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AMERICAN LEGION

LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION

Thursday, September 11, 2008

House of Representatives

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

joint with the

United States Senate

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Washington, D.C.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:39 a.m., in Room 345, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. Bob Filner [Chairman of the Committee] presiding.

Present from House Committee on Veterans' Affairs: Representatives Filner, Snyder, Michaud, Herseth Sandlin, Mitchell, Hall, Berkley, Walz, Buyer, Miller, Boozman, Brown-Waite, Turner, Bilbray, Bilirakis, Buchanan, and Scalise.

Present from Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs:

Senators Akaka, and Burr.

The \*Chairman.\* Good morning. I want to thank you for all of you being here for this presentation of the Legislative goals of The American Legion. And we welcome all of you from all across the nation.

Of course, this happens to be the seventh anniversary of the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and all of us in America grieve together.

We have a proud legacy which The American Legion represents of appreciation and commitment to the men and women who have worn the military uniform in defense of this nation and, of course, to the public servants who respond to threats to our security.

So let us remember the innocent lives that were tragically lost seven years ago and if you will all join me, please, in a moment of silence.

[Moment of silence.]

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you so much.

We welcome again, as I said, all of you, especially the new Commander, the newly-elected Commander of The American Legion, David Rehbein.

It was a pleasure to meet with you in Phoenix with your National Convention. Phoenix, right? I did not know which city I was in after a while. And congratulations, Commander, on your election. And we thank your predecessor, Marty Conatser. Did I get that pronunciation right? And look forward to your term in office.

This has been a tradition obviously of the Legion being here. It is an honor for me and Senator Akaka to hear the views of the Legion which represents, of course, 2.7 million members. And your information here today will help us a great deal.

You come at a time when the budget is uncertain. I think the Legion has been in the forefront of saying, you know, when we start the fiscal year on October 1<sup>st</sup>, we ought to have a budget on October 1<sup>st</sup>, the appropriations, because you cannot plan or anything.

So I hope you will use your time here to advocate that if we do not pass any other appropriations bill, we at least do the veterans appropriations bill because that is absolutely necessary and begin to start a process which I know you are also engaged in where we can get this kind of

funding out of this very political and crisis-driven situation where we have a budget well in advance whether it is mandatory funding or forward funding or however we do it. We cannot be in this uncertain position as of October 1<sup>st</sup>.

So we thank you. Hopefully you will do some lobbying there.

In addition, we were, I think, very proud and you were taking a lead in that where we passed a very enhanced education benefits that we called the GI Bill for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It will be a great boon to certainly our newer veterans to have something that reminds us of the GI Bill of 1944.

But I know you also have concerns with the suggested way it is going to be implemented where they are going to be outsourcing or the Secretary suggested potential outsourcing of the management of the GI Bill.

I join you in your opposition to that. We cannot take that step which is a step toward privatization. We can do this for our veterans with our Veterans Administration and we ought to do that.

[Applause.]

The \*Chairman.\* Obviously there are many other key issues that are even in the three weeks or so that we have left to this session and we do not know if we are going to meet after the election yet or not, but there are incredible issues that we have to face not only for our newer veterans but those of you who have served in previous wars, whether they are World War II, Vietnam, Korea, or Persian Gulf I.

We have to do the job for these returning young men and women right. We know what happens if we do it wrong. There are probably many Vietnam vets in the room. How many of you are Vietnam era? The vast majority.

You know what happens if we do not honor our returning troops. There is an incredible difficulty both personally, for family, and for our nation. And we did not do it right when all of you returned from Vietnam.

I think many of us confused the war and the warrior and we did not honor the warrior even if we disagreed with the war. And as a result, health benefits, education benefits, integration in society, problems have resulted, whether it is homeless vets on the street tonight or suicides.

We are seeing the same thing happen now that we saw with

Vietnam and we have got to get this right. It is part of the cost of war. If we can spend a billion dollars every two days on the War in Iraq, we can spend some of that money on the warriors who are fighting this war and who fought other wars.

So whether it is the mental health needs of these returning veterans or the incredible injuries that they are dealing with that in previous wars they would not even have returned home, they have returned home to us, but with great injuries and other severe injuries, and we simply have got to do the job. That is our job as an American nation.

