to, again, reassure you because I know the rumor mill--and your comments were very appropriate. The rumor mill within the Internet is massive and fast. If you can imagine, we could say one thing right now, and probably in 30 seconds or less it will be on the Internet. So hopefully the comments I just made will be, to reassure veterans that we care about the service and we do not want to diminish it in any way, period, and will not be consumed, at least from my perspective, in a larger health care reform. So I wanted to make sure, if that was a concern of yours and your members.

Let me ask, if I can--and with the veterans, I just had the Under Secretary for Labor--we did some field hearings up in Alaska regarding veterans' hiring and veterans' job. What do you think from your perspective or your organization's perspective is the biggest impediment for veterans to get employment? You mentioned some interesting statistics. I know when we had our hearings in our kind of town hall meetings we had up there on employment, we heard a lot from veterans on some of the concerns. What do you think are some of the biggest impediments for veterans to

get the jobs they need? Does anyone--

Mr. Wallace. Senator, if I may, President Obama's Executive order is mandating that Federal Government agencies hire more veterans. We need to do something with voc rehab, improving that. We need to increase the tax benefits for hiring of veterans at corporations.

I think the most important thing, though, is that we have to do a better job of selling who veterans are. Earlier this morning, Mr. Buyer mentioned the dependability, the ability to work with people. You cannot train people-- it takes a long time for you to train someone that has that ability. The ability to change direction on a moment's notice--I mean, I went through graduate school and got an MBA, and they did not tell me how I could change directions on a moment's notice. They taught me that in the United States Marine Corps when the first shot was fired.

That is something that corporate America is eager to get. They are eager to get those kind of qualified people, and we as a Nation, we as a veterans' organization, you as a Congress, have not done a good job of explaining to corporate America the value of hiring veterans, and I think we have to do that. We have to do that with money for publicity, and we have to do it aggressively.

Senator Begich. Thank you. One of the things I will tell you from the--we picked up working and talking with

some labor organizations and then sitting in the Armed Services Committee, which I thought was very interesting is, as you know, within the military there are many different job classifications, voc job classifications, and you get certain certifications through the process. But when you come out and then you want to go in that exact same field, you will have to in some cases get totally recertified even though you probably already have all that skill. And it became clear to me that there has to be a way to link the work that is done in the military, especially voc ed areas, where you come out with a trade, that we can make a transition wherever they work in the United States, that they can get certified and then work in that field without this long process, in some cases repeating the work and education they had in the military.

Is that a fair statement?

Mr. Wallace. Yes, it is, and that has been an issue for years, licensing and certification. There have been a lot of MOUs between VA and the Department of Labor and so forth. The problem is it goes down to the State level. Then you have got to get an MOU with every State and every agency and every different type of job. So it gets very frustrating to the veteran who is a truck driver--

Senator Begich. Yes, who is qualified, read to go.

Mr. Wallace. Right. A truck driver all over Iraq or

Afghanistan, all over the country here in training, then goes back home to New York and cannot drive a truck. I mean, it makes no sense, but that is what the problem is. It gets so far down. If there is any way that we can work with you to get that changed, we would be more than willing to do so.

Senator Begich. I will look forward to it. I know that the Under Secretary Jefferson of Labor and I have had this conversation. He is very motivated in trying to maybe pick three or four areas to kind of do some sampling, because as you do, for example, unified building codes, for example, nationwide, there are ways maybe to approach this because it seems ridiculous that they do all that great work. As you said, driving a truck in Afghanistan, if you can do it there, you can do it anywhere, is kind of my view. And if they can make it through there and do the work that needs to be done, they should be able to come back here and not have to go through a long process, in some cases an expensive process, to get relicensed and certified, when really they already have exceptional skills ready to roll.

So I will look forward to this. This is something I learned during my hearings and talked to Labor as well as the governments, and someone who has been from the local government as a former mayor, I clearly understand that there are ways that we can probably unify this on a national

level to give our veterans the skills and qualifications they have earned and put them to work coming back when they want to go into civilian life. So we will work on that.

