

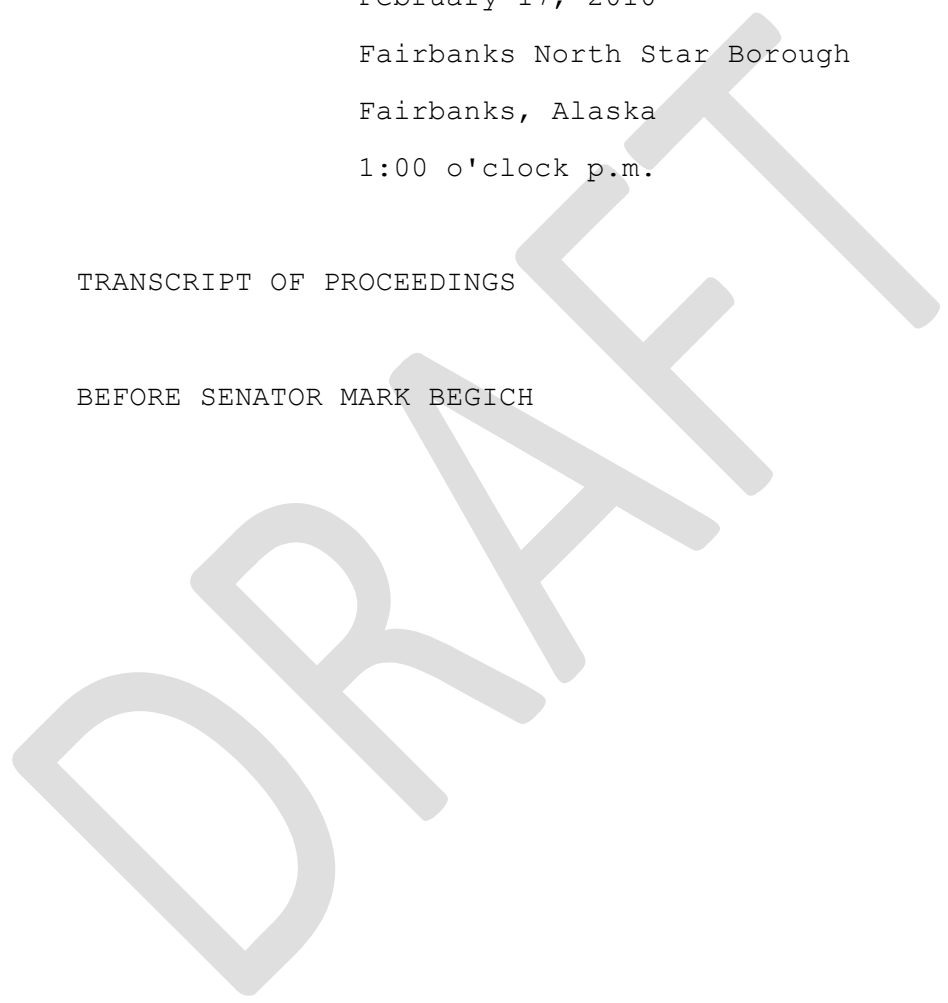
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UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
FIELD HEARING ON SERVICES FOR VETERANS IN ALASKA

February 17, 2010
Fairbanks North Star Borough
Fairbanks, Alaska
1:00 o'clock p.m.

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

BEFORE SENATOR MARK BEGICH



P R O C E E D I N G S

(On record)

SENATOR BEGICH: We'll call this meeting to order.

This is a Field Hearing on Services for Veterans in Alaska for the Veterans' Committee for the United States Senate.

Let me -- first, I know that we have two mayors here. Mayor Hopkins, thank you very much for being here. Mayor Isaacson from North Pole. I think you're -- there you are, you're behind him. Thank you both for being here today and your interest in veterans' issues, and thank you for the great weather. As I have come from the cold, deep Washington, D.C. where it is fifty-plus inches and 25 to 30 degree weather, it's amazing to come to Alaska and be in warmer weather with less snow, I have to tell you.

I also have some folks here I'll introduce in a second from Washington, D.C., and I did tell them that they will be able to come to the tropics if they can come with me to Alaska in February. And they are here. We want to give them special recognition for, one, traveling to Alaska, but, two, for traveling in February. We give them extra credit points, just so you know that. When they come in the summer, they don't get any extra points for that.

Let me make a few comments and then I'll describe what today is going to be about and how it will work. This hearing will focus on the state's services for veterans in Alaska,

1 including support of returning veterans, job opportunities for
2 veterans, benefits for veterans, and the December audit by the
3 VA Office of Inspector General of the VA Regional Office in
4 Anchorage.

5 The committee has had multiple hearings on VA benefits,
6 health care, and services; however, this is the first time we
7 are specifically focusing on the unique challenges confronting
8 returning Alaskan veterans of Operation Iraqi and Enduring
9 Freedom.

10 I'm pleased that the committee is joined today by
11 Assistant Secretary of Labor Ray Jefferson. Ray, just raise
12 your hand. I know you'll be on our second panel. He has been
13 with me in Anchorage for a field hearing. We've been to
14 Wasilla, today we're in Fairbanks, and then we're off to
15 Kotzebue tomorrow. So we're giving him a full, rounded
16 Alaskanized approach to getting people familiar with what's
17 going on here in Alaska. And, in addition, you'll hear when he
18 testifies a little bit about the Department of Labor and some
19 of the efforts and work they're doing.

20 We are also joined by Dr. Susan Pendergrass, the
21 Director of Veterans' Integration Service Network, or VISN 20.
22 Dr. Pendergrass is responsible for VA Northwest Health Network.
23 I'm not sure where she -- there she is. If you'd just -- there
24 we go. So thank you again, and they'll be on panels, on the
25 second panel.

1 We are also joined -- or also I want to give you a
2 little bit of statistics. Most of you know this already, in
3 that Alaska has over 70,000 veterans; about 11 percent of our
4 population. We are the highest per capita in the nation. The
5 Anchorage -- the Alaska population is very diverse, but also
6 spread not only in the urban areas, but into the rural areas.
7 So we have very unique situations that face our veterans in the
8 challenges that they face, not only in employment, but other
9 services that they need. Along with that, each year about
10 1,500 individuals from the military, especially from our recent
11 conflicts, move out of our service and into the veteran
12 capacity.

13 I want to applaud the VA employees in Alaska for the
14 work they do, and the VA does a lot of very significant work in
15 making a difference for Alaskan veterans; however, there is
16 always room for improvement as evidenced by the recent VA IG
17 dated December 7th, 2009, that showed that the Anchorage VA
18 Regional Office failed to meet requirements in 13 of the 14
19 areas covered during the inspection. This concerns me deeply
20 because providing accurate, timely, and comprehensive services
21 to our veterans is one of my top priorities as a member of the
22 Veterans Committee. More work needs to be done.

23 I hope that both of our panels will shed some light on
24 the issues such as why we continue to hear from some veterans
25 that are not aware of their eligibility for VA benefits and

1 services; why some veterans are not receiving appropriate VA
2 services; and why veterans have such a tough time in finding
3 employment. I hope to discuss these and other important issues
4 with our panels today.

5 Indeed, our unique geography, diversity, and the way of
6 life require the VA develop a unique strategy to care for our
7 veterans, especially those who reside in rural areas. Back in
8 Washington, we have worked hard to ensure that the VA has the
9 resources to provide the best care possible. Congress has
10 provided record-breaking funding increases to the VA. Last
11 year, I supported the VA's Veterans Health Care Budget Reform
12 and Transparency Act to ensure funding for veterans' health
13 care one year in advance of the regular appropriation process.
14 This bill was signed into law in October '09.

15 We have followed up on that success with passage of the
16 Caregiver's Bill, which would help wounded warriors and the
17 families who care for them. This bill, which also improves
18 care for women veterans, those who reside in rural areas, and
19 those who are homeless, has been sent to the House of
20 Representatives for their action and we expect action later
21 this year.

22 Finally, I know there are veterans here in the
23 audience. As you know, back some time ago I came up and had a
24 veterans' roundtable at one of the facilities here. Today is a
25 little different. Today is a congressional hearing that I'm

1 chairing here on behalf of the Veterans' Committee. The
2 process, just so everyone is aware, is we will have two panels
3 that will present. You will see by the panels' presentations
4 diverse thoughts and views on the services of the VA. It's
5 helping us create a congressional record to understand
6 specifically Alaskan issues that we can then bring back to
7 Washington, D.C.

8 Saying that, I know there are individuals who would
9 like to testify. This process at a federal -- or this
10 congressional hearing does not allow that individual testimony,
11 but saying that, we have created a document -- and someone
12 actually just brought me some paperwork already. Anything
13 presented today will be part of our congressional record,
14 shared with the rest of the committee, as well as with my
15 office. There is a form that we have out front, when people
16 came in, that you can fill out and put down additional comments
17 that you want to give us or concerns that you have, or
18 questions that you're not getting answered by whoever might be
19 within the Veterans' Administration process. Let us know that.
20 They will collect those or you can put them on the table.

21 And we have several staff here. Why don't every staff
22 member just kind of raise your hand. There's a couple. These
23 are the folks that when you fill that out or you have something
24 you want to hand out to give us for the congressional record,
25 please give it to them so we can make sure we keep a record of

1 it. But, again, it's not the normal process that a lot of
2 people are familiar with when they walk into an assembly
3 chamber like this where people line up for three minutes and go
4 through testimony. But it's for us to learn for the
5 congressional record as well as the committee of what we can do
6 to improve the services.

7 So that's the process here. Several of us in between
8 our next appointment, leaving from here to our next one, will
9 have available time that -- as we did in Anchorage when we had
10 the field hearing there. People were able to come up to our
11 special guests and give them also some additional information.

12 Today we have the first panel, and we will have two
13 panels. The first panel, I'll read the names, and then I will
14 ask them to give their presentation and I'll give you kind of
15 the order. So I'll read each name, introduce you, and then
16 I'll roll back and mention each name that will start off.

17 Linda, and I -- we -- I practiced your name; I think we
18 got it right. Boisseau. Is that.....

19 MS. BOISSEAU: Boisseau, yes, sir.

20 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. Linda Boisseau, Department
21 Service Officer, Disabled American Veterans. We also have
22 Robert Roof, an OIF veteran; Joe Sheehan, a lieutenant colonel,
23 U.S. Army Retired, Chairman Northern Alaska Military Retiree
24 Council; and Ron Woolf, Unit Representative, Employer Support
25 of the Guard and Reserve. Which we're going to have a ceremony

1 afterwards with some other folks that are anxious to sign up,
2 which we're very excited about.

3 The order will be just that, and we'll start with
4 Linda, who will give her presentation. And I will do my best,
5 as I said to the people who are testifying, just imagine we're
6 in your living room, all of us. Keep it casual. That's what
7 we try to do here, but give you the flexibility to express your
8 views on things that we can do to improve service. Linda.

9 MS. BOISSEAU: I would like to have a Miller Lite, sir.

10 SENATOR BEGICH: A Miller Lite for Linda.

11 (General laughter)

12 MS. BOISSEAU: Mr. Chairman and members of the
13 committee, I'm glad to be here on the behalf of the Disabled
14 American Veterans. I know that the VA has problems and there's
15 no need in continually ragging on it and saying, okay, you
16 failed 13 out of 14 things. So, if possible, I would like to
17 just bring up a few instant issues that we're having problems
18 with.

19 First of all, sir, we're having to broker out our
20 claims. A lot of them go to Salt Lake City. They also go to
21 Seattle, Washington, and they also go to San Diego, California.
22 I cannot overemphasize how horrible San Diego, California is on
23 their claims. I wish the OIG would go in there and pull a lot
24 of the claims that are being, you know, done down there and
25 coming back to Alaska. It results 9 times out of 10 in a

1 Notice of Disagreement or appeals. It's like they give them
2 zero percent or they deny them. It's no in-between. It's
3 really very, very poor.

4 That's been one of -- we have problems with Salt Lake
5 City and Seattle, but not half as much as we do with San Diego,
6 California rating our claims.

7 Another issue that I have is mail is continuing to be
8 misplaced. Right? Instructions to VA by the veterans are
9 overlooked and communication is non-existent. We've had a rash
10 of supposed people not showing up for their C&P exams. I don't
11 know if it's a miscommunication from the people that are
12 supposed to be sending out the notices that people have C&P
13 exams, but there's been no mail forthcoming to -- these people
14 have missed appointments and are being denied their claims
15 through the VA because of this supposed mailed-out C&P exam
16 missed. That's been another big issue that we're having. And
17 some of these are pretty serious with post traumatic stress
18 disorder that they have had since 2000. Now they're doing a
19 review and threatening to take them down from 100 percent to 50
20 percent, assuming that their GAF has changed. Their GAF score.
21 Which is not 52, it's 42, according to the records, but it was
22 quoted as 52. It's just a -- it's very irritating and when
23 people have post traumatic stress disorder, they haven't worked
24 since 1989, they have trouble coming even to some of the
25 groups, and don't even speak but have to sit in the corner.

1 But they still need the camaraderie because they can't continue
2 staying in the dark, shall we say, all the time. I just find
3 that offensive, but they need to fix that supposed C&P
4 notification. I don't believe it's happening, honestly, for
5 the majority of them.

6 The phone centers cannot provide the information to
7 veterans other than what is input into the system, and that is
8 the problem. When we call 1-800-827-1000, we usually get
9 Phoenix, Arizona out of Alaska. We have a problem with
10 Phoenix, Arizona in the fact that here in Alaska if you get 50
11 percent or higher, you receive up to \$170,000 property tax
12 exemption.