So we thank you for making sure that we do that job. The American Legion is always at the forefront for making sure, whether it is the older veterans or the newer veterans, that we do our job.

So we pledge to do that. We are glad that you are here. We want to make sure that we do the job right.

I want to say one more thing before I turn it over to my Co-Chair of this meeting, Mr. Akaka, and that is one of the, I think, the most insulting things that is well-known to many of you in this room and to all of our veterans is the

incredible backlog of claims, disability claims. I mean, the figures change, but it is around 800,000. I mean, that is a disgrace. And there are ways to deal with it.

I think instead of just saying we apologize to the Vietnam vets, we ought to make some deeds that really reflect what we are saying.

There are tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Agent Orange claims going back to the Vietnam War. I say if you were there, we should care. I do not care if your boots were on the ground, you were in the blue waters off the coast, you were in the blue skies above, if you were in Guam or Cambodia or Laos, we should honor those claims now.

I mean, you fought the VA long enough. We should not have to prove every little item. If you were helping us in Vietnam, we should help you now. So I am for honoring all those claims now and just getting them off the books.

In addition, when your claim is submitted with the help of the kind of certified Veteran Service Officers that you have working for you, and they are in counties all over America, I think we should accept those claims subject to



audit the way the IRS does for your tax--

[Applause.]

The \*Chairman.\* --for your tax return. You get a check if you have a tax return coming in three weeks from an agency that was dysfunctional a couple decades ago, the IRS. Surely we can do the same for our veterans and get that claims down to where it belongs, at zero.

So we are looking at that. I know Senator Akaka and I are trying to deal with all these issues. And I would like to recognize the Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, the gentleman from the great State of Hawaii, Senator Akaka.

[Applause.]

Senator \*Akaka.\* Thank you very much, Chairman Bob Filner.

And aloha and welcome to all of you here today, a warm aloha to the National Commander, Dave Rehbein, from Phoenix, and senior officials and all the members of The American Legion who are here with us this morning.

And because I am not certain, are there any of you here from Hawaii? Raise your hands if you are. Thank you.

The American Legion has a long and proud tradition of public service. No question about that. Your advocacy on behalf of our nation's veterans is truly honorable and I applaud you for all that you do and you are thinking of doing.

I am pleased to join all of the leaders of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House Committee, and as well as my very close colleague, Richard Burr, who is the Senate's Ranking Member.

As we move toward the final days of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, I note that we accomplished a great deal for our nation's veterans over the past two years, but there are still many challenges ahead before us.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I remain committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality of benefits and services. When we send our troops into battle, we must be prepared to care for them when they return home. Caring for them means providing the best healthcare and rehabilitation. It means fairly compensating veterans for their injuries.

As I have said many times before, we simply must, especially in this time of war, we must ensure that VA is equipped with the resources necessary to carry out these missions now and into the future.

Our national security depends on how we meet the needs of those returning from battle. VA is one of the premier healthcare providers in the nation and that is a fact. And I am proud to have contributed to the improvements and quality and access to VA care and each member of the Committees, both in the Senate and the House, who have done this.

Now our task is to keep the resources flowing. After years of under-funding veterans' programs, this Congress appropriated the largest increase in the history of VA.

Those funds are helping to provide better healthcare to veterans. The additional funding is also enabling the Veterans Benefits Administration to hire thousands of new employees.

It is my profound hope that this investment will produce marked improvements in care as well as a reduced backlog of veterans' disability claims.

I also believe we need to do more to ensure a more

predictable funding stream for VA.

Last year, in connection with the disclosures about Walter Reed, America learned about the disgraceful treatment of some of our disabled servicemembers and veterans. Congress responded promptly and the Armed Services and Veterans' Affairs Committees collaborated in an unprecedented manner to address the issues at Walter Reed and elsewhere.

One result of this cooperation was the Wounded Warrior provisions included in last year's "National Defense Authorization Act."

Among other improvements, we more than doubled the period of automatic VA healthcare eligibility for returning troops. This means that servicemembers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan are now eligible for five years of VA healthcare upon separation from service.