The last comment I will just make, Mr. Chairman, or question, is: Do you think there is enough work being done--because, obviously, veterans not only want to have a job and be out there working, but they also want to start their own small business. And it seems at times there are two pieces to the equation. One is I think the Federal Government has not done enough in making sure their goals are met. They have goals, 3 percent, but it is not necessarily--it is a goal. It is not always met.

But put that question aside for a second. Is there enough that we are doing to provide the necessary training and skill levels for veterans who want to be small business people?

Mr. Wallace. We do not believe so. We believe that that could be improved. You know, there is an untapped cadre of corporate executives that are retired that are veterans that somehow could create a corps--

Senator Begich. Like a mentoring--

Mr. Wallace. --of mentors that could be tapped into and could help veterans actually understand how to write a business plan and how to get where they want. They may be the most technical person in the world to be able to do all

the good stuff, but if they do not have the business plan, they are not going to be able to sell it to the lending institution and so forth and so on.

I think there is a cadre of people--again, public relations is what going to make this happen. It is going to make people step forward, I think, because of the value of veterans.

Senator Begich. Very good. Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to ask questions, and again, to all of you, thank you for your service. I will remind those that were here last year that I appreciate you coming every single year, but I will tell you, you have an advocate. My father-in-law, a retired colonel, sends me his copy of his magazine, articles outlined and things circled in them. Everything that you send him I get.

[Laughter.]

Senator Begich. And with his footnotes, exactly what I should be doing, and I have learned one thing with my father-in-law. It is healthy in the family environment to agree with him 100 percent.

[Laughter.]

Senator Begich. So thank you all very much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much.

And now we will have questions from Representative Walz.

Mr. Walz. Well, thank you Mr. Chairman.

Earlier, I did not mention--I was going to mention and single out the Minnesotans, but I knew, being good Minnesotans, they better be outside in the 60-degree weather after this winter. So maybe I will talk to them when they come by the office, but thank you to all them.

I would like to say thank you to my colleague and friend from Indiana who gave such an eloquent portrait of what this is all about. And he is also my friend, and he is retiring this year. I often remind him many of us will be retiring this year come November. But I think what was made very clear--

[Laughter.]

Mr. Walz. I think what was made very clear is these issues transcend all of us, and the one constant is you being there all the time of making sure that that voice is never wavering. And I think one of a sense of great pride and great sense of responsibility we have in serving on this Committee is the things we learn from each other. And I think coming back to what you are saying, Bob--and this is something that Mr. Buyer has been very clear and gave me a lot of food for thought about, is how we deal with in caring

for our veterans and making sure we do not cross that line into victimhood. And I think that is what you are talking about on this, that these are not victims. These people are not asking for a handout. We simply are there fulfilling our moral obligation to put them back on the same footing. And I think what you are talking about on this issue is--

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. We can sometimes get lost in that, and I think you are right. I put a little amendment in--and it seemed like it would have been unnecessary--on the intelligence bill, but make sure that we were educating our security clearance adjudicators on the wounds of war, both mentally and physically. We were seeing a disproportionate number of returning veterans being denied a renewal of their security clearances for their service in war to be serving on homeland security and other things. Who better to have protecting us than those who have already done it? And yet, because of how we were doing this and not selling it, we were not selling their strengths. We were focusing on what was a perceived weakness, which is just simply a wound of war that needed to be corrected.

So I think you are right on on this, and I think this is a key piece of what we need to do, and I think that is the good first start.

A couple things I would ask. I think Senator Burr was

right on, too. I agree with him on this. My patience is running thin on this, and we need to get this fixed. And what I said, we had the VA IG in--and I am a big fan. As we said, we all big fans. But he kind of downplayed, when I talked about that the Vietnam veterans said the IG does a wonderful job of fraud and abuse, not so great with waste. And he kind of pooh-poohed that those were overused terms. I think he was missing the point that many of us believe there is a culture that is so rigid it cannot adapt.