13 When my veterans asked for the property tax exemption
14 paperwork and the civil service preference letter, they seem to
15 have a terribly difficult problem understanding what in thunder
16 the property tax exemption letter is that has to be presented
17 to the borough no later than the 31st of March. So that is a
18 delay for my veterans receiving those benefits. I would like
19 to have that fixed. Somebody needs to educate those people
20 that we live in Alaska and maybe some of -- as you noted
21 before, sir, when you came in, our circumstances are quite
22 different from the Lower 48.

23 Notes are not updated on a regular basis. We have a
24 veteran that was awarded disability pension in August of 2009.
25 The veteran has a VA medical appointment scheduled back in

1 November of '09 and again in February at the Fairbanks medical
2 clinic. All right. He lives in Northway, which is 258 miles
3 from the medical clinic here in town. The winter bus schedule
4 out of Northway is such that the veteran has to stay in
5 Fairbanks for at least four nights. He has to arrive on
6 Wednesday and depart on Sunday, through no fault of his own;
7 there's no other transportation for this gentleman. The
8 veteran has to have paid this out of his pocket, \$776.10, out
9 of his pocket, because his file did not reflect -- he was not
10 put into the computer that he was awarded disability pension.
11 His annual income other than the pension that he receives is
12 from social security, which is only \$3,072, sir. He's poverty,
13 but through no fault of his own. He hasn't got the money to
14 pay for something that he should be -- being taken care of by
15 the Veterans' Administration. Okay.

16 There are some claims that haven't had a progress note
17 or action for approximately six months and the claims are still
18 active. That's another huge problem. An example: a Notice of
19 Disagreement received and dated, stamped by the Anchorage VA,
20 July the 30th of 2008. Right? On December the 10th, 2008, the
21 spouse received a letter from the VA indicating that the Notice
22 of Disagreement procedure would be sent. On November the 13th,
23 2009, after a service officer inquiry as to the status of the
24 claim, the VA indicated that the file had been closed and
25 shipped to St. Louis, Missouri prior to the date originally

1 received and the date stamped. No communication on this death
2 benefit for the spouse has been received as of this date.

3 Thank you for your time, sir.

4 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. You did very
5 well. And what I'll do is I'm going to take the testimony from
6 all four and then I'll come back as I finish out all four.

7 MS. BOISSEAU: Thank you for your time on this, sir,
8 very much.

9 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. Thank you very much.
10 Robert. Robert and I had a great conversation just before he
11 started, and I said the same thing. I said, this is -- don't
12 make -- don't worry, just say what's on your mind.

13 MR. ROOF: I'll do the best I can, sir. I do want to
14 say before I go on with my tirade, pointing fingers attempting
15 to discriminate the flaws in the system, I'd like to mention
16 that I do so humbly. For despite the errors of a few and the
17 system as a whole, there have been many more instances of good
18 individuals, many who are sitting in this room today, that I
19 have come across that have done their best to aid in my path of
20 recovery and transition.

21 I would also like to acknowledge the idea that my
22 generation of veterans has the greatest understanding and
23 support than any generation of the past. It is with the utmost
24 respect to the warriors that have come before me, those
25 individuals who have tirelessly helped me to navigate my

1 recovery and to you, Senator, that I dare to voice my
2 complaints. Sadly, there are still issues that must be
3 addressed, particularly health care issues.

4 I've found that there -- lack of counseling is
5 available. In order to get in and see anybody or to be
6 prioritized, you must basically be a harm to yourself or
7 someone else. There's just a lack of people available. And
8 when I was seen in counseling, it was once a month at best.
9 And a few times I would have appointments cancelled without
10 being notified until I was walking through the door, but yet
11 you continually get reminded that, you know, if you're going to
12 miss an appointment that you need to notify them so that
13 someone else can have your time slot, or if you fail to go to a
14 certain number of appointments, then, you know, you're at loss
15 of losing -- getting your counseling, which I've never heard
16 happening, but it's -- the threat is always there.

17 Numerous times because of the lack of VA facilities
18 here in Fairbanks, I've had to fly to Anchorage, missing -- you
19 know, taking time off of work and losing days' worth of wages
20 and/or missing out on school. And to get down there and have
21 my meds that I was supposed to be receiving not be there and
22 then be told by the nursing staff that I need to do my best to,
23 next time I have an appointment, to call and let them know, to
24 remind them to order my medication, when I thought that's what
25 my patient record was for. And as someone suffering from the

1 disabilities I am, I have trouble remembering if I locked my
2 door when I leave the house each day, let alone trying to worry
3 about if me flying to Anchorage and losing out on my day, if,
4 you know, I'm going to get the care that I went down there for.

5 Since my transition out of the military -- I was a
6 gunshot wound victim and receiving OT and was meeting with
7 surgeons before I left Fort Campbell, but after you receive my
8 orders to get out on a medical board, there has been no
9 follow-up care on my injury which at this point I'm sure
10 there's not much that could be done. But it was a simple fact
11 that I fell through the cracks, basically. There was no
12 further attention paid to my gunshot injury. The only issue
13 that has somewhat been addressed is the PTSD.

14 As I mentioned, the lack of VA facilities here in
15 Fairbanks. You know, you have to go all the way out on post
16 and -- which is a hassle in itself and at times trying to go
17 through the gate.

18 I've been trying to go back to school since I returned
19 to Alaska and I enlisted the help of the voc rehab program as
20 opposed to the GI Bill because as a disabled veteran, I thought
21 it was the goal of the voc rehab program to provide the
22 additional support needed for disabled veterans such as myself,
23 and that has not been the case. When I first went to go set up
24 my voc rehab, I was told by the counselor that I needed to go
25 out and gather up all this information. And as I mentioned, as

1 a person with my disabilities, I'm not the most sociable. And,
2 as a student, I mean it's -- the school system is hard enough
3 to navigate on your own, but then with the additional problems
4 that I have, basically, I was on this wild goose chase and I
5 brought back this information, what I thought the information
6 that he had asked for numerous times, and he failed to
7 communicate exactly what he was looking for or what I thought
8 he was looking for didn't work, and after the third time I was
9 finally able to give him what he needed.

10 And, let's see, I apologize.....

11 SENATOR BEGICH: No, you're doing fine.

12 MR. ROOF: At one point, I enlisted in the -- or I
13 enrolled in a class that was for -- it was a humanities degree
14 requirement for my program and I received a phone call from the
15 voc rehab counselor stating that this class wasn't listed on my
16 degree requirements and that therefore the VA was going to
17 fail -- was not going to pay for it and that I cannot be out
18 there freelancing my education. And, you know, honestly, I
19 really don't care for school. I love to learn, but I -- school
20 is just really not for me and I really don't want to spend any
21 more time with it than I have to. I'd much rather just get on
22 with life and get my degree. And, you know, I felt insulted
23 that this accusation was made. And the fact is, you know, like
24 I say, he just didn't have a full understanding, apparently, of
25 how the school system works and what was really being asked of

1 me to fulfill these degree requirements. And how can you sit
2 there and make these accusations that I'm out there freelancing
3 my education when he doesn't even know what's going on? So I
4 think part of that is lack of understanding, too, on the
5 veterans' coordinator up at the university who I've tried to
6 speak with on multiple occasions and who is always unavailable.

7 And just the aid, too, needed to navigate the school
8 system. Like I said, apparently, you know, there's the Office
9 of Student Services for Disabilities and I just recently found
10 out that they could have been doing a lot more for me to help
11 me get through my classes and tailoring my classes more to my
12 needs. And this is all new information. Here, I've been
13 faking my way through my education now for two years trying
14 just to get by and scrape by and get whatever little I can out
15 of it. And here, you know, like I said, all this stress and
16 all this trouble and, you know, failing classes could have been
17 hopefully not happened if I would have, you know, had the
18 additional aid and support that I felt I needed.

19 Speaking of voc rehab and what's disheartening about it
20 is that, you know, under this new GI Bill, not to sound like a
21 money-grubber, but part of the reason why I chose the voc rehab
22 is, like I said, is for the additional support I thought I
23 would receive as a disabled veteran. And now, I mean, I might
24 as well just have done the GI Bill and gotten the additional
25 money so that I wouldn't have to try to work and go to school

1 and put this all together when, you know, if I'm not getting
2 the help, then I might as well just switch over the programs.

3 That's really -- I mean, I can't really touch base on
4 employment. I've found a job; I work part-time. Like I said,
5 I've been going to school just simply because I got the job
6 with the same company my mother works for and they've been more
7 than gracious to give me time off for, you know, appointments
8 and to go to class, so -- but I mean, or if I have PTSD flare-
9 ups as I have had recently. I've taken a leave of absence from
10 work now for two weeks. And so once I lose this job or move on
11 in the world, you know, that's something I'll have to face, but
12 as of right now I can't really touch base on employment
13 opportunities.

14 That's about it. All I can really say, too, is
15 recently I was just contacted as part of that PTSD lawsuit
16 saying that I was shorted on my medical board ratings. I've
17 only been given 30 percent for PTSD when the standard was
18 supposedly 50 percent. And so this makes me, what, you know,
19 out of 4,300, not a large number, but I just don't understand
20 why -- you know, who's accountable for this, the fact that
21 there's supposed to be a set standard and -- to my
22 understanding, and we were all shorted. So it doesn't really
23 pertain to these issues, but, basically, you know, I've been
24 getting the short end of the stick now for a little while and
25 that's just one more way. So thank you for your time.

1 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you, Robert, very good and I
2 appreciate your testimony.

3 Lieutenant Colonel Sheehan, why don't you go next. And
4 I appreciate you being here and good to see you again.

5 LTC. SHEEHAN: Yes, sir. Good afternoon, Senator, and
6 ladies and gentlemen. I'm Joe Sheehan, a retired Army officer,
7 a life-long Alaskan, and a former inspector general for the
8 Army here in Alaska.

9 First, sir, I want to thank you all for coming here to
10 listen as well as for allowing me the opportunity to contribute
11 here today. And, Senator, I'd like to also personally
12 recognize you and thank you for your focus on veterans' and
13 retirees' issues since you've been on board.

14 In the interest of time, I'll let my written submission
15 speak for itself. It lays out the same broad issues that are
16 unfortunately just as valid today as they were three years ago.
17 And, frankly, that's truly the problem. I could tell you the
18 horror stories of veterans with lost records, delays, and
19 denied benefits, et cetera, but I don't want to focus on the
20 symptoms of problems in VA. You'll hear that from others, and
21 the VA IG report is damning enough.

22 Instead, I want to constructively focus instead on
23 laying out a vision for the way ahead on systemic issues, for
24 where to go from here. How can VA better meet its mission
25 obligations to veterans? And how can that effort also make a

1 critical difference here in this fragile but interdependent
2 fabric of health care that we have here in Alaska with limited
3 capabilities? And how can we leverage VA and interagency
4 capabilities to pioneer a model for the rest of the system that
5 might benefit everybody?

6 I have five key points I want to take away here. The
7 first, Senator, is that I appreciate your determined efforts,
8 since we talked in November, toward establishing the Alaska
9 Health Care Task Force. That is a critical effort. I can't
10 tell you how important that is to prioritize and help develop a
11 strategic vision up here for improving efficiencies and useful
12 support. That can't be done from Washington, D.C. in a cookie-
13 cutter fashion; it has to be done from the ground level. It
14 will significantly improve access to health care for the rest
15 of Alaskans in addition to us federal beneficiaries, of which
16 we comprise 43 percent of all Alaskans. And there are many
17 examples where veterans, retirees, and our active-duty family
18 members in Alaska are unfairly denied both access and delivery
19 of health care on a level equitable to other states, and that's
20 a proven fact.

21 The second critical need, meanwhile, is to take care of
22 the low-hanging fruit, such as a few unique and simple
23 frustrations that we have that we can't surmount because
24 Congress must allow them an actual legislation and word of law.
25 Some of these include things like the inability of TriCare

1 managers here in Alaska to designate patients to civilian PCMs,
2 just as most other states do; the lack of reimbursable travel
3 provision and TriCare for life, where people have to travel
4 around from our remote regions and have nothing when they get
5 there, and have to take their families along with them;
6 proposed distance and drive-time limits on TriCare Prime here
7 in Alaska, which are currently on waiver of being threatened
8 again.

9 The third issue I want to discuss is that I don't want
10 to see all of the dedicated members of VA tarred. And many
11 wonderful people, like Linda B. over there, work daily and work
12 very hard and there isn't a veteran in this town that doesn't
13 know her. However, I do want to say that we do need to change
14 the culture of VA as an agency and especially in regard to both
15 its level of commitment and its focus of investment here in
16 Alaska.

17 I'd love to get specific and I can later if you'd like,
18 but the key concerns are in the areas of attitude, capacity,
19 access, and outreach. VA has an unhealthy Anchorage-centric
20 mentality in a state one-fifth the size of the United States.
21 Rural vets do not have acceptable, let alone equitable, access
22 to health care. Fairbanks should be a more viable VA hub for
23 Northern Alaska and the watershed that it serves.

24 VA education programs should be the catalyst for
25 spreading a homegrown health care capacity across this state

1 and the synergy of these and other task force-style ideas would
2 save VA a lot of money while delivering far better access to
3 veterans, but would also grow sustainable health care services
4 for all of our rural area veterans and serve as a foundation
5 for the prosperity of this state, and we cannot fail to do
6 that. This would be a win/win for everybody.

7 The fourth point is it's important to note that VA, as
8 you well know and I know you know this, is not the only subset
9 of Veterans' Affairs. Too often, however, hundreds of
10 veterans' bills, quote/unquote, focus upon VA, but most of the
11 members of Congress don't seem to understand that these bills
12 usually do not include or even help retirees and the families
13 of our active-duty military. These active-duty military are on
14 the same TriCare and are not part of the VA system. A young
15 specialist or young airman has to go out there and find access
16 in the community here in Alaska and they have two kids and they
17 have trouble finding that. And especially doing it affordable
18 and a lot of times things are deferred as a result of that.

19 However, while they're entirely separate systems, there
20 is much to be improved by way of mutual support and shared
21 efficiencies, and we aren't mining those now, but these must be
22 allowed in legislation and by policy.