This Congress also enacted the post 9/11 GI Bill that was mentioned here by Chairman Filner. Like others who served in World War II, I personally know how the original GI Bill changed our country for the better. This improved benefit will provide similar help for today's and tomorrow's troops.

But there is much work that still lies ahead of us. We must ensure that VA remains at the forefront of treatment and research on traumatic brain injury and PTSD. Timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims also remains an issue and it is especially important that the quality of decisions does not suffer as anticipated improvements and timeliness are accomplished.

We must continue to seek a seamless transition from military to civilian life for the newest generation of veterans where VA is an active partner with the Department of Defense.

Assisting veterans' families is an essential part of the successful reintegration of new veterans into their communities. Families of injured veterans face a multitude of wide-ranging needs, from care-giver training to education services to employment issues. Finally, a smooth start to the new GI Bill is really a top priority.

In closing, I am reminded that it was seven years ago today that our Committees had been scheduled to meet to hear the legislative priorities of The American Legion. Tragically the events of that day overtook the hearing as

Americans went to battle against those who attacked our country.

We paused today to remember all of those who died on that sad day as well as to pay tribute to those who have donned our nation's uniform in battle since.

We must rededicate ourselves to the task ahead of us with renewed passion.

I again want to thank Commander Rehbein and members of The American Legion for who you are, what you are, and what you have been doing for our country.

I just want to tell you that I have to leave for a markup on another Committee, but will carefully review the record of today's hearing.

And, again, thank you so much for being here and for what you have done for our country and will be doing for it. And thank you and best wishes with much aloha for our future. Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Senator. Thank you.

I would like to recognize the Ranking Member of the House Committee, Mr. Buyer, Indiana.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* Thank you.

Thank you, Commander. Congratulations on your recent election and to all past Commanders and to the National President of the Auxiliary. Congratulations.

I also would like to publicly acknowledge and welcome back Ms. Ginny Brown-Waite back to the Committee.

Ginny, you had a pretty trying last year and in particular this summer. We all knew about your absences and our heart always is extended to you with the loss of your husband. Ginny, welcome back to the Committee.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Buyer.\* I would like to commend two members of the Committee here and that is Stephanie Herseth Sandlin and Dr. Boozman. These are two members of the Committee that do extraordinary work behind the scenes and do a lot of lift for the Committee. And they set a tremendous tone of bipartisanship on this Committee. And for that, I want to commend them and thank them.

And we also congratulate you on your--

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Buyer.\* Wait a minute. Hold on. Hold on to your

applause. You are going to be due when?

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Late December.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* Late December she is going to have her first child.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Buyer.\* Now, to let you know what a good legislator she is, she has timed this child so she can take maternity leave while we are not in session. So pretty extraordinary there.

I also want to thank Chairman Filner for his moment of silence and how very appropriate. Many of you were in this town on September 11<sup>th</sup> when we were here to receive your testimony some years back. I remember some of you standing in the street as you looked down because there were no cars.

And as you looked down and you could see the black clouds just begin to bellow across the Potomac and it was a very horror moment for our country as we began to learn more and more news.

And I want to thank The American Legion. The reason I want to thank you is is that--first, before I turn to you as an organization, I think we should extend our thanks to the



bravery of the men and women of our Armed Forces. Our nation has not suffered another major attack since September 11<sup>th</sup> and at the same time, while they were protecting us, these heroes in uniform helped topple two of the world's most wicked tyrannies and they liberated over 50 million people.

And just recently, General David Pattreus, the top U.S. Commander in Iraq, announced that American combat troops could possibly leave Iraq, excuse me, in particular Baghdad by next summer and the entire country by 2011.

Such a welcome prospect did not even seem possible just a short period of time, even, in fact, the summer of 2006. Some in Congress had declared the war lost, but that was not The American Legion.

You see, The American Legion, I believe you knew better. American Legion, you never wavered in your commitment to success in the Global War on Terrorism.

As the past National Commander indicated in your September issue of the magazine, "The American Legion has consistently supported the troops and their mission."

The Commander who had personally visited the troops and General Pattreus last year said upon his return, "Our troops

are doing their jobs and succeeding. Congress must allow General Pattareus to complete his mission to build a safer, stable Iraq that will not threaten its neighbors nor the United States."