I want to hit on two things, Commander, that are near and dear to my heart, and I believe they both tie together on seamless transition. I am sick of this. Every one of you here--Bob, you have been at this for 20-some years. All of you have talked about it. I am sick of us continuing to be firefighters instead of preventing the damn fires. Get the seamless transition done. Make it smooth. Make the claims backlog work the way it is supposed to. And then we will not be dealing with this every single year. It is becoming ridiculous. And I think the key is right. I think it is two things: changing the culture of how we approach this, and yet it is the technology side.

Now, I am appreciative of where you are at. You told us to take a look at IT, something we spent a lot of time on. But I had them--and all of us did, when they were testifying last week, we are giving them \$3.3 billion. We

added it up over time. I am still waiting for some of their pilot projects that were started in the year 2000. My God, they are eight generations behind already. Even if it comes online, it will not be worth a damn.

So my question is: Are they learning the issues from the private sector? Are they listening? I had to point out to them last week that IAVA's website had a better calculator on GI benefits. They did not have one up. IAVA did it as a nonprofit for less than \$20,000 and are connecting more veterans going through their portal than was going through the VA's.

So I do not mind giving them the resources they need, but I am telling you, in this tough environment we have to be accountable for every penny. They have got to do a better job. And I think Senator Burr brought up some intriguing questions there if that is happening. So I look forward to asking, in working with you, for us to keep the spotlight on them.

And the last thing I would tell you, the one I struggle tremendously with and we have to get is rural veterans. Fifteen percent of our population lives in rural areas; 50 percent of our returning warriors live there. There are several reasons for that. I would like to think it is because the culture of rural areas tends to have service as a priority a lot of times. Not that it does not happen in

urban areas, but there is something to it. And also for many of us, it was an opportunity to get an education and get a job.

So I am asking you, as we are trying to figure out this rural health care piece--I convened a summit with the VFW representatives, with our VISN, with the director of the VA hospital, and all of those, bringing them together to try and see how does the CBOC fit into this, how do we make sure that if we are going to do fee-for-service--an IG report showed that 37 percent of those dollars were misspent. If we are going to allow someone to see someone and it makes sense to see a specialty care person, maybe a physical therapist in a rural area or whatever, how do we make sure we have accountability over those dollars. And I am looking for all of you to come up with some suggestions on this, how you think the best way to go about that is to make sure that that mix between the care that has to be at the VA, that that can go to the CBOC, and that that can reach out into the fee-for-service.

And Senator Begich has left, but I heard his colleague Representative Young mention veterans in Alaska cannot go see the Indian health care clinic. They have to skip over and go 800 miles somewhere else. That is just stupid, and it is wasteful of dollars, and we could do better to integrate that.

So it is more of a comment. I do not know if you want to comment on it, but I appreciate that. This seamless transition thing, this is the line in the sand for me that I am drawing. I am going to die on that one no matter how long it takes, because it has got to get done. It is terrible for us to wait, so I look forward to standing right with you to push that one over the edge.

But if you have any comments where we are going, if you have any insight into this rural veterans issue, I would certainly appreciate it.

Mr. Tradewell. The fact that the rural veterans--we have people from Wyoming, people from Alaska, and we can talk about Hawaii. And if there is anything more rural than a series of islands off by themselves where health care has to be taken care of, I am sure the Senator knows of the problems we have seen there.

We stand behind the fact that even though these people have chosen to live in that area, they still deserve the health care that should be given them. And we are champions of making sure that rural health care is one of the items that is top on our list. We will promote it in our literature and make sure that our veterans are champions of the cause to make sure that rural health care is another priority on our list.