23 This brings me to my fifth and final point. With
24 respect, sir, Congress has been part of the problem instead of
25 being part of the solution. And that's why I appreciate your

1 direct efforts here today and your focus on these issues. Too
2 much of the system is based upon stovepipe parochialism and
3 entangling regulations which restrict each agency's ability to
4 effectively offer a best practices approach to delivering
5 services and health care, let alone optimize efficiencies
6 between agencies.

7 Then there is the annual fight to sustain things like
8 the funding of inadequate band-aid patches for things like 21
9 percent Medicare that we spend all that energy on every year.
10 And why? Often the best answer is not more money, but to truly
11 fix the programs or policies at hand. We need to change the
12 paradigm at both VA and in Congress and, otherwise, if we do
13 what we always did, we'll get what we always got.

14 The bottom line, sir, is we can do better, we should do
15 better, we must do better.

16 Senator, and ladies and gentlemen, I could cover more,
17 but my five minutes are up. So subject to your questions, this
18 concludes my initial statement. Thank you.

19 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. And just to
20 remind folks, as you do testify and you have that written
21 statement, that is also part of the record. So I want to thank
22 you, Joe, for your testimony again. Thank you for visiting
23 Washington that one time. It gave me a great idea and I
24 appreciate you sharing that number one choice because we moved
25 it forward, but I thank you for that.

1 LTC. SHEEHAN: Thank you for your efforts, sir.

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Absolutely. And I'll have some
3 questions I know on that. I will have. Ron Woolf, thank you
4 very much and thank you for being here with the ESGR and a
5 great group of supporting our employers supporting the guard.
6 So, please.

7 MR. WOOLF: Thank you. Well, first, I'd like to.....

8 SENATOR BEGICH: Oh, you know what we need to do, we
9 need to slide that microphone over to -- I apologize. One, we
10 want to make sure the people can hear you, but also that it's
11 on the record. There we go.

12 MR. WOOLF: I'd like to thank you for the opportunity
13 to testify here today. In my real job, I'm the controller at
14 Golden Valley Electric Association and I volunteer to support
15 men and women serving our nation's National Guard and Reserve.
16 And I think I'll just read my testimony.

17 SENATOR BEGICH: Sure, please.

18 MR. WOOLF: Thank you. Members of our local Employer
19 Supported Guard and Reserve met to discuss my testimony and the
20 message we'd like to share. ESGR is a Department of Defense
21 organization that seeks to promote a culture in which all
22 American employers support and value the military service of
23 their employees.

24 The nation's reserve components, referring to the total
25 of all National Guard members and reserve forces from all

1 branches of the military, comprise approximately 48 percent of
2 total available military manpower. The current national
3 defense strategy considers the National Guard and Reserve as
4 full partners in the fully integrated total force. ESGR's
5 mission focuses on building relationships between guard members
6 and reservists and their employers. We strive to educate
7 employers about the Uniform Services' Employment and
8 Reemployment Rights Act, USERRA, while promoting the benefits
9 of hiring military personnel.

10 USERRA is a federal law intended to ensure that persons
11 who serve or have served in the armed forces, reserves,
12 National Guard, or other uniform services are not disadvantaged
13 in their civilian careers because of their service, are
14 promptly reemployed in their civilian jobs upon their return
15 from duty, and are not discriminated against in employment
16 based on past, present, or future military service. The
17 federal government is to be a model employer, as it says in the
18 act.

19 Our experience with Fairbanks employers is excellent.
20 As you've mentioned, we have a lot of veterans and a lot of
21 military in Alaska. And the federal and state upper management
22 are very well versed on USERRA, but mid- and low-level managers
23 do not receive training on the Act's requirements. This is an
24 opportunity where the Veterans' Affairs Committee can help our
25 returning soldiers.

1 When I first started with ESGR, our mission was to
2 educate employers about their traditional National Guard and
3 Reserve employees who are gone for short periods of time.
4 We've informed employers about the importance of those
5 missions. The extended deployments now being experienced by
6 our soldiers has created new challenges for our men and women
7 returning to the workplace. I'd like to share the following
8 experiences with you.

9 Deploying or returning service members are often put in
10 situations that make the transition difficult due to their
11 immediate supervisors' lack of knowledge. They are not
12 provided authorized benefits, they're excluded from
13 consideration for promotion, and forced to provide written
14 documentation to justify the rights they are granted under the
15 law.

16 Service members have had to educate their immediate
17 supervisors on their rights, and the federal government is to
18 be a model employer under USERRA and yet large entities like
19 federal and state agencies often have the largest number of
20 inquiries or requests for assistance after deployment due to
21 lack of knowledge of mid- and low-level managers. Co-worker
22 relationships are challenging for many National Guard and
23 Reserve service members. Deployed service members return to a
24 work environment that sometimes is hostile due to lack of
25 knowledge on the part of the co-workers, co-workers who have

1 had to pick up additional workloads or wonder why the deployed
2 employee received a benefit or seniority when they are not at
3 work. Co-workers hired while a service member is deployed
4 often have the hardest time understanding the situation because
5 they did not see the support the deployed worker received prior
6 to deploying, all the effort made by the deploying service
7 member to help the employer prior to their departure.

8 When service members return to this type of workplace
9 negativity, it is hard to readjust to their jobs and their
10 deployment can be seen as a cause of strife in the workplace.
11 When one local soldier returned to work with an employee that
12 was temporarily promoted to backfill his position during his
13 deployment, that employee enlisted the support of several other
14 personnel in the office in an attempt to keep himself at the
15 higher grade. This led to a very negative work environment
16 until several months later when the temporary replacement was
17 moved to another position in the department.

18 Businesses and organizations have a difficult time
19 temporarily replacing National Guard and Reserve members who
20 are educated and trained for their jobs that need to be filled
21 by other employees. Some businesses and organizations are
22 unable to find temporary employees and will fill from within or
23 for a current employee the opportunity to work temporarily in
24 another position at a higher level, which still leaves the
25 employer short of personnel.

1 The Veterans' Affairs Committee can help National Guard
2 and Reserve members by rallying the support of mid- and low-
3 level managers for our soldiers. While this is an overall task
4 to educate all employers, you do have influence over our
5 federal managers and front line employees. Education will be
6 the key to understanding perhaps federally mandating supervisor
7 training that includes USERRA. It would benefit the employer,
8 employee, and the co-workers.

9 We at ESGR have posters that identify basic USERRA
10 rules directed primarily to the employer. We could use the
11 same medium directed towards co-workers to provide an
12 understanding and to obtain their support rather than a disdain
13 for our soldiers and airmen. Thank you.

14 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. That was very
15 good, Ron. Thank you for your testimony. Thank you, all four
16 of you, for your testimony and presenting. I have some
17 questions. I'll randomly go through them and then as I finish
18 this, we'll have a second panel with some questions you have
19 generated for me to ask them, which is good. That's part of
20 the process here, and so you have given me some good thoughts.

21 Linda, I want to ask you if I could on the -- you had
22 mentioned some of the brokering of the claims -- whoops.

23 (Microphone falls from table)

24 They have to go together I think. We'll have to tell
25 the Fairbanks borough they've got to upgrade. Where is the

1 mayor? No, he -- I know he's upstairs in a meeting. He's
2 coming down later again.

3 But, Linda, you had mentioned several areas that
4 they're sent out or brokered to, but the one that really stuck
5 out for you was San Diego.

6 MS. BOISSEAU: Oh, the claims are horrible, sir.

7 SENATOR BEGICH: And is it that once they receive them,
8 it's the process they take? Or is it a combination of things,
9 how long it takes them to do it or lack of communication? What
10 are kind of the.....

11 MS. BOISSEAU: It's a little bit of both.

12 SENATOR BEGICH: Okay.

13 MS. BOISSEAU: First of all, it's not necessarily the
14 length of time. It's the caliber of their rating decision that
15 they render.

16 SENATOR BEGICH: Because you said like appeal --
17 there's a high rate of appeals off of those ones.

18 MS. BOISSEAU: Absolutely, because of -- it's -- they
19 have not looked at the evidence that was presented in their
20 medical records. It's like they didn't even open the darn
21 thing.

22 SENATOR BEGICH: Is there something you have to -- at
23 your disposal and if not I'll be asking some other folks that
24 get on the next panel, but when you get these brokered out --
25 these claims get brokered out to, you said, Salt Lake, Seattle,

1 San Diego as examples, do you have in your capacity to say,
2 well, gee, San Diego, 70 percent go to appeal? Or Seattle, 20.
3 Do you have any of that data point? If you don't, that's okay,
4 I'll ask the next panel to.....

5 MS. BOISSEAU: No, not at this time, but the thing of
6 it is we have to broker those claims out because we do not have
7 the people trained in Anchorage.....

8 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

9 MS. BOISSEAU:to handle obviously the rating
10 systems. Right? And so I mean I understand that, but I'm --
11 really I'm not being disrespectful and I do understand that.
12 I'm not dinging the VA here for that, you know, because to
13 become a rater, it's a very long process if you're worth your
14 salt and it's really an intense system, you know. So it is
15 something -- but for some reason they have a lot.....

16 SENATOR BEGICH: That always has a high appeal rate.

17 MS. BOISSEAU: Has a very high appeal rate as compared
18 to the other sources, yes, sir.

19 SENATOR BEGICH: No, that's a good -- I mean that's a
20 good point. I mean part of what the process of this hearing
21 is, is to not only look at some of the VA services, the
22 employment services, those issues, how we can look to improve
23 them, but this is good information. I'll.....

24 MS. BOISSEAU: It's like having to do the claim all
25 over again because you're trying to start from square one

1 because then you've got the official Notice of Disagreement,
2 they have to go through the process, and we win anywhere from
3 63 to 82 percent of those claims on appeal or Notice of
4 Disagreement. So that's -- I mean, like from February of last
5 year to this year, we have done over eight million dollars in
6 claims just for the disabled veterans in the State of Alaska.

7 I mean, we're out there humping and trying really
8 hard.....

9 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

10 MS. BOISSEAU:and I mean I'm just -- it's a
11 frustration level I know also for Anchorage because they don't
12 have control over those raters from those other places.

13 SENATOR BEGICH: Other places.

14 MS. BOISSEAU: I don't know that it's being brokered
15 out until I receive the final determination on that claim. So
16 it's nothing like, hey, wait a minute. Should I put a note on
17 this: Do not broker out. I can't do that. I can't do that.
18 That would be ludicrous.

19 SENATOR BEGICH: Right. But you don't get noticed on
20 when they.....

21 MS. BOISSEAU: I get no notice until the claim comes
22 back.

23 SENATOR BEGICH: Until completion.

24 MS. BOISSEAU: Absolutely, yes, sir.

25 SENATOR BEGICH: So you don't know where it's actually

1 being dealt with at that point?

2 MS. BOISSEAU: No. Unh-unh.

3 SENATOR BEGICH: Let me ask you if I can one other
4 question and that is, I thought it was interesting, the call
5 center. Is it that -- is it your -- and I think -- I don't
6 want to put words in your mouth, but what I heard was your
7 concern is that the call center, when there are questions, they
8 may not be aware of some of the Alaska, kind of unique
9 situations.....

10 MS. BOISSEAU: Absolutely.

11 SENATOR BEGICH:like the property tax exemption
12 is a great one.

13 MS. BOISSEAU: Absolutely.

14 SENATOR BEGICH: And you're right, it's 170,000.

15 MS. BOISSEAU: Uh-huh.

16 SENATOR BEGICH: And, you know, how does that work?

17 MS. BOISSEAU: Hunting, fishing license, all the other
18 stuff that goes with it.

19 SENATOR BEGICH: Right. The hunting license, the
20 fishing license.

21 MS. BOISSEAU: But they can't get any of that without
22 that letter stating, you know, that.....

23 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

24 MS. BOISSEAU: You know. And they have to be handed in
25 in a timely manner, by the 31st of March, and if it's not,

1 then.....

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Yeah, you lose the year.

3 MS. BOISSEAU: Absolutely.

4 SENATOR BEGICH: And there's no two ways about it.

5 MS. BOISSEAU: And they do not acknowledge the property
6 tax like, let's say that somebody filed in January of this
7 year, it was granted, you know, all the way, but I mean
8 retroactive back they still have to pay those taxes. So I
9 mean.....

10 SENATOR BEGICH: That's right, yeah.

11 MS. BOISSEAU:for that delay, is a big loss of
12 revenue for the veteran's family.

13 SENATOR BEGICH: And is it your sense, and I'll ask
14 this as we get to the next panel, but is it your sense that
15 maybe some additional training for those call centers.....

16 MS. BOISSEAU: Perhaps on Alaska's unique situation. I
17 don't.....

18 SENATOR BEGICH: Right, for those that handle Alaska
19 calls.

20 MS. BOISSEAU: It should not be that difficult. But
21 who is to say? The VA may take it any time and say, okay,
22 we're not going into Phoenix anymore on the 1-800 number; maybe
23 we're going to go to blah, blah, blah. So it's -- I mean, it's
24 an easy fix, but it's frustrating because the veterans are not
25 getting that paperwork in a timely manner. Okay.

1 It's a simple, easy fix if the training becomes Alaska
2 is unique in that with the property tax exemption ladder. It
3 shouldn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out to make
4 sure that if it says Alaska, let's just say, okay, Alaska the
5 benefits associated with 50 percent or higher. That's an easy
6 fix for a telephone person.

7 SENATOR BEGICH: Yeah. And the good thing about Alaska
8 is we just have one area code, so it's not complicated to
9 figure.....

10 MS. BOISSEAU: No, it's not.

11 SENATOR BEGICH: I'm learning that in D.C. You know,
12 you can be calling just a few miles and have a whole different
13 area code.