Now, The American Legion took that view when others here on Capital Hill were singing get out, get out, get out, get out, retreat, lost, all that theme.

That is not what you did. The American Legion, you took the long view and recognized that success was the only option. The American Legion, you never lost faith with our military and its leaders.

And, once again, this great organization has proven itself to be a tremendous national asset that stands by its principles.

Now, come to think about this. The President said he would surge. He was highly criticized for the surge.

The American Legion, you were steadfast in your principles in support of the troops in the mission and the surge. Now as the surge has had its success and in particular the Marine Expeditionary Unit, two Marine battalions, and the five Army brigades who participated in

the surge have already come home.

Think about this. How many of the American people even know that? You see, with success, it does not lead. It is not in the headlines of the papers. If it bleeds, it leads. If it is successful, it may not even be in print.

But I want to take a moment to thank you because in the darkest hours, The American Legion, you took a stand. And I assure you when the Legion takes a stand, it is not just with the national here. It is the stand and influence that you have in your communities all across America because the Legion and the Legionnaires are influence makers in our communities.

And so I want to thank you for having done that.

I would like to recognize, we have some Legionnaires from Indiana, my good friend, Kenny, the Big O. Kenny O is here from Lafayette; Steve Shore from Indianapolis; and Alan Titus from Martinsville, and any other Hoosiers who may be here.

I also would like to welcome the Commander of North Carolina. Is he here? He is not? Oh, my.

Jim Mahuy is my childhood friend, is a retiree from the

Navy and is now the new Commander in North Carolina.

I also would like to thank American Legion. There are some things you do that I really respect. So I want to touch on these.

Your American Legion Legacy Scholarship Fund, it is extraordinary what you are able to do out there and the money you raise and the impact it has.

The other is is the Legion's Operation Landstuhl, very good. Those of you know in the medical chain of mercy, Landstuhl, a very important place.

And you recognize that and so let me thank you for how much money you have raised and donated to buy comfort items for those troops.

The other is that I think has been extraordinary has been your Heroes to Hometowns and that is an extraordinary program that has had tremendous benefits because all of you know what it was like when you came home from that war and you know you have to reach out and you have got to mentor someone and that helps tremendously.

So I want to thank you for having done that.

Now, we are headed to a conference. We are most hopeful

with Chairman Akaka, Chairman Filner, Senator Burr, and myself, all of these bills that have passed in the House, that have passed in the Senate, some of which have passed in the Senate Committee but have not been able to get off the floor. We recognize the construction bill.

Chairman Michaud, we are going to have to figure out how we make this happen. I just want all of you to know everything--this is a difference about this conference coming up--everything is on the table. Everything is on the table except one in my view and that is do not repeat the Hartness decision.

Now, that is just Steve Buyer opinion, but here is another time I want to thank The American Legion. The repeal of the Hartness decision. Now, others have a different view on it.

And, American Legion, you share this. And, Steve, I want to thank you. You leaned forward and you met, you talked with the Commanders, and you took the position as you have always done. Do not cut a benefit from one veteran to give the benefit to another veteran. Never do that.

And to think that this Congress could take action to

take a billion dollars away from wartime elderly, disabled, homebound veterans, it blows my mind.

So if we want to find monies for some other types of veteran, in particular, the nonresident Filipinos, then let us find the money from somewhere else. Do not take it from the most vulnerable veterans. I think that is wrong.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Buyer.\* The last thing I want to end with is I want to compliment Chairman Filner. He has one of the Olympic training centers in his congressional district in Chula Vista. And the two of us had a bill to assist our, I call them our paramilitary athletes.

You know, many of whom wear the uniform are athletes and when they come back and they have got their disabilities, what I did was years ago, if you remember the United States Olympic Committee was having some challenges. They had some ethical challenges. You had a board that had over a hundred members on the board. People were linking on to the Olympic ideal to find profit and then they were fighting among each other. And there were some ethical challenges.

John McCain took a different view in the Senate. I took

one in the House. We both introduced our legislation. We moved it through the Committees to reorganize the United States Olympic Committee. And the Olympic Committee had been reorganized. The relationships that I developed from that experience, I then brought to the VA.