Mr. Walz. I appreciate it, and, again, thank you all

for being here. If you do not do it, no one will around here. If you do not speak for it, it will not get done. And as all of us have said, we fight for every penny here, and it was amazing how fast billions can move in other directions. So keep pushing it in the right direction.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Thank you very much, Representative Walz.

And now I would like to call on Representative Boozman for his questions.

Mr. Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, I would like to recognize the folks from Arkansas, if they are here. Very good. Thank you, guys. They do a tremendous job at home, and we really do appreciate all that they represent.

I want to thank all of you for being here, Commander, and the tremendous job that you are going to do and are doing, the staff that worked so hard on the Subcommittee, Ranking Member, on Economic Opportunity, and I was really--I was glad that the Senator a few minutes ago was talking about the trucking issues, how we can get some of those things done, little things. You know, a lot of service members coming out would like to go into franchises, you know, how we can--the education component or whatever, you

know, how perhaps we can help get them in franchises, you know, putting veterans to work.

I do appreciate all of you being here. It is so important as you go around and you are visiting with your Members of Congress. There is no substitute for that. As you can see, the Committee works very, very well together, Mr. Walz and Mr. Hall, nobody is more dedicated to veterans than they are, Mr. Buyer on our side. It is just everybody working together.

Again, we cannot get that done without your grass-roots efforts, which you have done such a tremendous job. The staff up here does a great job, and we really do appreciate working with them very, very much.

Let me ask you a little bit--I am an optometrist, an eye doctor, and so I am interested in the telemedicine piece. And you guys might comment a little bit for us about if you have any idea of utilization, if you have any idea as to other areas that you might see that go.

You know, we talk about rural America, and certainly that is an area that I think we could do a lot more of. Again, as an optometrist, or eye doctor, if you have any need for any free advice after this is over, I will hang around and answer your questions about your cataracts or glaucoma or whatever.

Could you talk to us a little bit about telemedicine

and see where that is going in the future?

Mr. Wallace. Congressman, we want to see telemedicine used as much as it possibly can. There should be no impediments in the VA that says we cannot do it, we cannot do this. They have got the smartest doctors in the world. With technology the way it is and with the rural areas, remote areas that we are talking about, we have got to embrace it. And, again, it is a culture change in VA. It is a mind culture. They have to get over that mine culture and say, yes, we will embrace it and we will use it to the best advantage to take care of America's veterans.

I mean, it is very simple to us. You know, we do not know what dial to turn and so forth, but, I mean, why wouldn't you do it? I mean, other places do. You know, the Mayo Clinic, I mean, tie somebody up in Beijing, for crying out loud, and give an operation. I mean, why can't you do it here to remote areas? It just does not make sense to us, and we encourage the VA and we encourage Congress to push the VA to embrace it more.

Mr. Boozman. Good. Very good. I look forward to working with you on that and encouraging also especially things like eye care, you know, where you are looking at diabetic retinopathy, things like that, having the ability to--the technology is so good and then also the quality of the images that you are seeing, things like dermatology,

little lesions, you know, that are not quite right, getting a guy that looks at those all day every day, that really does make a lot of sense. So I look forward to working with you on that.

Then, also, the trucking issues, you know, things like that where we can work to get veterans recognized for the experience that they do have in the different areas, helping with their licensure programs and things like that. As you know, there are some hurdles to overcome. In a sense you can have a lot of experience out on the road in Afghanistan, but a lot of what we deal with is just the regulations, you know, as far as this and that. But I do think that there is room to really make a difference in that regard.

Thank you, Commander. I appreciate your staff, and then thank of all you so much. A special thanks to the Auxiliary. You guys do a tremendous job. When I, you know, am around, looking about, the people that are doing a lot of the work, you know, is the Auxiliary. And, you know, certainly things could not function without you. As the Senator said, you know, earlier about his father-in-law, my Dad did 20 years in the Air Force. My Mom is 96 or 97--97, I guess, and every time I see her, she wants to know what I am doing for veterans.

The good thing is I have got a good story to tell her. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Representative Boozman.