14 MS. BOISSEAU: But I mean I'm not trying to be mean
15 about it, but it does.....

16 SENATOR BEGICH: No, no, that's good information.

17 MS. BOISSEAU: It does need to be fixed. I mean, these
18 little things is what adds up to frustration levels at.....

19 SENATOR BEGICH: Yeah.

20 MS. BOISSEAU: But, I mean, \$170,000, I would be
21 chewing somebody's foot off. Okay?

22 SENATOR BEGICH: Yeah. No, I hear you. Thank you,
23 Linda. That was very good. That helps me with some additional
24 work. But let me ask Robert.

25 You did a great job. You had good testimony. You

1 clearly are anxious to be productive, have a job, work, get
2 educated, do all the things that you want to do to be
3 successful in life.

4 In your -- and I noted you found additional services
5 through student services within the university that you were
6 unaware of, but not until later down the road, where you had
7 the veterans' coordinator maybe not as aware of some of those
8 services. Is that a fair statement or am I.....

9 MR. ROOF: Well, she works in financial aid. It's just
10 one of those things that you.....

11 SENATOR BEGICH: Two different.....

12 MR. ROOF: You tag "veterans" onto something and so
13 automatically I say, oh, that's for me. You know, like that's
14 who I think I should be talking to.....

15 SENATOR BEGICH: Gotcha.

16 MR. ROOF:naturally because that's -- you know,
17 like I said, navigating this whole system, that's all I spend
18 my time doing is, you know, trying to find some guidance. And
19 so I've tried talking to them, you know, as far as is this the
20 correct paperwork I'm filling out, is this what I need to be
21 doing.

22 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

23 MR. ROOF: Is there anything else I need to know as a
24 student, as a disabled veteran going to UAF, is there anything
25 else I need to know that can help me be successful? Like

1 that's all I'm trying to do, is get on with my life and move
2 past, you know, these things that have happened to me. And I
3 don't regret any of this, but I'm trying to now make a new path
4 in life and any help I can have doing that -- and, like I said,
5 in dealing with all these things, I'd be more than grateful.

6 And not knowing about them until after all these -- you
7 know, I've probably taken years off my life just stressing out
8 about this stuff and it's unfortunate to me, I feel, that, you
9 know, I've had this much trouble in trying to -- you know, like
10 I said, I'm not looking for handouts, I'm not looking for
11 people that sit there and do my homework for me.

12 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

13 MR. ROOF: But just tailoring these classes, I mean, I
14 don't know how to learn some of the ways some of these other
15 students do. I mean, everybody has different learning styles,
16 but coupled with the PTSD and my own learning style, it just --
17 it's frustrating. Like I sit in class, I can't concentrate and
18 just, you know.....

19 SENATOR BEGICH: Well, let me ask this, Robert. Again,
20 was the assumption -- and I think I heard you say this. Was
21 the assumption that when you saw the veterans' coordinator,
22 that that was a broader sense of what they were offering, but,
23 really, it was about financial.

24 MR. ROOF: Correct.

25 SENATOR BEGICH: And when you went to student services,

1 it was much broader and suddenly you saw some opportunity
2 there.

3 MR. ROOF: Well, all that I really got out of
4 student -- I was -- my VA counselor at the time had told me
5 that, you know, the university has this, but basically all it
6 was, was I went in and they asked, oh, you know, what is it
7 that you feel, you know? And I said, well, I have terrible
8 anxiety. You know, there's times where I may just need to get
9 up and walk out of class because I'm having whatever issues.
10 And so that was given -- you know, it's basically a letter
11 that's written up and you get two questions. It says this
12 student might choose to lose -- you know, leave class for a few
13 minutes to, you know, bring himself back together and then
14 return, or this student likes to work in smaller groups because
15 he can't deal with large groups at this time. And that was all
16 it was. There was no additional saying, okay, well, you know,
17 I have these -- like I said, I have these difficulties
18 concentrating and, you know, whatever. There was no -- I
19 wasn't informed that there could be more that was done.

20 SENATOR BEGICH: Sure.

21 MR. ROOF: Say I was, you know, an autistic student or,
22 you know.....

23 SENATOR BEGICH: Well, let me ask you this, Robert, if
24 I could. Would it have made a difference if when you walked in
25 to the university for the first time and you wanted to be a

1 student, that there was a person that said I work with veterans
2 and they didn't -- they worked on everything, you know,
3 financial aid, services, stuff that students -- and said I'm
4 going to be your partner while you figure out what you want to
5 do and help you through this early stage of getting -- would
6 that have made a difference to you?

7 MR. ROOF: Sir, what's the voc rehab program for?
8 That's my question. That's what I thought I would be getting
9 from that. That's why I elected to use the voc rehab program.
10 And I may be wrong. I -- if.....

11 SENATOR BEGICH: Well, we're going to ask some folks
12 next up, so.....

13 MR. ROOF: Apparently, I was wrong because when I -- I
14 failed to mention before, but when I made a call to the
15 supervisor saying that basically I was told that they -- the
16 voc rehab program wasn't there to hold my hand. And so
17 therefore I feel that it's not my job to hold voc rehab's hand.

18 Like why am I going out and being sent to find all this
19 information and all these inner workings of the school system
20 when, you know -- and constantly, you know, being forced to
21 prove that I'm doing the right thing? Like I have enough
22 problems going on. I don't need to be harassed by people that
23 are supposed to be helping me.

24 SENATOR BEGICH: Right, right.

25 MR. ROOF: And so -- and that's -- yes, basically, it

1 would be nice if there was someone there at the university or
2 in-house at the VA that says, okay, this is your goal, this is
3 what we want to do, this -- you know, make you a productive
4 member of society again and, you know, say these are the
5 necessary steps that you'll be taking.

6 SENATOR BEGICH: Right. Kind of guide you.

7 MR. ROOF: Right.

8 SENATOR BEGICH: And to give you the freedom to figure
9 it out, but also be there to kind of say, well, here's the 20
10 services that are available for you. Kind of help you select,
11 but yet at the end of the day you're ultimately responsible for
12 it, but helping you guide through that.

13 MR. ROOF: Right. Well, just being aware of the
14 information. Like I said, I just now found out about the whole
15 disability thing.....

16 SENATOR BEGICH: Sure.

17 MR. ROOF:you know, and the tailoring of this.
18 You know, say these are certain things and, you know, how
19 someone that better understands. And that's just it; I think
20 part of the problem with voc rehab is he doesn't fully
21 understand the whole.....

22 SENATOR BEGICH: The whole picture.

23 MR. ROOF: The whole picture of my disabilities and the
24 school system, you know. And like I said, when you put those
25 two things together is that there's a reason why I failed my

1 class. It's not because I didn't show up or I didn't want to
2 be there or I didn't do the work. It's because I had other
3 issues going on. And, you know, like I said, I have symptoms,
4 flare-ups, or whatever and things happen. It's not me wanting
5 to go burn, you know, taxpayer dollars and freelancing my
6 education, as they put it. I'm just trying to get on with
7 life.

8 SENATOR BEGICH: Yeah. That's very good, Robert.
9 Thank you very much for some of that information. Let me go to
10 Joe. You were always -- when you were in my office, you were
11 like, bam, bam, bam, and once again you are consistent with
12 that, which clearly shows your military background; that is,
13 about mission and about accomplishment and goals.

14 And so I want to pick one of them out, but comment on
15 one. And I agree with you on the efforts of -- on the issue of
16 the Congress and how they can really mess things up because
17 there are multiple jurisdictions; they try to, you know,
18 package a little bit here, package a little bit here,
19 stovepiping.

20 So in your situation of your description, the culture
21 change which is probably the most difficult to do in any
22 organization, military/non-military, government/non-government,
23 what would be the one thing that you could say here's what
24 would make a difference to really help change the culture of
25 the VA to understand what we need to be doing? And this may be

1 a bigger question than you can answer in a very simple way, but
2 could you try to do that? Give me a thought there.

3 LTC. SHEEHAN: Yes, sir. I honestly don't know if I'm
4 in a good position to judge that. I can give you a spectator's
5 viewpoint.....

6 SENATOR BEGICH: Sure.

7 LTC. SHEEHAN:and I think that would be a fair
8 assessment of that. And I would say, you know, it's a large
9 and ponderous bureaucracy that's tied down by politics and
10 cultural inertia, if you will. And it's not anybody's fault in
11 particular. You've got some wonderful people leading it:
12 General Shinseki and I know General Peake before him, and at
13 the very top. And in the trenches every day, like I said,
14 there are wonderful people like Linda B., who, you know, are
15 caring and dedicated, are making it happen, and they know where
16 the rubber meets the road, what they need on the ground.

17 Unfortunately, what you have in between there, and I
18 don't want to tar everybody out of this, is that -- is there's
19 a lot of people who are invested in the status quo and there's
20 rice bowls to protect and there's budgets that come down from
21 Congress, and it's the typical thing in any, you know, typical
22 bureaucracy.

23 SENATOR BEGICH: Organization, yeah.

24 LTC. SHEEHAN: And I don't mean that as a pejorative.
25 I mean it as a.....

1 SENATOR BEGICH: No, no, no, that's good.

2 LTC. SHEEHAN:as a definition of a bureaucracy.

3 And so the question is, are you listening? Are you -- do you
4 have a cycle and a process for self-improvement? And even if
5 you do, are you able to fit that into the paradigms that are
6 given to you by Congress and the mandates for roles and
7 missions and say this is what you must do and you can't cross
8 money over to other agencies and everything like this.

9 So it's real easy to tar people with they're not doing
10 whatever, and I think in many ways people have their arms tied
11 behind their backs and there are some people who outright need
12 to be fired. I'll just give you that perspective. But on the
13 other hand, you know, the 99 percent of them out there are
14 working hard and they have effective leadership. They just
15 need to have the sort of task force effort we've been
16 discussing.....

17 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

18 LTC. SHEEHAN:to be able to say.....

19 SENATOR BEGICH: To kind of shake it up a little bit.

20 LTC. SHEEHAN:how can we make this work on the
21 ground? And what kind of culture do you have? And going back
22 to, you mentioned my military background, and this is my
23 perspective. You know, how can you win the battle if you know
24 that you're losing it and you aren't listening out there to
25 your commanders on the ground who are decisively engaged every

1 day? And that's what they've got to do, and we don't do that
2 well, I'll tell you that. And that's a charitable way of
3 saying it.

4 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. Let me ask you,
5 Ron, and I -- if I could be very brief only because we have
6 another panel of five folks up and we're going to have another
7 opportunity when we do some bigger stuff. But I just wanted to
8 comment and then you don't have to comment if you want to, but
9 I was very intrigued by your comments about the federal
10 government and what we could be doing more with our mid
11 management level of is he educating them on the importance of
12 the program, but also the co-workers. And it seems like what I
13 was hearing is there's just a gap of information. Is that.....

14 MR. WOOLF: Exactly. I think the training needs to go
15 down to the managers that are on the front lines that deal
16 directly with our deployed soldiers. And I think some
17 education for them and something that would give the rest of
18 the employees knowledge of what's going on and the rights that
19 their fellow employees who choose to be in the guard and
20 reserve.....

21 SENATOR BEGICH: I want to ask at a later time, maybe
22 not during the hearing here, but for my staff to follow up on a
23 question. And that is, I know when I was mayor of Anchorage,
24 every Monday we had new employee orientation. You know, we'd
25 have, you know, a high turnover rate in one department, low in

1 others, but generally you have new people always coming in.
2 And because of the conflicts we're engaged in, how engaged
3 everyone is, you know, I'd be very curious as we talk to the
4 federal workforce what kind of work do they do at that first
5 point of entry for a new employee, as an example. Because
6 there are all ranges, everything from the beginning level staff
7 to management and everything in between.

8 So you've given me some real good food for thought
9 here. I greatly appreciate that.

10 MR. WOOLF: Thank you.

11 SENATOR BEGICH: Let me end this panel. Again, thank
12 you all very much. You did a great job in helping shed some
13 light on the positives and the negatives and where we can make
14 some improvements. So thank you very much.

15 We're going to switch out panels and we'll -- again,
16 thank you all for being here. Thank you, absolutely.

17 (Pause)

18 SENATOR BEGICH: If the next panel can line up, that'd
19 be great. And as the next panel is coming up, I want to try to
20 keep things. We're going to run, I can feel, a little bit
21 behind, so I want to keep things rolling along here. We have
22 five presenters with some additional -- go ahead and take your
23 seats those that are participating in the next panel.

24 And let me remind the folks the next panel will be five
25 individuals: the Assistant Secretary Ray Jefferson of Labor --

1 Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training; Mark
2 Bilosz, Director, Anchorage Regional Office, Veterans Benefits
3 Administration, Department of Veterans' Affairs; Verdie Bowen,
4 Sr., Administrator, Office of Veterans' Affairs, Department of
5 Military and Veterans' Affairs, State of Alaska; Belinda Finn,
6 Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations, Office
7 of Inspector General, Department of Veterans' Affairs; and
8 Dr. Susan Pendergrass, Director of the VISN 20, Veterans Health
9 Administration, Department of Veterans' Affairs.

10 We have other folks who will be joining them for the
11 question component if there are questions that they need to
12 answer.

13 What I'd like to do at this time, just before I do
14 that, I don't know if Borough Assembly Member Hank Bartos is
15 still here. He was here earlier. We want to thank him for
16 joining us in this presentation and meeting today.

17 We will lead off with Assistant Secretary Ray
18 Jefferson. And, Ray, we have been around a little bit in the
19 last couple days and I really appreciate you coming here to
20 Alaska. And I know you -- for those that are unaware of what
21 enthusiasm is, you are about to feel it and see it. I'm always
22 nervous with Ray now going to meetings because I always thought
23 I was impromptu with ideas and getting things done. He, by
24 far, exceeds me in light years.

25 So, Ray, you're on.

1 MR. JEFFERSON: All right.

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much for coming,
3 Mr. Secretary.