Marrying up the United States Olympic Committee with the VA created a memorandum of understanding whereby we created all these military sports programs to use sports as a platform of healing for many of the disabled. Over 4,000 now have gone through those sports programs that we have created.

I was with the Secretary last night. He just returned from China. He represented the President in China at the Paralympics. And there are eleven of our military athletes who happen to be disabled that are on that team that would have never been on that team had that memorandum agreement never happened.

So it is a pretty exciting thing. And I am hopeful that, Chairman Filner, our bill could be considered by the Senate and we want to take and build off of the successes and utilize sports as healing for our disabled athletes.

With that, I yield back my time.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Buyer.

I would recognize the Ranking Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Mr. Burr of North Carolina.

Senator \*Burr.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My good friend, Steve Buyer. It is good to be with you, Steve.

Commander, let me assure you I am anxious to hear from you, so I am going to be brief, but I welcome you in your new position as well as the National President of the Auxiliary.

My two colleagues, I think that are here from North Carolina, members of the Legion, it is always good to see them.

And as I look in the crowd and see a couple of empty chairs, I am reminded that the world changes with \$4.00 a gallon gas. It is very expensive to go places. It is a reminder to those of us hopefully on the VA Committee that as we look forward into the future, it is incumbent on us to place the delivery of care much closer to where our veterans live, that the quality of the outcome is significantly different when we do not dislodge them from the communities they live in and separate them from their families.



And I think that that is really the mission of this Committee is to begin to be the visionary along with the VSOs of what the delivery system of the future should look like.

Mr. Chairman, I want to personally thank the Legion today for your work on behalf of our veterans. Without your advocacy, there is no doubt things would fall through the cracks.

This year, the Legion has been extremely helpful to veterans and, quite frankly, to some of the initiatives I have worked on. It was the Legion as an early proponent of addressing the overlapping and duplicative disability systems operated by the Department of Defense and VA.

You worked with me and others to advance the goal of finally getting the DoD out of the disability rating business. And it is my hope that as we move the Defense Authorization Bill in the United States Senate this week that that will, in fact, be included in it and we will then have a single rating system.

Second, the Legion was very supportive of a very intense debate on the GI Bill, but you saw the benefits to veterans across this country and to our active-duty military of the

transferability of those educational benefits.

At the end of the day, we were able to provide a much better benefit to veterans of the future and to those individuals who put on that uniform on our behalf. And certainly their spouses and their children will be the beneficiaries of the transferability of that benefit. It would not have happened had it not been for you in the room and for the membership at large.

Third, the union joined in support of "The Veterans Second Amendment Protection Act." It was a common-sense piece of legislation that would end an arbitrary and unfair process by which the VA reports VA beneficiaries who cannot balance their checkbooks to an FBI criminal database. The end result is that many veterans were denied their Second Amendment rights.

That legislation would prohibit now the VA from sending the names of veterans and children and spouses unless a judicial authority finds that there is a danger to themselves or to others. It is a standard that we hold for everybody else in this country and why veterans could have been held to a different standard is beyond me. But it is because of your

support, your help that we are on the road to alleviating that.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Legion, I salute you for your courage. You have supported the men and women of the Armed Forces in good times and in bad times.

Now, I have deep respect for every member that serves on the Veterans Committee on both sides of the House and the Senate. But I have got to share with you today something that I think each and every one of you knows.

If we do not change some things, the outcomes will not change. If we are not willing to redesign the way we do ratings, we will have the same problems. If we are not willing to redesign how we process claims, we will have the same backlogs. If we are not willing to rethink geographically how we place the delivery of care, we will deny some veterans the quality that they deserve.

It does not come by simply changing the chairs around in a room. It comes by changing the entire structure and that can be done collectively, but it cannot be done if the will is not there.

So I challenge the Legion. I look forward to your

testimony today, but I also challenge the Legion to stay engaged in this process to make sure that the changes that are made are not just superficial, but they are changes that can withstand the test of time and the test of money because the reality is that they will both be tested in the future for us to maintain the commitment that we have made as a country. And that is the number one objective of you and I believe of this Committee.