And now I would like to call for questions from Representative Hall.

Mr. Hall. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Walz, our Ranking Members, for holding this hearing. Commander Tradewell, thank you so much for being here today and for your testimony. Thanks to all the officers and the Auxiliary, all of the VFW members, especially those from New York and from the Hudson Valley, welcome. And thank you for your service.

I would briefly just comment to say that I am in total agreement with your testimony regarding the backlog and believe that the VA, where it is trying and we have pilot programs going on, we have pilot virtual regional offices and pilot IT programs underway. And Secretary Shinseki I believe is taking some very good steps to deal with the very difficult situation which, as you note, is getting worse because of the new diseases that have been automatically made presumptive for Agent Orange exposure and because of the returning veterans from our current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But, still, I am in agreement with Mr. Walz and with Senator Burr's comments that at some point--I have been here

for a little over 3 years, and this is what we have been working on for that time. It is a short time compared to others up here and certainly to the time that you have been working on it. But I am honored to chair the Subcommittee on the House side on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, and we passed a bill in 2008 that was unanimously passed by both the House and Senate. I am proud to say, in this time when everybody talks about partisanship, that we did not have a single vote on either the House or Senate floor against the bill to modernize the claims process and that it was signed into law by President Bush, and it was as good an example of all of us working together to try to solve this problem as you could find.

There are studies that that legislation called for that we are waiting to yet get the reports on. There were successful pieces of it, like the creation of a Survivors Office in the VA. But at the same time, we are still waiting and watching that number creep up.

So listening to Senator Burr, I am thinking about what Chairman Filner keeps coming back to, which is the IRS model that, you know, when you send in your filing for your taxes, they take it, acknowledge it, either cash your check or send you a refund depending on what you say that the earnings were the previous year, and then they selectively and scientifically audit a sample and try to correct any errors

after the fact. But the people who are waiting for their refunds do not have to wait 180 days, or for 2 years if it is an appeal.

So, you know, that is something that I would be curious about your opinion. I do not think that we feel--or I do not feel that we are there yet, but I am with Mr. Walz in the sense that we have put a lot of money and a lot of thought and a lot of talk into this problem. And I would like to see some tangible and sizable reduction in that waiting time and in that backlog in the near future, or else I am going to start thinking that the IRS model may be one that we should look at as a radical change to try to get benefits in short order to those who have earned them.

I also just want to mention that changing the culture of the VA does, as many people have mentioned, take time, whether it is certification for a trade that one acquires in service being recognized and acknowledged in civilian life so you do not have to go through the same training or licensing again, or something as simple as GI bill benefits being delivered in the most efficient way.

We just had a hearing on a bill that I have before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance--and it hopefully will be before the full VA House Committee--to require the VA to wire education benefits directly into the veterans' accounts. I have been hearing from veterans in my district

in New York that they are told by the VA to drive down to New York or take a train to New York to pick up a check to cover their tuition and their books and their housing and so on. It may be a 4-1/2-hour round trip by train or by car and cost 50 bucks or \$45 or so. And the VA regional office is only open from, I believe, 8:00 to 4:30 Monday to Friday. So those are school days, and we are asking our student veterans to skip school to come down and pick up a physical check when all other disabilities are as a matter of routine are wired into--the compensation is wired into veterans' accounts all over this country.

It just seems like the kind of thing they should-- somebody should think of this up front instead of us having to debate a resolution and hold a hearing on it. I mean, it is--so I am totally in agreement with you about the need for a change in the culture. I thank you for your service and all of you for your service to our country and, of course, for your service to your fellow veterans. And having married into a West Point family, I hear from them, from my nephew who will graduate in May from West Point, to my brother-in-law who is a lieutenant colonel and works at the academy, to my father-in-law who is--well, I do not hear from him audibly, but he is buried at West Point. And I want to make sure that this is something that, as Mr. Walz said, when I leave here or when we leave here, the

conversation is not still on the same topics.