4 MR. JEFFERSON: Thank you, sir, it's my pleasure. So,
5 Senator Begich, thank you very much for the invitation. And
6 also behind me, veterans and citizens of Alaska and the
7 Fairbanks community, I'm thrilled to be with you here today.

8 Let me tell you a little bit about who we are and what
9 we do and how we can be helpful. Myself, a veteran, served
10 with one of the ranger battalions, through the ranger bat, and
11 also 1st Special Forces Group. I lost my hand in the line of
12 duty trying to protect some colleagues from a hand grenade,
13 went down through the voc rehab program through the Department
14 of Veterans' Affairs, and right now I have the privilege of
15 serving with this great agency. And what we do is we proudly
16 serve veterans and transitioning service members.

17 We prepare and guide them in their quest for meaningful
18 employment; we protect their employment rights; we maximize
19 their employment opportunities. How do we do that? We have
20 240 people around America, so we do it in partnership with
21 Congress, sir, with the Department of Defense, Department of
22 Veterans' Affairs, ESGR and state workforce agencies, the
23 veterans service organizations, the private sector, and
24 nonprofits and other government agencies around America.

25 So what are some of the programs that we have that are

1 relevant here and can help veterans in Alaska? Let's first
2 start with a program that we call Jobs for Veterans State
3 Grants. In simple terms, we have 2,000 employment
4 representatives around America; 13 of them are in Alaska and 8
5 of those 13 can be accessed through Anchorage or through
6 Fairbanks. So if you're a veteran who is seeking employment or
7 who wants to make a change, contact one of our 13 employment
8 representatives. And, Tom Hall, I'm going to quickly ask if
9 you could just stand up. This is my state director. This is
10 the go-to person in Alaska for employment opportunities.

11 Number two, homeless veterans. We do one stand-down a
12 year. It is in Anchorage, but we can connect you with
13 opportunities if you are a homeless veteran. Three, Rob Roof,
14 I hope you're still here.

15 AUDIENCE MEMBER: He stepped out.

16 MR. JEFFERSON: All right. I would like to connect him
17 with a program we have called America's Heroes at Work. If you
18 know a veteran who has PTS or PTSD or TBI, we have a program
19 that can help them find meaningful employment and it gets rave
20 reviews from the service members who are in it and also from
21 the employers. I also want to connect Rob and any other
22 veteran taking advantage of the new GI Bill in Alaska with
23 Student Veterans of America. Sir, this is a new veterans
24 service organization. Their whole job is to make sure that
25 when veterans like Rob hit campus that they can assimilate

1 easily to the culture, the programs, the resources there.
2 That's what it's set up for and it's a great dynamic new, young
3 veterans service organization.

4 Let's shift to Native American veterans. I, myself, am
5 part Penobscot. My great-grandfather was 100 percent Native
6 American. This is an issue that's near and dear to my heart.
7 We've recently invited a core group of tribal leaders to the
8 U.S. Department of Labor and the secretary and all the agency
9 heads were there to begin learning how we can better serve
10 tribal leaders throughout America. But that's what's happening
11 in Washington.

12 Right here in Alaska this morning we met with a variety
13 of the Native Americans and Native American veteran business
14 leaders, and we are doing an assessment right now to determine
15 the best ways to serve Native American veterans in America.
16 And, as of today, I am instructing that team to make contact
17 with the tribal council leaders in Alaska to make sure that the
18 issues, recommendations, and suggestions of tribal council
19 leaders here are heard. Sir, I want to thank you for bringing
20 me to that meeting this morning.

21 We are also going to be out more on the tribal lands
22 and to the major convening events and conferences of Native
23 Americans and Native American veterans this year, 2010.

24 Next, rural outreach. You know, it's great if you have
25 a lot of fancy companies in your city, but suppose you're in

1 Kotzebue where we're going to tomorrow, or in the villages? So
2 we wanted to be exploring the power of e-commerce and Internet-
3 based home businesses to provide employment opportunities for
4 veterans in rural America, and, as, sir, you've educated me,
5 highly rural Alaska.

6 Two more quick things. USERRA, protecting employment
7 rights. You know, I was very glad to know that the employer
8 community in Alaska is very supportive of the guard and
9 reserve. In this entire state with this tremendous number of
10 veterans, there's only five to six complaints a year. That's
11 incredible. But we also know that there's tremendous stress
12 being placed, so as we've been speaking about, we want to look
13 at how we can work to help employers that have very small
14 numbers of employees where some of those are guard and reserve
15 that are going for extended deployment. So we are meeting with
16 the head of ESGR in D.C. to begin a dialogue to try to get to
17 some action items and see if there are some things we can do
18 even as a demonstration project.

19 Finally, we have 165,000 service members who leave the
20 military every year. They go to a three-day transition
21 assistance program. I'm really changing this to a transition
22 acceleration program. The bottom line is this program hasn't
23 been modernized in 17 years. Right now it's a 240 Power Point
24 slide show over three days. You can imagine how exciting that
25 is. We're going to go ahead and transform the entire thing,

1 bring in best practices, improve the facilitation. We want to
2 make it economically relevant, immediately useful and more
3 engaging, and even fun - let me bring that word in - for
4 participants.

5 So this is my first trip to Alaska. I'm a kama'aina of
6 Hawaii. Hawaii is home. So I look forward to this being the
7 beginning of a relationship, this being the beginning of a
8 journey, and also the opportunity to learn from all of us here
9 in this room in decisions of Alaska and how we can do a better
10 job.

11 Thank you, sir.

12 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. And I have to
13 tell you, when you mentioned that Power Point yesterday, I
14 could not -- I can't imagine sitting in a training program,
15 seeing 240 Power Point slides and thinking that's going to get
16 me excited. And so thank you for that. And he also learned
17 today that when he asked the question how many people have been
18 to Hawaii, I whispered in his ear, that's our second home. So
19 many Alaskans visit Hawaii. So thank you again for being here.

20 The next person I'd like to ask is Belinda Finn,
21 Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations, Office
22 of Inspector General, who did the report in regards to the VA
23 Anchorage regional office. She'll give a summary of that.

24 That's good enough, it doesn't need to be close. It
25 picks up really well from there.

1 MS. FINN: Okay. Great. Can everybody hear me? Okay.

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. This is much better than
3 the Anchorage assembly room, I want you to know that.

4 MS. FINN: Yes, it is.

5 SENATOR BEGICH: You hear that, Fairbanks, what I said?

6 MS. FINN: Senator Begich, thank you again for the
7 opportunity to be here today and testify about our inspection
8 of the VA Regional Office in Anchorage, Alaska. With me today
9 is Mr. Brent Arronte, who is the director of our Benefits
10 Inspection Division.

11 The Benefit Inspection program is a recent initiative
12 to ensure that our nation's veterans receive timely and
13 accurate benefits and services. The OIG had been scheduled to
14 review all 57 regional offices during the five-year cycle, but
15 we recently began a hiring initiative that will allow us to
16 review the offices in three years.

17 During our inspections, we review functional and
18 operational activities in each VARO using five protocols that
19 cover claims processing, data integrity, management controls,
20 information security, and public contact. We report on our
21 results of each inspection as a snapshot in time.

22 In the summer of 2009, we conducted an inspection of
23 the Anchorage VARO focusing on the 14 operational activities
24 and found that the office had problems meeting standards in 13
25 of those areas. We concluded that the management team has

1 challenges in the oversight of the operational activities,
2 improving insufficient network capacity to support the business
3 processes, providing training to staff, and managing an
4 internal claims brokering process. We felt also that two
5 issues specifically contributed to the challenges in management
6 oversight at the office.

7 First, the office did not have a Veterans Service
8 Center manager for approximately eight months in fiscal year
9 2009 and the manager had just recently come to the office when
10 we did our inspection. Additionally, the VARO director manages
11 the office from afar; he is currently located in Salt Lake
12 City. Both of these positions are key to managing the
13 effective operations of any regional office.

14 As a result of the network capacity issues, the
15 regional office employees had difficulty in consistently
16 accessing the computer applications required to perform their
17 jobs and employees told us this problem had been occurring for
18 over a year.

19 During our review, we noted that the director had moved
20 many claims from the Anchorage office to offices in Fort
21 Harrison, Montana and Salt Lake City, Utah. This movement of
22 claims made it difficult for the staff to manage workload and
23 associate mail with the corresponding claim folder. Because of
24 this, we compared the staffing levels between Anchorage and the
25 Boise VA Regional Office. Our analysis showed that Boise had

1 about 22 more full-time employees for a comparable inventory of
2 rating and non-rating claims.

3 I'd also like to add that my office is currently
4 working on a national review of VBA's claims brokering process
5 and we hope to report out later this year on results from the
6 national program.

7 In conclusion, we recommended that the VARO director
8 improve oversight of the quality assurance process, develop a
9 mail routing guide to ensure proper mail processing, research
10 the cause and solutions to improve network capacity, and
11 provide additional training. The director concurred with all
12 of our recommendations and provided responsive comments and
13 action plans to our recommendations.

14 Senator, that concludes my oral testimony today. Thank
15 you again for the opportunity to be here. And Mr. Arronte and
16 I would be pleased to answer any of your questions.

17 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you both very much for being
18 here and I will have some questions. And I won't make it
19 Groundhog Day where it's the same questions of yesterday.

20 MS. FINN: That's good. Thank you.

21 SENATOR BEGICH: You betcha. So I have some additional
22 questions. So the next person I have is Mark Bilosz, who is
23 the director of the Anchorage Regional Office, Veterans
24 Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans'
25 Administration.

1 MR. BILOSZ: Thank you. Senator Begich, it's my
2 pleasure to be here today to discuss our efforts in meeting the
3 needs of veterans residing in the state of Alaska.

4 Accompanying me here today is the western area VBA director,
5 Mr. Willie Clark, and the Veterans Service Center manager in
6 Anchorage, Patrick Kelley.

7 I will discuss important benefits and services provided
8 to veterans living in Alaska, as well as discuss concerns about
9 the Anchorage regional office addressed in a recent VA Office
10 of Inspector General report. The Anchorage regional office
11 administers the following benefits and services: disability
12 compensation and pension for veterans, vocational
13 rehabilitation and employment assistance, and outreach for all
14 veterans, and survivor benefits. Our goal is to deliver these
15 benefits and services in a timely, accurate, and compassionate
16 manner. This is accomplished through the administration of
17 comprehensive and diverse benefits programs.

18 Currently, a total of 34 employees work in the Veterans
19 Service Center and 7 employees in the vocational rehabilitation
20 and employment division within the regional office. Employees
21 at the Anchorage regional office are very motivated and are
22 providing excellent service to Alaska veterans. Performance
23 indicators reveal the Anchorage regional office is performing
24 much better than in the past, completing a greater number of
25 claims each month, while improving accuracy.

1 As the outbased director of the Anchorage regional
2 office, I visit Anchorage at least once quarterly and have
3 daily discussions with division management to maintain an open
4 line of communication and provide direction and oversight. A
5 new VHA clinic is scheduled to open in May 2010 and VBA has
6 secured space at the new site. The Anchorage regional office
7 is looking forward to moving into this new space, as it will
8 provide us with improved working space.

9 In June, a new Veterans Service Center manager reported
10 for duty in Anchorage. The Veterans Service Center manager
11 position was previously vacant for approximately eight months.
12 This position was vacant due to the difficult task of
13 recruiting an experienced person to the Anchorage area.

14 Additionally, the Anchorage regional office recruited
15 and hired two new supervisors. The appointment of the new
16 supervisors has had a positive impact on the overall management
17 and performance of the office this fiscal year, as the station
18 is making strides toward improvement in many performance
19 measures. For example, rating inventory has trended in a
20 positive direction every month this year. Compared to December
21 of last year, Anchorage completed 226 more claims this year, an
22 increase of about 156 percent. In addition, rating and
23 authorization quality have both showed improvements. In fact,
24 due to the focus on internal training, rating quality in
25 Anchorage exceeds the national average.

1 The Anchorage regional office vocational rehabilitation
2 division is one of the top performing divisions in the nation
3 and it was identified and awarded a Tier II level award last
4 year. In addition to the improvements in quality, the
5 management team has successfully implemented several policies
6 pertaining to the workflow that I'd like to highlight here
7 today.

8 A policy for timely corrective actions of errors
9 identified by the Veterans Benefits Administration's National
10 Quality Review Program was implemented. A policy outlining
11 control and tracking of claims folders was implemented. This
12 policy provides for better control of the location of claims
13 folders. The management team has implemented a consistent
14 local quality review process to complete timely quality
15 assurance reviews that ensure veterans service representatives
16 establish the correct date of claim. The most recent review in
17 January showed only a 1 percent error rate. As VBA has an
18 ethical and legal responsibility to maintain adequate controls
19 over all date stamps throughout our facilities, two new
20 electronic date stamps with locking devices are now in place
21 and kept in secure locations.

22 The Veterans Service Center has also taken action to
23 more efficiently safeguard veterans' personal identifiable
24 information. All employees receive training on the proper
25 safeguard and destruction of materials, desk inspections of

1 work stations and common areas are performed regularly. In
2 September a new workflow plan was implemented to ensure
3 Veterans Service Center staff properly control and process all
4 mail. To ensure congressional inquiries are processed in a
5 timely and accurate manner a new policy for handling
6 congressional inquiries was implemented. Our goal is to
7 complete inquiries within five days and so far this fiscal year
8 we're completing them within 4.3 days.

9 The Office of Inspector General conducted an
10 investigation during the summer of 2009. The Office of
11 Inspector General report recommended 12 areas of improvement.
12 Action has been taken to correct the deficiencies identified by
13 the Office of Inspector General and those items have been
14 addressed in my oral testimony and my written testimony that
15 you also have today.

