



UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
**VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

JOHNNY ISAKSON | CHAIRMAN

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Wednesday, January 21, 2015

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## Isakson Opening Remarks as Chairman at First Senate VA Committee Meeting this Congress

**WASHINGTON** – U.S. Senator Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, today delivered the following opening statement at the first official committee meeting held in the 114th Congress:

**“I’m Johnny Isakson, chairman, and I’m very pleased to have Richard Blumenthal as the ranking member.**

**“Let me start off by saying it’s indeed an honor for me to be the chairman of the committee and I look forward to working with Richard almost as co-chairman to try and share information and make sure we’re looking out for the veterans of the United States of America and making the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs] a better service.**

**“I’m going to change some of the procedures with the committee. One, we’re going to operate under the early bird rule, which means ... we’re going to go in order of presence. ... Second thing is we’re not going to do opening statements for anybody other than the chairman and the ranking member, but [members of the committee] will have the opportunity to give closing statements. It’ll make things run a lot faster.**

**“I have chosen to dedicate my service in this committee, and I want to ask all you to do the same thing, to a veteran from Georgia.**

**“I’m going to remember Lt. Noah Harris, who passed away in Iraq on June 18, 2005. He was known as the ‘Beanie Baby soldier.’ He left after 9/11/2001 as a cheerleader at The University of Georgia and volunteered for an ROTC Commission**

**“He was in Iraq for two years and died in his second tour in Iraq. He died ... going to help Iraqi soldiers who were pinned down by the enemy.**

“Noah’s mother [and father], Rick and Lucy Harris, are two parents that are just wonderful individuals who have used his life as a tribute to the veterans that have served our country.

“Noah became my pen pal in 2005 when I first served in the Senate, and he would send me emails from the front in Iraq. He would sign every email that he sent me, and sign every piece of mail he sent to his parents with the following letters, ‘IDWICn,’ short for ‘I do what I can.’

“He always said, ‘I do what I can,’ and my service as chairman of this committee is to tell you I’m going to do what I can, and I hope each one of you will do the same thing to see to it that the Veterans Choice bill is put in place at the [Department of Veterans Affairs] and our veterans are getting the best services possible.

“We have a lot of good employees in the VA. We have a lot of good physicians, a lot of good paraprofessionals, a lot a good logistics people and a lot of good managing people. But I want to tell you something: my experience has been that of the 314,000 people in veterans’ healthcare, there are some [who] fold their arms knowing we’re going to be gone in two years and there will be another group coming in, and so they try and wait us out.

“What we proposed in the Veterans Choice bill is a way to bring veterans better services at a quicker period of time and bring about choice, use Medicare-approved doctors as a force multiplier for Secretary McDonald and the VA health system, and make sure our veterans get the best services possible.

“There are some problems with its implementation and we want to make sure that the veterans’ choice bill is not only the law of the land but it is the practice of the land at the VA.

“Another thing I am going to do that’s a little different than the way we have operated in the past: rather than have a member of the VA out [here] testifying and telling us what they want us to hear, we’re going to go to the VA and have a lot of our meetings. In fact, our next meeting is going to be in February where we are going to do a stand-up at Secretary McDonald’s office at the VA building here in Washington. That’s where he has all of his department heads come up and do a stand-up to come and tell what mistake they [made] yesterday and what they corrected, what were their successes and what they are doing, and what they need to do to do their job.

“I’ve always felt like if I’m out of sight, out of mind, nobody cares what I think. If they know I care enough to go to them and ask questions and have the committee there, we are going to be a better committee and the Veterans Choice bill is going to get implemented because they know we’re watching. I intend for us to do at least two field trips: one to one of the hospitals that’s

had terrible construction problems, either Denver, [Colo.], or Orlando, [Fla.], where the cost overruns are unbelievable.

“And I think this committee owes it to the veterans of American to go to Phoenix, [Ariz.], and see what’s being done in Phoenix to correct those problems.

“I’m going to be working on organizing those and I’m going to invite every member of the committee to go and I hope every member that can will do so because I think if we are no longer out of sight and out of mind, we’ll be a much more effective committee and see to it that the Veterans Choice bill works.”

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*The Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee is chaired by U.S. Senator Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., in the 114th Congress.*

*Isakson is a veteran himself – having served in the Georgia Air National Guard from 1966-1972 – and has been a member of the Senate VA Committee since he joined the Senate in 2005.*

*Isakson’s home state of Georgia is home to more than a dozen military installations representing each branch of the military as well as more than 774,000 veterans.*



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