So thank you again for your service, and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the time.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Representative Hall.

Now I will call on Senator Buyer--Representative Buyer for his questions.

Mr. Buyer. About to lower my esteem as a gentleman.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Buyer. Danny, I have enjoyed working with you over the years. I truly have. And I call you "Danny" as a friend.

I want to touch on a couple of areas. We talk about the claims processing. As I sort of look back at this one, Bob, I think we missed a wonderful opportunity to modernize the disability system. I think we really did. When I look back with the disability commission, the Dole-Shalala, I just wish we would have jumped into that one. It was hard. It was difficult. And sometimes when hard and difficult, the town procrastinates, and I wish we would not have.

So where do we end up? We then end up with having to work on the tactics, and the tactics is how do you then better the system. So you throw people at it, and that is what we are being done. You then, your counsel to us is to

focus on the quality of the claim, timely, and being accurate.

And, you know, some years back, I remember when the Under Secretary of Benefits gave an exam of existing personnel, they did not do very well in the test. And that became a debate of whether the test was fair. Then a couple with this one, too.

Then as we focus on IT, what do we do? We improve the IT, but in the end all we have done is digitized a paper process. So Mr. Burr's comments about focusing on process, he is absolutely right. So your comments, Mr. Wallace, about culture, I mean, my gosh, what good is it for us to provide the IT if, in fact, we are not going to change the paper process when we digitize it? It seems pretty bizarre to me. So no wonder it takes even more time. So that is very challenging for me.

I would like to ask a particular question, and, Commander, if you do not have the answer, maybe someone on your staff does. In your written statement, you recommended basing the post-9/11 housing stipend on the veteran's home zip code rather than the zip code of the school being attended online. Payments under the current method range from as low as \$01 in Mansfield, Ohio, to as high as \$2,751 in New York City. The VA has indicated the average payment is about \$1,400. Why would using a veteran's home zip code

be a superior method? My fear is that--wouldn't this method be more susceptible to fraud as opposed to using the zip code of the school? Can someone explain to me why this was in your statement?

Mr. Hilleman. Thank you, Congressman Buyer. We are concerned that the propensity for fraud, while there may be fraud with the veteran saying, "I live at Mom's house," when in reality they are living in a different zip code, would be much higher for institutions to relocate to zip code, say, San Diego and register all of their students through San Diego with that zip code, though they live in rural areas of Montana, Alaska, Indiana, and throughout the Nation.

So the propensity for fraud would be more systemic, in our view, if a university that is doing online payments.

Mr. Buyer. But do you know of any cases?

Mr. Hilleman. It is currently not paid, Congressman, so we are not familiar with any cases.

Mr. Buyer. All right. Well, I appreciate you raising the attention to us, and we will look at it. I just want to make sure we use the correct methodology.

Mr. Hilleman. I understand and we agree.

Mr. Buyer. We will keep our eyes on that one then for you.

Mr. Hilleman. Thank you.

Mr. Buyer. The other I would ask--well, I guess I want

to inform you of a couple things that are going on, and if you get a chance--Commander, I do not know if you are going to be seeing the Army Chief anytime soon, General George Casey, or the Vice Chief, Peter Corelli. Are you going to be seeing them anytime soon?

Mr. Tradewell. He was with us yesterday, presented what his thoughts were of the condition of the Army and the future.

Mr. Buyer. Okay. General Casey or Corelli?

Mr. Tradewell. General Casey.

Mr. Buyer. Casey. If you get a chance to see the Vice Chief, please ask him about his work with regard to TBI. He is truly off the heels and on his toes over the last year plus, and he is doing an extraordinary job. He is trying to get a data repository and how we can move to measure the G-force. So what we have done here is, you know, those of us when we created the polytrauma centers within the VA to take care of these active-duty soldiers, now we have five of these polytrauma centers. We then changed the helmet--the sling system inside the helmet to helmet pads to reduce the G-force. Well, now there is some research being done with regard to sensors that could be placed in the helmet.