16 With the help of the OIG report findings, specific
17 shortfalls at the Anchorage regional office have been
18 identified and action plans are in place. VA senior leadership
19 is committed to providing the necessary resources, funding,
20 employees, and facilities to the Anchorage regional office to
21 ensure the best possible service is provided to Alaska veterans
22 and their families. I also am fully committed to continuing to
23 improve the claims processing in Alaska.

24 Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony and I greatly
25 appreciate being here today and look forward to answering any

1 of your questions.

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. Thank you for
3 your testimony. The next person I have is Dr. Pendergrass, and
4 she's the director of the VISN 20, Veterans Health
5 Administration, Department of Veterans' Affairs.
6 Dr. Pendergrass.

7 DR. PENDERGRASS: Thank you very much, Senator Begich.
8 Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and discuss
9 the VA health care of Alaskan Northwest Network. I'm
10 accompanied today by Mr. Alex Spector, who is the director of
11 the Alaska Health Care System. And I would like to thank you
12 for your leadership and the advocacy on behalf of veterans and
13 Alaskan veterans. You have continued to show that commitment
14 and we are very appreciative of all of the assistance that you
15 have given us.

16 My written testimony has been submitted and I will
17 focus my remarks on several issues that are important to the
18 Alaskan veterans, including TeleHelp, the rural help outreach,
19 and the Veterans Beneficiary Travel Program.

20 We provide access to health care to eligible Alaskan
21 veterans through an integrated delivery system which consists
22 of clinical care sites, joint ventures of DOD facilities, and
23 contract care. We have continued to see an increase in the
24 number of veterans using the VA health care. It has grown by
25 close to 14 percent over -- since 2005.

1 We have clinics and vet centers in Anchorage,
2 Fairbanks, Kenai, and Wasilla, and we are providing primary
3 care including preventative services, health care screenings,
4 and mental health services at all of those sites. Our
5 inpatient care is provided through the DOD Joint Venture
6 Hospital on Elmendorf Base, contracts with Providence Alaska
7 Medical Center in Anchorage, and we purchase care from
8 community hospitals throughout the state.

9 In addition, we have two outreach clinics. Outreach
10 clinics are not clinics that are open five days a week, but
11 several times during the week, and those are in Homer and
12 Juneau, Alaska. We are expanding the Juneau, Alaska outreach
13 clinic. That's currently under construction and will be
14 completed by mid summer, and the hours of that clinic will then
15 expand. We have a new construction replacement of our main
16 clinic in Anchorage and that will provide expanded capacity to
17 serve the veterans.

18 By the end of 2010, we will have a VA clinic presence;
19 a VA presence that will serve more than 88 percent of the
20 veterans, that will have the care in the borough with which
21 they reside. So 88 percent of those veterans will have access
22 to care in their boroughs. We have specialty services and have
23 continued to improve our care with homeless veterans. We have
24 inpatient mental health services that are provided by contract
25 care and we also have specialty VA programs. We use the Lower

1 48 state veterans service capability. We have active programs
2 here and long-term care in both for institutional and non-
3 institutional services.

4 What we are doing also is to have an active coordinated
5 home care TeleHelp program, and 31 percent of the TeleHelp
6 users live in highly rural areas; 16 percent live in rural
7 areas, and 53 percent in the urban areas. This enables us to
8 place an assistant device in the home that the individual can
9 utilize to monitor help information, provide that information
10 to the VA so that they do not have to come in for a visit. We
11 have been using that primarily to monitor chronic diseases, but
12 we are now expanding to help monitor some of the conditions
13 such as PTSD, substance abuse, and some of the psychiatric
14 disorders.

15 The Alaskan VA health care system has recently also
16 expanded to -- in TeleHelp in several specialty areas. We have
17 implemented a Teleretinal Diabetic Screening program. This
18 enables an individual with diabetes to get an eye exam, it's
19 read, and the monitoring of any effects of eye disease as a
20 result of their diabetes. We also have instituted
21 teledermatology so that an exam -- a picture can be taken of a
22 lesion and read by a dermatologist remotely and provide for
23 treatment and consultation so that the individual does not have
24 to travel to that specialty services.

25 We have just recruited a psychiatric nurse practitioner

1 for a telemedicine mental health provider. We have just
2 connected this month that provider with Anchorage and the
3 Fairbanks clinic and through TeleHelp we will allow a VA
4 neuropsychologist to screen veterans for TBI. Again, very
5 difficult to provide these specialists within some of the rural
6 and remote areas. So using telemental health and telemedicine
7 is one of our primary options.

8 We are also exploring options to partner with other
9 groups such as the American Native Health Consortium and the
10 Bristol Bay Area Health Consortium, the Maniilaq Health
11 Corporation, and we've hung great promise in increasing the use
12 and availability of mental health care resources to the Alaskan
13 veteran system and the veterans in Alaska.

14 We have also established several rural health
15 projects -- pilots that are outreaching into the
16 Yukon-Kuskokwim area and it is a pilot in which we are able to
17 try to enhance primary care to rural veterans and be able to
18 contract that service through the tribal veterans -- through
19 the Tribal Health Consortium. We've also placed tribal veteran
20 representatives to assist in outreach to the Alaskan Native
21 veterans and in training other VA health care -- other benefits
22 and providers for VA benefits.

23 We have a special outreach to the Alaska Native Tribal
24 Health Consortium organizations and a major deployment with --
25 and also we have the deployment of the Alaskan National Guard

1 in our OIF/OEF outreach. And we have a Memo of Understanding
2 with the State of Alaska Department of Military and Veterans
3 Affairs to meet the needs of the returning service members.

4 Our final benefit I would like to address is the VA
5 Beneficiary Travel Program. In 2009, we spent over four
6 million dollars to transport Alaskan veterans by ambulance,
7 car, van and air travel, as well as mileage reimbursement.
8 Approximately 50 percent of travel expenses were airline
9 tickets for travel; 77 percent of that was within Alaska and
10 the remaining were to VA facilities in the Lower 48.

11 In summary, we continue to increase access to meet the
12 needs of the Alaskans residing in -- the veterans residing in
13 Alaska. We have included not only clinical services, but
14 additional sites of care to try and improve that access, and we
15 have maintained a high performance rating and quality of care,
16 access standards, patient satisfaction, and employee
17 satisfaction.

18 I thank you again for the opportunity to testify at
19 this hearing.

20 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. Our last person
21 on this panel is Verdie Bowen who is the administrator, Office
22 of Veterans' Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans'
23 Affairs for the State of Alaska. Good to see you again,
24 Verdie.

25 MR. BOWEN: Thank you, Senator, for inviting me here.

1 And I have a couple of things that I'd like to address today
2 and the first one is the prescription drug coverage that we
3 have at the Pioneer Homes, and the next area I'd like to just
4 give you a highlight of the GI Bill and some of the issues that
5 we have experienced in the state.

6 And first of all, I want to really let you know that
7 your staff, especially C.W. Floyd has been a world of help on
8 most of this stuff that we have done. And he's sitting back
9 there smiling, but it's actually the truth. When I.....

10 SENATOR BEGICH: Don't get his head to grow too large.

11 MR. BOWEN: No, I won't. When I was appointed to this
12 position in May of last year, I think I was in the office about
13 20 hours before my first phone call came in about the denial of
14 prescription drugs -- VA prescription drugs to members within
15 our VA home. And it specifically dealt with veterans, but at
16 that time we had 14 veterans in the homes that the Pioneer Home
17 had refused to administer the medications that came to them
18 free. They wanted them to purchase the medications through the
19 pharmacy. It took probably about three weeks to determine that
20 the reason why they had stepped back in time was because
21 someone had unearthed a policy that was covered with dust in
22 the corner that said that they could not administer medications
23 to those people that are unable to administer medications
24 themselves from pharmacies outside of the Pioneer Home. And I
25 thought myself that this would be an easy fix; that we should

1 be able to just sit down and open up the bottles and hand the
2 pills out. But, apparently, you know, it shows you how inept I
3 am at administering medications, especially in this case.

4 We sat down and had a roundtable soon before the end of
5 the month and I thought we had a work-around to where we were
6 bringing in a part-time physician assistant to help with these
7 issues, and that lasted about two weeks. And then I went back
8 through the process and I -- at that time, the unique
9 experience that I had is that I was able to discover that we
10 had 60 representatives in the state of Alaska. At that time, I
11 didn't know, but before that time they had always spoken to me.

12 I had also got to speak to probably 20 retired state
13 representatives. The last person that called me was Mayor
14 George Wuerch to let me know that his neighbor was involved
15 with this process as well. But the unique thing about this
16 was -- which this fell under the Department of Social Services.
17 When I spoke to the commissioner of social services, then we
18 had a complete roundtable. Bill Hogan, and he was outstanding,
19 he stepped in and he put in a large fix. He wrote an
20 administrative order to fix the law so that they could receive
21 their medications.

22 Currently, as I speak today, I am glad to announce that
23 the state house has taken ownership of this and it's passed
24 into state law so that this will not ever happen again. And
25 what is going to occur for our veterans in the home is that if

1 this ever does come into effect, then the state itself will
2 take on the cost of the medications, not the patient. But also
3 we uncovered in this process, we also uncovered the fact that
4 our patients that were in the homes that fell under Indian
5 Health Care Services that were receiving medications would also
6 be denied theirs as well, if they were incapacitated. And so
7 this law will also fix that.

8 Currently, like I said, it is through both committees
9 in the house and senate and it's now in the finance to get its
10 final review. And that to me is -- it took too long, really.
11 It gives you a point to understand that when you have state and
12 federal agencies involved, there's a lot of bureaucratic
13 nightmares that you have to follow through to try and fix these
14 things. And a problem so simple as that should have taken just
15 a few hours; instead, it took probably about seven months. And
16 so it gives you an idea that some of the problems that we're
17 facing within the VA system itself is virtually in that same
18 kind of nightmare and ownership as you trail each one of them
19 back to the end of their programs.

20 The next thing I'd like to talk about is the new GI
21 Bill in its current status. I'm a firm believer that if you're
22 in Muskogee, Oklahoma today and you're unemployed it's because
23 you choose to be. General Shinseki has done such a wonderful
24 job of fixing some of the issues that we have with the Post-
25 9/11 GI Bill. The first thing I really want to point out about

1 the Post-9/11 GI Bill, this is probably the greatest thing that
2 has occurred for veterans since the GI Bill that was introduced
3 after World War II. The values that the veteran receives,
4 especially here in the state of Alaska -- and I'll give you
5 some examples.

6 Here in Alaska, a veteran will receive up to \$159 a
7 credit hour, which means if they go to UAA, it's free. They
8 receive \$13,429 in fees that are covered. That allows them to
9 go to the aeronautical school at UAA and it covers all of their
10 fees. They get \$1,000 each year for their books, for their
11 fees for their books. And this is something that's unique that
12 a lot of people won't point out, but in rural Alaska where you
13 have less than six people per square mile, this program will
14 give you \$500 to fly into the schools. And also in the state
15 of Alaska, we're blessed to have 16 of our universities that
16 are located here to be part of the Yellow Ribbon Program, and
17 what that means is, is that if their tuition is higher than the
18 \$159, then they will utilize the Yellow Ribbon Program to cover
19 that extended cost. And who is covered under this cost is any
20 person that has accomplished 36 months past 9/11.

21 And this here, like I said, is an outstanding program.
22 But, you know, there are some issues that we have that need to
23 be addressed. Robert brought these up and this is something
24 that you won't find in my memos, but he did bring up something
25 about voc rehab. Voc rehab is probably half of.....

1 (Microphone feedback)

2 SENATOR BEGICH: There we go.

3 MR. BOWEN: Maybe that's not a good sign. Voc rehab
4 virtually is about half of the payment to the veteran. When
5 you're dealing with your monthly stipend, if I had my book -- I
6 bet you Miss B has her book that will tell you that voc rehab
7 is probably around six to eight hundred dollars a month stipend
8 that they receive, vice the amount that they receive through
9 the Post-9/11 GI Bill. See, under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, they
10 receive \$1,836 a month for their monthly living stipend. And
11 also under the voc rehab, I, too, was also under the impression
12 that voc rehab would provide them the services that they need,
13 the extended services that they need to help them get through
14 the programs if they have special needs.

15 And I spoke to the guidance counselor at UAA with
16 Mr. Floyd several months back and we discussed this about some
17 of the helps and that person also brought up some of the
18 things, and they were under the same understanding; that the
19 voc rehab program would step in and give these guys special
20 assistance, because we had -- we have people currently going
21 under the 9/11 program that need special counseling, that need
22 special tutoring and things like that that's not provided. And
23 so this is probably something that we need to look into,
24 bringing that program up to the same level that Post-9/11 is
25 currently.

1 This really concludes my testimony and I want to thank
2 you for having me speak before you.

3 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you very much. And I will --
4 because our time is running short, but I want to walk through a
5 couple things. I'll just start first with Ray. We've had lots
6 of opportunities already, so I'll just ask you a couple of
7 quick things if I could.

8 MR. JEFFERSON: Yes, sir.

9 SENATOR BEGICH: But I thought this was an interesting
10 one on the young student vets. Can you expand on what that is
11 within the university, one, for -- not only for me to
12 understand, but also Robert is still here and others to kind of
13 hear -- explain that to us a little bit more.

14 MR. JEFFERSON: Sure. So, as you know, sir, there's a
15 variety of veterans service organizations. Some of them are,
16 you know, a long history, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans, et
17 cetera.

18 SENATOR BEGICH: Sure.

19 MR. JEFFERSON: One of the newer ones is Student
20 Veterans of America and I would encourage people to go to the
21 web site. It is an organization created by and created for
22 this youngest generation of veterans from OIF/OEF, and what
23 they really focus on is helping this young generation of
24 veterans take full advantage of the new GI Bill, but also I
25 would say to deal with all of the potential challenges of

1 going.....

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Like a mentor to.....

