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Statement of Chairman Bernard Sanders

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

Joint Hearing on the Legislative Presentation of AMVETS, Air Force Sergeants Association, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Jewish War Veterans, Gold Star Wives, Fleet Reserve Association, Vietnam Veterans Association, National Guard Association, and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs

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"Thank you, Chairman Miller, and thank all of you for joining us today despite the weather warnings and snowfall predictions over the next 24 hours.

I would like to thank the veterans who are here with us today and I appreciate all of your continued service back in your communities.

The knowledge that all of the organizations before us today gain from their daily interaction with veterans is an invaluable resource for members of these Committees and Congress as a whole. As we continue to address the issues that are so important to our nation's veterans and their families, I look forward to your continued input into the legislative process.

At times, VA's challenges cast a large shadow over what VA does well. I think it is important that we acknowledge the things that VA is accomplishing each and every day for veterans. For instance, patient satisfaction continues to increase across the country and the quality of care veterans receive at VA has never been better; VA continues to acknowledge that some exposures cause long-term health consequences – we saw this with the Secretary's granting of service-connection for conditions related to Agent Orange exposure; VA has taken an aggressive stance on homelessness by pursuing the ambitious goal of eliminating veterans' homeless by 2015; and through its world class research program, VA is making significant advances in health care for veterans.

Let me turn to the budget, something that is on all of our minds. VA is exempt from sequestration and I remain committed to protecting VA from future cuts. But some in Congress continue to discuss the Chained Consumer Price Index as though it is a viable option to battle the deficit crisis.

Proponents of this approach would change how the annual cost-of-living adjustments are calculated, which would mean that veterans who started receiving VA disability benefits at age 30 would have their benefits reduced by \$1,425 at age 45, \$2,341 at age 55, and \$3,231 at age 65.

This careless attempt to balance the budget on the backs of disabled veterans is fundamentally wrong. Adoption of a Chained CPI would substantially cut the VA benefits of more than three million veterans and their survivors. Such actions would be an injustice to those who have proudly and honorably served in defense of the richest nation in the world.

Let me be clear, any attempt to balance the budget on the backs of those who served and their families is a non-starter. It is unconscionable to ask disabled veterans to make do with less, while protecting tax loopholes that some of the wealthiest in America enjoy, which allows them to avoid paying their fair share.

In my Views and Estimates letter to the Budget Committee last week, I urged them to reject any change in the calculation of the COLA. I will not accept anything that fails to fulfill the promises we have made to our nation's veterans and their families.

As we all know, the claims backlog is one of the most significant challenges VA faces. To VA's credit, it has been working aggressively to overcome these challenges and to provide more timely and accurate decisions. In the last three years, VA has processed more than one million claims annually – more claims than ever before. Yet, at the same time, more than a million new claims have been filed in each of those three years. Claims for increased evaluations or additional medical conditions continue to make up a significant portion of the claims workload as a result of the increasing age of many veterans. We also continue to see more veterans seeking benefits for the first time. These are not only veterans of the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also veterans of other eras.

As more veterans seek the benefits they have earned, VA must do even more to address this growing demand. VA must continue to transform. It must also measure and understand the impact of transformation on its workload and respond accordingly. VA must move to a paperless claims system and continue to eliminate VBMS' technical issues. And most importantly, VA must focus on quality, by ensuring its employees have the training, focus, and tools necessary to get claims done right the first time.

As we all know, there is still much room for improvement and a lot of work yet to be done. That is why we must continue to work together to find innovative solutions until we have truly created a 21st century claims system. The expertise of Veterans Service Organizations has been and will continue to be vital towards finding solutions to the challenges facing the claims system. No veteran should ever be discouraged from reaching out to VA for help in the future because of a negative experience with the claims system.

In recent years, we have made great strides in terms of understanding and acknowledging the challenges that come with the invisible wounds of war, and in developing and offering more effective treatments. VA has hired more mental health providers, but our work is far from complete.

I do not believe that there is a “one-size fits all” treatment for PTSD and other mental health conditions. We must tailor these treatments to fit the individual and expand the types of treatments available to include complementary and alternative medicine options. I also believe VA should reach out to local communities and partner with Federally Qualified Health Clinics and Community Health Clinics that can provide quality mental health services closer to where veterans live.

We have made a promise to our veterans that, after sacrificing so much for our country, they and their families will be taken care of when they return home. If even one veteran feels that he or she does not have anyone to reach out to or that the right type of treatment is not available, then we have failed in our promise.

We can and will continue to raise awareness of the benefits earned by veterans through increased outreach efforts at every level of civic activity across the country. This must be a top priority, so that veterans no longer struggle needlessly without knowing what assistance is available.

In talking with veterans and veterans’ advocates, I am hearing that there are many veterans who are unaware of their earned benefits. That is unacceptable, and I will be working with VA to ensure that they try even harder to make veterans aware of their earned benefits. We must recognize that we cannot rely solely on social media and websites to communicate with veterans about their benefits. Local efforts must be put into place as well – such as VA visiting Senior Centers and other areas where older veterans congregate.

Outreach is particularly important when it comes to women veterans. The face of the veterans’ population is rapidly changing. With greater rates of women serving than ever before, we can only expect for this population to continue to grow.

Women face a unique set of health challenges, challenges that VA is currently developing a capacity to address. Perhaps the most pressing women’s health issues are those that stem from Military Sexual Trauma. MST is epidemic, with one in five women veterans experiencing this trauma over the course of their service. It is up to VA to see that veterans are provided with the physical and mental health care that they desperately need.

Recently, the White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont opened a Women Veterans’ Comprehensive Care Clinic. It is absolutely beautiful, primarily due to a group of local women veterans who assisted in its design. We need to ensure that programs like this are happening across the system.

The bottom line is simple. No veteran, family member or caregiver should ever have to fight the Federal government to receive their earned and well-deserved benefits.

To all of the organizations, welcome here today. I look forward to hearing your testimonies and working with you in the future”.