The interesting thing that is going on here is that here we are--football is trying to do this, and now we are trying to move that technology, and who turns to General

Corelli and says, "Hey, wait a minute. What you are doing, we have already done this research." The IRL, the Indy Racing League, has said, "Wait a minute. Don't put it in the helmets. We already do this. We measure the G impact," and they place it inside the ears. So General Corelli is going to be looking at what IRL does.

So there are some soldiers that find themselves in a high risk, those of whom operate the Buffalo. That is a very high risk. And so General Corelli is basically saying if you are in an impact zone and if we are able to measure that G-force and that impact, that is knowledge that is extremely important.

But, Chairman Akaka, what hopefully we are going to do here is we need to figure out how we thread, how we properly thread all of this information that we are going to gather. So if the Army side wants to gather information on trying to figure out how they can provide better protective gear and how they make better decisions with regard to someone who may be in an impact zone, there are special ops reasons for gathering that information and having a data repository at Fort Detrick. But from a health standpoint, doctors need to know what that G impact was on that individual's brain. So how we properly thread and were able to make this data interoperable between health and our special ops--I am just throwing this out. It is going to happen beyond when I am

here. But we have got to make sure that we thread that intelligence.

The other I want to comment on, and I would ask, Commander and Bob Wallace, if you would consider doing an article in the VFW magazine about our Paralympians. Last week, I was able to announce we have five of our disabled veterans are part of the Paralympic team, so this weekend, when you have the opportunity to watch the Paralympics on television, this makes a total of 15 now given the summer games and now these winter games whereby there have been 15 of our disabled veterans who have put down their military uniforms and now donned the uniform of the United States Olympic Committee.

We were able to years ago--I will not say reform the Olympic Committee, and then created this pathway for our veterans to games at the Olympics, not everyone can be an Olympian. And working with the House and the Senate, we were able to create many forms, using sports at a platform for healing.

So there is a great story to be told here about these real heroes and the inspiration they can then give to others. And I would ask you if you could do an article on the inspiration for which they carried forward. I think it would be really good to tell the American story.

Mr. Tradewell. Thank you.

Mr. Buyer. And with that, Mr. Chairman, thank you and I yield back.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Congressman Buyer, for your excellent statement.

I want to ask one question. The vote has been called. The timing is perfect. And this has to do with caregivers. There is no question that this has been legislation that we have general support throughout our country. In light of the pending family caregiver legislation, we have included in our Committee's views and estimates on the fiscal year 2011 a recommendation for \$57 million to be appropriated to implement this program.

My question to you, Commander Tradewell, is: Does this help allay your concerns about how this program will be funded?

Mr. Tradewell. If there is \$57 million in there for that particular issue, that would allay our fears that we would be promoting the caregivers without giving them any money.

Chairman Akaka. Yes, and again, I want to thank you and the VFW for the kind of support we have had and advance funding so we can plan ahead, as we are doing at this time, and it will make a huge difference.

On the issue of certification, Commander, Microsoft has

just launched a new initiative which I am delighted to support to address the certification and licensing issue for returning service members. And I mention that to urge you and your organization to explore this and let us know how you feel about this. We certainly want to move as quickly as we can in trying to improve the total system of VA.

I have further questions that I will place into the record.

[The questions of Chairman Akaka follow:]

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Chairman Akaka. In closing, Commander, I want to extend my thanks to our lead witness, Commander Tradewell, for appearing here today, and your testimony has given us, without question, a deeper insight into VFW's legislative priorities. As always, I look forward to continuing our work together to better the lives of all veterans and their families. The word "culture" has been raised several times here, and this is a key word. We need to change the culture as the challenges change and face us in these days.

Again, I want to say thank you so much for your support and also with all of those who are in attendance here today.

This hearing is now adjourned.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 11:16 a.m., the Committees were adjourned.]

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