3 MR. JEFFERSON: Well, sir, a few things. You can find
4 a mentor, you can -- they will help you -- they are on many
5 campuses. So, for example, the way it works is if Robert -- if
6 there's a Student Veterans of America coordinator of the
7 University of Alaska campus, you contact this person. And it
8 was exactly what he said. You know, I want to call someone and
9 say, hey, I'm here, I came from OIF/OEF, you know, how do I
10 translate into here? How do I get help with the courses? How
11 do I just navigate this huge campus system. And, by the way,
12 when I lost my fingers to a grenade, I went through the same
13 process at the University of Hawaii, and it's just -- it takes
14 a while to adjust to being in a room with folks who maybe are a
15 few years younger than you who have come straight from high
16 school, you know, and you've been doing all these other things
17 in the military.

18 So Student Veterans of America helps with that
19 transition, that translation in, to make sure that whatever
20 needs you have are addressed and they serve as a bridge between
21 the new GI Bill and the veteran and the resources and programs
22 of that university. So I would highly encourage folks to take
23 advantage of it, connect. I don't know for a fact that they're
24 in Alaska. I believe they're in all 50 states. I would say
25 they're very dynamic, they're growing, and they're very action-

1 oriented.

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. Now, that's something that
3 we can obviously, from our office, too, follow up to see if
4 Alaska has.....

5 MR. JEFFERSON: Yes, sir.

6 SENATOR BEGICH:someone on our university.

7 MR. JEFFERSON: And we can connect. We have a great
8 relationship with the president, sir, so we can make that
9 connection this week.

10 SENATOR BEGICH: Fantastic. That'd be great. The
11 second thing real quick, if I can, you mentioned the American
12 Vets at Work.

13 MR. JEFFERSON: Yes, sir. American Heroes at Work.

14 SENATOR BEGICH: American Heroes at Work. Can you just
15 again for the audience that's here, and because I didn't ask
16 you this yesterday, just describe a little bit about how that
17 works.

18 MR. JEFFERSON: Absolutely. And we had a chance, sir,
19 to dialogue on that yesterday.

20 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

21 MR. JEFFERSON: One of the programs that we have is
22 designed to help veterans with PTS and/or TBI and/or PTSD find
23 meaningful employment. What we found is the accommodations
24 that these veterans want and need tend to be very normal, easy
25 accommodations, but the employers themselves just need to be

1 educated. So this program connects a veteran with an employer
2 and educates the employer on the accommodations.

3 And here is what's so interesting about the
4 accommodations. Many of them are things such as I want to be
5 able to get up and walk around for, you know, 10, 15 minutes a
6 few times a day. Please don't walk up behind a veteran, you
7 know, and grab him or her from behind or on his shoulders.
8 Please don't place them in areas where there's lots of loud,
9 unexpected noises or very bright lights. When employers hear
10 what the accommodations are, it's the same thing anyone would
11 want a great percentage of the time.

12 The other thing I'd say is we brought the employers and
13 the veterans together and they rave about this program. So
14 it's called America's Heroes at Work. I will connect with your
15 office, sir, so you will have access to that. Robert, if
16 you're still here, I'd love to connect you with our director
17 for this program and also anyone else here in the building.

18 And, again, our access point directly is Tom Hall.
19 And, Tom, would you stand one more time, please. You're
20 getting some good exercise with me. It's a great program, sir.
21 We just need to raise awareness of it. I want to do a lot more
22 with it.

23 SENATOR BEGICH: That's great. I mean, you told me
24 about it a little bit and that's why I wanted you to kind of
25 expand a little bit here. But, again, thank you for that.

1 That's a great access point and I know people will take
2 advantage of it. Robert is here and he's patiently watching
3 and listening. So thank you.

4 MR. JEFFERSON: All right.

5 SENATOR BEGICH: Thank you, Ron. Let me, if I can,
6 Belinda, I promised you I wouldn't do Groundhog Day on you and
7 have the same questions, but one that intrigued me was an item
8 I think you added today and that's of a national brokering
9 process review you're doing. You've done a pretty significant
10 review on the Anchorage regional office in a variety of areas,
11 but on a national level you're doing a look at the whole
12 brokering.

13 I know Linda B. brought up a lot of issues about
14 brokering. Is that what you're looking at, is that whole
15 system and trying to figure out what's good, what's bad? Is
16 that -- it will go on automatically (referring to the
17 microphone). Yeah.

18 MS. FINN: Yes. Part of the -- we're looking at
19 brokering from a number of aspects. One of them is to try to
20 determine how much the brokering process improves the
21 timeliness of claims processing. We would also -- I'm not sure
22 whether we've been planning to look at error rates or appeal
23 rates, so I've been making notes on that to possibly add.

24 SENATOR BEGICH: Yeah. I would tell you -- and that's
25 why I wanted to ask this question, is because what I hear from

1 a lot of folks at least so far in this process we've been going
2 through in the last few days, but also part of that is
3 timeliness is not as significant coming from the broker, but
4 it's more of they get it and then there's error on it and it's
5 like they're repeating the workload.

6 And to me, the great measurement will be -- I'll use
7 the one, I think it was San Diego. I'll use that example I was
8 given that San Diego sends back and yet of those 53 to 60
9 percent, I forget the exact number, are being turned right over
10 into being approved, then -- and yet 9 out of 10 are being
11 appealed. And some -- and then you compare that to Salt Lake
12 and Seattle and that's not occurring. Why is that?

13 You know, that's, to me, an interesting question. Is
14 that worthwhile to look -- I mean I'm not into the appeal
15 process, I don't understand all the details, but it sure seems
16 on the surface that would be worthwhile to look at.

17 MS. FINN: I would agree, it does sound like it's
18 worthwhile. I will mention, about a year ago we looked at the
19 National Quality Assurance Program in VBA and one of the things
20 we noted was that brokered claims were not included in the
21 quality reviews and not included in the national quality rates.

22 SENATOR BEGICH: Really?

23 MS. FINN: Yes. And so we recommended that VBA
24 establish a process to review those brokered claims for
25 accuracy and include that in the rate. And they agreed with

1 that recommendation, but I don't know right this second what
2 action they have taken to make that happen.

3 SENATOR BEGICH: Could you -- and maybe someone else
4 might have a comment on that, but could you at least at a
5 minimum, if we don't hear the answer to that when I move
6 through the panel here, get us an answer? See what has
7 happened from that recommendation from a year ago.

8 MS. FINN: Yes, sir. I will do that.

9 SENATOR BEGICH: I think that would be very
10 interesting. The other second question is in regards to, you
11 said, the challenges in the network. Is that the communication
12 network? I'm trying to think of how you described that, and
13 I'm now reverting back to the Anchorage regional office. You
14 talked about the challenges in the network. Can you.....

15 MS. FINN: Yes, sir. It's the challenges in the
16 network access to -- I'm not sure whether it's over the
17 Internet or just the VA network.

18 SENATOR BEGICH: Okay.

19 MS. FINN: But the VBA applications that are needed to
20 process claims, many of these are run obviously not out of
21 Anchorage, but in other locations. And if the folks working in
22 Anchorage couldn't access the applications, it's very hard to
23 do the job.

24 SENATOR BEGICH: So it may not be as computerized, in
25 essence, is what you're saying?

1 MS. FINN: I believe it was problems with the network
2 bandwidth in Anchorage.

3 SENATOR BEGICH: Right. And, C.W., it's kind of like
4 Radar in M.A.S.H. C.W. hands me one word "bandwidth." Two
5 words.

6 MS. FINN: Yes.

7 SENATOR BEGICH: So I have a feeling that may be the
8 issue. Is that part of it?

9 MR. ARRONTE: Yes, that -- when we were on site,
10 correct, it's bandwidth.

11 SENATOR BEGICH: Okay.

12 MR. ARRONTE: And it was a T1 line and I think the
13 director had indicated that there were going to be three or
14 four additional T1 lines brought into that. It should help
15 that connectivity problem.

16 SENATOR BEGICH: Has that occurred, Mark?

17 MR. BILOSZ: Yes, I think there were three T1 lines
18 that were added and it has improved things dramatically. And
19 we're also expecting when we move into the new building in May
20 it will even be better. So it has improved.

21 SENATOR BEGICH: Great. I know I -- in my simple world
22 I live in, I just -- my mother-in-law just went from dial-up,
23 if you can believe this, to cable and you can only imagine what
24 that's like. You know, she can actually get a photo in seconds
25 rather than hours. So it's a very -- so that's interesting.

1 That's what I was trying to -- I wasn't real clear on
2 that, but that makes a lot of sense.

3 And the last question is you mentioned accessing
4 computer issues. Is that the same thing? You had mentioned
5 accessing computer issues. Is that similar to.....

6 MS. FINN: Yes, accessing the applications.

7 SENATOR BEGICH: It's all the same.

8 MS. FINN: It requires bandwidth.

9 SENATOR BEGICH: Okay. Same thing. The bandwidth
10 isn't strong enough, so therefore the applications weren't as
11 robust as they could have been. Is that a fair.....

12 MS. FINN: Yes, they couldn't access them.

13 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. Well, again, on the
14 national brokering, that is exciting that you're doing that and
15 I think this hearing, hopefully, brought some ideas to the
16 table that we could incorporate. And then please let us know,
17 is that progressive? It sounds like, you know, several months
18 from now you might be down the path on it, but let us know how
19 that progresses. I think the committee would be very
20 interested. As you know, appeals have been an issue that
21 percolates at the committee level on a regular basis.

22 MS. FINN: Yes, sir. We will. As a matter of fact,
23 I'm just going to take a second to say.....

24 SENATOR BEGICH: Sure.

25 MS. FINN:I really appreciate the opportunity to

1 be here and out in the field and here with the issues from
2 veterans. We work real hard to make sure that when we look at
3 an issue, we answer the questions that are important, you know,
4 and the issues that need to be fixed. So this has been a great
5 opportunity for me and I've been taking a lot of notes.

6 SENATOR BEGICH: Great. Thank you very much. Thanks
7 to you and your team. Mark, again, thank you and your team
8 that's here with you. I want to ask you, and I know I asked
9 you this in Anchorage, but I want to make sure the Fairbanks
10 folks also hear this. And that is, the issues that were
11 brought up in the report and the items of concern, there is no
12 disagreement to fix those problems; you agreed with the
13 recommendations. Is that a fair statement?

14 MR. BILOSZ: Yes.

15 SENATOR BEGICH: And that you're taking active steps to
16 move forward to -- as you identified in your written testimony
17 in more detail than your verbal, but you basically are taking
18 steps to get this process cleaned up and moving in the right
19 direction. Is that a.....

20 MR. BILOSZ: Yes, we.....

21 SENATOR BEGICH: I don't want to put words in your
22 mouth. I just want to make sure the Fairbanks folks hear
23 exactly what we talked about in Anchorage also.

24 MR. BILOSZ: Yes. We implemented action items to
25 address all of the issues and we're monitoring those and those

1 are having a positive impact on our performance.

2 SENATOR BEGICH: And we agreed yesterday, I know, when
3 I asked Belinda the question on, you know, when their next
4 review is, they were indicating even though they have more
5 resources, they can go from five years now down to three, which
6 is great, but what I have asked is that you report back to me
7 and the committee by June the progress that you have had in all
8 these metrics of measurement. That is still a commitment that
9 you're comfortable with making?

10 MR. BILOSZ: Yes, sir, I had a note.

11 SENATOR BEGICH: Okay. Good. Again, that was for the
12 Fairbanks audience to know that, you know, sometimes we have
13 these great reports and they're not -- you know, in a lot of
14 ways they're criticisms, but they're also about how to improve
15 the system because no matter what we do in life, there's always
16 room for improvement. And what happens sometimes is those
17 reports kind of move on and then people will do their own work,
18 and the next thing you know the report isn't reviewed by the
19 public and they then call us and say, well, what happened? And
20 then we say, good question, and then we call and they say,
21 well, geez, there's -- of those 13 items, 7 of them got
22 implemented, we don't know why the other 6.

23 So this process of bringing it back in June will allow
24 us a chance to publicly say here's a success or here's areas
25 that just aren't working out as well as we thought. Is that

1 fair?

2 MR. BILOSZ: Fair is -- very much so, yeah.

3 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. Again, I want to thank you
4 for the willingness to kind of step up to it. One thing I --
5 you said rating qualities, is I think the phrase you used. How
6 do you measure rating quality or rating qualities? I may not
7 have written that down exactly the way you said it, but I
8 remember that phrase.

9 MR. BILOSZ: Yeah. We have a National Quality Review
10 program that's located in Nashville and every month a series of
11 rating decisions gets sent to that facility.

12 SENATOR BEGICH: Is it a random selection of those?

13 MR. BILOSZ: It's a random selection. Every regional
14 office in the country sends files there.

15 SENATOR BEGICH: So they send them off to this
16 location?

17 MR. BILOSZ: Yes, and they have a group of folks there
18 that are experienced review the files and determine if there
19 are errors or if there aren't errors. Some errors, just as the
20 IG did the inspection, some errors affect payment, others are
21 just administrative type of errors. But they report that back
22 on a monthly basis to the regional office and in my office, as
23 an example, we use that data to train people to make sure that
24 those mistakes aren't repeated.

25 SENATOR BEGICH: And then you keep -- I know you and I

1 talked about this yesterday. In your office, and I didn't see
2 it, but you pointed it out to me, and that is you keep a wall
3 chart basically to make sure people understand what the
4 measurements are that we're measuring for success.

5 MR. BILOSZ: Yes. You know, it's vital that we are
6 providing quality service to veterans, timely service to
7 veterans, and if our employees don't know what that is, then
8 they can't perform to the level that they need to. So we
9 update that daily with our performance measures and it allows
10 our employees to know how what they do day in and day out
11 affects the veterans in the state of Alaska.

12 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. Let me, if I can,
13 Dr. Pendergrass, I'm going to move to you, if I can. I
14 appreciate the shopping list of items you're working on, and it
15 is impressive. One thing I'd love to get if I could, again
16 this is very parochial, obviously, it's Alaska and I'm more
17 interested in Alaska issues and what's good for Alaska
18 veterans. But I think this would be also important for many of
19 my colleagues on the committee who are from rural states.

20 I'd be curious if you could give us, not right now, but
21 more of a written report on the several demonstration projects
22 we have with you, especially with the Tribal Health Consortium,
23 with Maniilaq and other organizations we're doing work with.
24 Because one of the things that I am hopeful for, that we will
25 be able to prove, is that a veteran in a small village can go

1 to an Indian Health Services facility, get the services rather
2 than having to fly or be transported all the way across to
3 maybe Fairbanks or to Anchorage or to Seattle or wherever else
4 they might have to be sent when there might be a facility right
5 next door to their home that is run by Indian Health Services,
6 paid by the same taxpayers as the VA is, but available.

7 A good example of that is in Nome. The Indian Health
8 Service will be building 170 million dollar health care
9 facility, brand new, starting this spring. It will be a state-
10 of-the-art Indian Health Service provider. It would be a shame
11 to have a veteran who lives literally right there have to be
12 forced to go to another place because we don't have
13 arrangements with these. And I know you are using Alaska as
14 kind of a pilot. As Ray and I talked today, if you can do it
15 in Alaska, you can do it anywhere, is our attitude here.

16 So I'd be curious, if you'd kind of give a report to
17 the committee on kind of how these demonstration projects are
18 working and how they've been implemented. Because one of the
19 complaints I've heard is it's taking a while to get through the
20 bureaucracy and I know that's because of the stovepiping that
21 goes on, and we want to make sure these move forward if they
22 are successful. Do you have any quick comment?

23 DR. PENDERGRASS: Well, in my -- I have a briefing
24 document from last week that we didn't present, but.....

25 SENATOR BEGICH: Connect with? A little snow.....

1 DR. PENDERGRASS:I do have it. I do have an
2 expanded version.....

3 SENATOR BEGICH: Excellent.

4 DR. PENDERGRASS:of what the rural initiatives
5 are. The challenge for us is both the access and the
6 efficiency of the VA system and balancing that with VA's --
7 it's similar to an HMO in that we have very specific internal
8 services and capabilities that we need to use first. And
9 sometimes that requires -- and sometimes we are prohibited from
10 providing services outside of our system.

11 SENATOR BEGICH: That's only a function of the laws
12 that people like myself can pass.

13 DR. PENDERGRASS: Yes, that's right.

14 SENATOR BEGICH: And so, I guess, here's why. I think
15 you will find in Alaska, those who are familiar with our Indian
16 Health Services here, it is a robust, a very successful
17 program. It's run by Tribal Consortium.

18 DR. PENDERGRASS: Right.

19 SENATOR BEGICH: It is very unique in its delivery
20 system. There's a program in our facility in Anchorage called
21 Nuk which is a holistic medicine program. It has reduced
22 emergency care injury by 68 percent, a great statistical data.
23 And because it does such good quality service, they get
24 incredible reviews across the country. And it just seems that
25 there's an opportunity here.

1 And so I would say to you don't limit what the
2 potential is if there's a law that says you can't cross the
3 line because the real end product here is about service to the
4 veteran.

5 DR. PENDERGRASS: Right. And I think the task force
6 group will be able to.....

7 SENATOR BEGICH: Help us.

8 DR. PENDERGRASS:sort that out because the pilot
9 is a pilot, because it would require some legislative changes.

10 SENATOR BEGICH: Exactly. Well, I'll look forward to
11 that. And last thing, just a quick question on mental health
12 service professionals. What are you finding in recruitment in
13 a sense of trying to get folks to be in that service? Because
14 what I hear, it's a problem.

15 DR. PENDERGRASS: It's.....

16 SENATOR BEGICH: In all areas, not just.....

17 DR. PENDERGRASS: It is a major problem. We have not
18 been able to entice the professionals up here full-time. We're
19 using opportunities for traveling up for short periods of time.
20 We did that to do some of the mental health C&P exams.

21 SENATOR BEGICH: Is it.....

22 DR. PENDERGRASS: We're using locums.

23 SENATOR BEGICH: Is it -- and, you know, you can be
24 very frank here. And that is, is it because they have to go to
25 Alaska or is it because it's the cost or that the income is not

1 as great as they could get doing it elsewhere, or it's a
2 family -- what's the draw here? What's the.....

3 DR. PENDERGRASS: Well, it's a number of factors.
4 First of all, the supply of professionals.....

5 SENATOR BEGICH: Is already small?

6 DR. PENDERGRASS:is small. The compensation that
7 working for a private or even a state facility -- state salary
8 is different than private sector, and so the salary is an
9 issue.

10 SENATOR BEGICH: Not competitive.

11 DR. PENDERGRASS: It's not competitive. And then
12 you're in a very rural, highly rural, medically underserved
13 area which is a problem.....

14 SENATOR BEGICH: It's tough.

15 DR. PENDERGRASS:across a number of states, but
16 Alaska especially.

17 SENATOR BEGICH: I would be -- and I just saw -- I
18 don't know where he just went. Brian Rogers just walked in.
19 He's our chancellor for the university here. Where did he go?
20 Oh, there you are, over there. I point that out only because I
21 think what we have to figure out is what we can do in the
22 education arena to try to entice people, one, to enter the
23 field at the front end because if we can create the supply then
24 at least some who still don't want to, you have a larger supply
25 to work from. And this is something that I know I'll see the

1 Board of Regents tonight at a reception and maybe it's just an
2 idea we can insert more discussion.

3 DR. PENDERGRASS: The VA has an ability to help offset
4 some of the student loans as part of the employment. It may be
5 additional incentive to that, working in a rural area.

6 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. That's a good point. Let
7 me -- and I again apologize because of the timing. We're real
8 close, but let me -- Willie, did you have some additional
9 comments? That's about as far as it will go, so you just
10 speak, you'll be okay.

11 MR. CLARK: Okay. All right. Good. Thank you, sir,
12 for allowing me the opportunity to speak.

13 SENATOR BEGICH: Sure.

14 MR. CLARK: I am Willie Clark. I'm in charge of VA
15 Benefits Operations for the Western U.S., which includes
16 Mr. Bilosz' office and now Mr. Kelley's office here in
17 Anchorage.

18 Three things quickly I'd like to bring up. You talked
19 about the -- or asked a question about brokering quality.

20 SENATOR BEGICH: Yes.

21 MR. CLARK: We started that last year. So as a result
22 of the IG report, we are doing quality on our brokered cases.

23 SENATOR BEGICH: Excellent. Good.

24 MR. CLARK: The second thing is the San Diego office
25 that Linda brought up.....

1 SENATOR BEGICH: Yes.

2 MR. CLARK: The San Diego office, believe it or not, is
3 one of our best performing stations in VBA. This is the first
4 that I have heard of that. I asked Mr. Bilosz and Mr. Kelley.

5 SENATOR BEGICH: Well.....

6 MR. CLARK: They had not heard anything from Linda. So
7 what we're going to do.....

8 SENATOR BEGICH: You have today.

9 MR. CLARK: Well, we're certainly -- we're going to
10 talk to her about that and we will address any concerns that
11 she has.

12 SENATOR BEGICH: Will you share that with the
13 committee?

14 MR. CLARK: Yes, sir. We'll certainly do that.
15 Lastly, we talked about the call center in Phoenix.

16 SENATOR BEGICH: Yes.

17 MR. CLARK: And at all of our call centers we have
18 state benefits books that speaks to tax exemption letters, a
19 license, and the full gambit for each state. So I -- that's
20 another one that surprises me. I will certainly get with the
21 Phoenix office, that's under my responsibility as well, and
22 make sure that they are trained and providing those letters.

23 SENATOR BEGICH: Let me ask you real quick if I can, on
24 the books that you provide to those trainers, are those --
25 before the trainers utilize them for those states like in

1 Alaska, are people like Linda at that level reviewing them to
2 give you -- to make sure -- because they -- you know, sometimes
3 what we do is -- and I had this actually with the VA recently
4 in a committee hearing. They were saying, well, we notify
5 veterans, we put the legal notice in the paper and so forth.
6 And I said, well.....

7 MR. CLARK: Yes, sir.

8 SENATOR BEGICH:you know, no one pays
9 attention.....

10 MR. CLARK: Yes, sir.

11 SENATOR BEGICH: No offense. I mean, my father-in-law
12 is a retired colonel.

13 MR. CLARK: I understand, I understand.

14 SENATOR BEGICH: You know, he's not looking in the want
15 ads for classifieds by the VA, he's looking, you know,
16 elsewhere.

17 So do you kind of reverse it back and say, you know
18 what, here's the book, let's go back to the people on the front
19 line in Alaska, look at this, how would you use it, is there
20 something missing here? Or even how it's laid out to make sure
21 it's readily usable. Do you do that?

22 MR. CLARK: Well, we have certain people that we do it
23 with. I don't know at Linda's level what happens.

24 SENATOR BEGICH: Okay.

25 MR. CLARK: But, certainly, in this case because,

1 again, all states are different.

2 SENATOR BEGICH: Absolutely, oh, yeah.

3 MR. CLARK: And these call centers, because they're set
4 up to get a call from any state, so they must know. And all
5 they do is open the book to that particular index that speaks
6 to that state.....

7 SENATOR BEGICH: Right.

8 MR. CLARK:and then they are to give out those
9 letters. But I will check that to be sure that in all cases,
10 but specifically Alaska, that we have the correct information.

11 SENATOR BEGICH: Very good. And I'm just a big fan of
12 encouraging because we have -- it's no criticism to the VA;
13 it's a criticism to kind of our bureaucracy of how we do
14 business. Sometimes we get closed in and we forget that the
15 person on the line may get that exact same index and say, you
16 know what, you know, they're never going to find it the way you
17 have it listed here. Because they see it from a different
18 perspective of the caller who is going to make that call.

19 And so I would just encourage, as I do with all
20 agencies, you know, I do it through the commerce and others
21 that this is a technique I used when I was mayor and it made a
22 big difference in usability of the documentation.

23 MR. CLARK: Okay, sir.

24 SENATOR BEGICH: Just a little thought there.

25 MR. CLARK: Yes, sir. We'll do that.

1 SENATOR BEGICH: The only thing I'll say and end here,
2 and, Verdie, I have two parts. One is to say thank you for the
3 work I know you did and along with C.W. on the ATG, making sure
4 those individuals received the benefit that they justly deserve
5 that was taken away for a short period of time.

6 And I want to thank you for the hard work you did to
7 kind of plow through it, find these folks, find the recipients,
8 find their dependents. And I know between you and your work
9 you did out of your office, through our office and C.W. and
10 some others that were really.....

11 (Microphone feedback)

12 SENATOR BEGICH: Really helpful there. I just want to
13 say thank you for doing that.

14 MR. BOWEN: Thank you, sir.

15 SENATOR BEGICH: And you laid out some good thoughts
16 here and I'm going to -- not to burn up time here, but I do
17 want to do some follow-up on the voc ed and we'll do that
18 through our office and your office.

19 MR. BOWEN: Yes. As a matter of fact, sir, I wrote
20 myself a note here that my voc rehab person will send a memo
21 over to C.W. and compare the two programs.

22 SENATOR BEGICH: That would be great, so we can kind of
23 see what we need to do to improve on it.

24 MR. BOWEN: Yes.

25 SENATOR BEGICH: Let me end there and, again, to the

1 panel, thank you all very much. As we try to -- as at least I
2 attempt to do in the last two days in these hearings is to
3 bring out ideas and not -- you know, we can spend a lot of time
4 pounding on each other, which is not hard to do in the world we
5 live in it seems today, but it's better to find those ideas,
6 see where we can improve, recognize criticism is not a
7 negative, but it's a positive to improve a system that's
8 delivering service to thousands, and in this case millions,
9 around the country.

10 And so I thank you all for your public service. Thank
11 you for your willingness to step up and say here's what we can
12 do to make it better.

13 And also I think an example that, Belinda, you laid out
14 which I really appreciate that, you like these field hearings
15 because it gives you a little food for thought and that's why I
16 like them, to get out and hear what people have to say. So
17 thank you all for being here.

18 Thank you to the audience that is here. And we are
19 going to go next -- C.W., next door? Right here? Next door
20 we're going to do a -- right through that door, we're going to
21 do a press event in regards to the folks that are signing on to
22 support our guard and their employment, and it's just another
23 opportunity to highlight the great work that our business
24 community is doing.

25 So, again, thank you all very much. This meeting is

1 adjourned.

2 (Off record)

3 (END OF PROCEEDINGS)

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DRAFT

C E R T I F I C A T E

1 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA)
2) ss.
3 STATE OF ALASKA)

4 I, Elizabeth D'Amour, Notary Public in and for the
5 State of Alaska, residing at Fairbanks, Alaska, and court
6 reporter for Liz D'Amour & Associates, Inc., do hereby certify:

7 That the annexed and foregoing Public Hearing was taken
8 before me on the 17th day of February, 2010, beginning at the
9 hour of 1:00 o'clock p.m., at Fairbanks, Alaska;

10 That this hearing, as heretofore annexed, is a true and
11 correct transcription agency testimony, taken by me
12 electronically and thereafter transcribed by me;

13 That the hearing has been retained by me for the
14 purpose of electronically filing the same with the United
15 States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

16 That I am not a relative or employee or attorney or
17 counsel of any of the parties, nor am I financially interested
18 in this action.

19 IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and
20 affixed my seal this 23rd day of February, 2010.

21 _____
22 Notary Public in and for
23 the State of Alaska
24 My commission expires: 12/28/2010
25

S E A L