I thank each and every one of you for your attendance today. Commander, I look forward to your testimony today. Thank you.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Senator.

[Applause.]

The \*Chairman.\* Mr. Latham, I see you made it through the traffic. We stretched out our introductions so you could be here.

We want to welcome Congressman Tom Latham from Iowa who will introduce the new Commander of The American Legion.

Mr. Latham.

Mr. \*Latham.\* I thank the Chairman.

Ranking Member Buyer and members of the Committee, I am

honored and privileged to have the opportunity to introduce the new National Commander of The American Legion who is from my hometown of Ames, Iowa. He is the fifth Iowan to serve as our National Commander following a great tradition of service that characterizes the citizens of our great State.

I have known Commander Dave Rehbein for many years and have witnessed his dedication to serving our nation's veterans, his engaging leadership style, and will surely be a great benefit to our veterans and to our nation.

Welcome, Dave, and congratulations on your election to lead the nation's largest congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organization.

Dave served as an infantryman during the Vietnam era and came to Iowa to attend Iowa State University where he graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Physics and a Master's Degree in Metallurgy. He recently retired from a career at the Ames Laboratory.

Dave served as Commander of The American Legion Post in Ames for over twelve years and was appointed by former Iowan Governor Tom Billsack to a position on the Iowa Commission for Veterans Affairs.

Within The American Legion, he has served as Chairman of the National Foreign Relations Commissions, Veteran Affairs, and Rehabilitation Commission and Legislative Commission. As National Commander, he represents over 2.7 million members of The American Legion and their families.

The Commander resides in Ames with his wife, Ann, his son, Chris, and his wife, Beth, and a daughter, Jennifer. All are active members of The American Legion. Ann is past Department President of Iowa. Chris is past Squadron Commander. And Jennifer is a current Unit President. The Commander and his wife have two grandchildren, Grason and Devon.

We are proud to have the Commander serving in this key position as an advocate for our veterans. And I look forward, as do my colleagues, to working with him on the issues facing our veterans at this critical time in our nation's history.

I would also take a privilege. I want to introduce a special guest I have with me. Richard Bacon is a member of Parliament from the United Kingdom and he will be shadowing me this week.

But, welcome, Honorable Bacon.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Latham.\* I apologize for being a little delayed this morning. There seems to be a ceremony going on by the Pentagon this morning.

But congratulations, Commander, and we look forward to your testimony.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Congressman Latham.

And, Mr. Commander, I did not realize we were fellow students of Metallurgy. But your written statement will be included in the record and you have as much time as you need for your oral testimony. Thank you again for your being here.

**STATEMENT OF DAVID REHBEIN, NATIONAL COMMANDER; ACCOMPANIED  
BY STEVE ROBERTSON, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE  
COMMISSION; JIMMIE FOSTER, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE  
COMMISSION; K.R. LEWIS, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS  
AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION; PETER GAYTAN, DIRECTOR,  
NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION**

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Thank you, sir.

Chairman Akaka, Chairman Filner, members of the Committee, it is an honor for me to appear before this distinguished body to present The American Legion's legislative priorities as they affect the delivery of healthcare and benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs.

But before I begin, let me thank you personally for so many of you being here this morning. I think that reflects the priority that is now being placed on the veterans of this country, the servicemembers of this country, and the benefits that they will continue to need after they finish their service.



I would like to thank Congressman Latham for introducing me today. I would like to thank him for his friendship, but especially for his selfless dedication to doing what is right for America.

I look forward to working with you during my term as National Commander.

With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I would like to recognize a few of the outstanding leaders and veterans' advocates in the audience today.

First, allow me to introduce my National Vice Commanders and if they would stand, Mr. James Davis from West Virginia, Mr. Michael Landkamer from Nebraska, Mr. James LaCoursiere from Connecticut, Mr. Harley Ray from Oregon, and Mr. Tracey Simmons from Texas.

Gentlemen, thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Also with us today are a number of the past National Commanders of The American Legion and I would ask that they stand and be recognized.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* You have heard that she is here. It is

my pleasure to introduce the President of the nation's largest patriotic women's organization, the American Legion Auxiliary, Mrs. Desiree Stoy.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* With her are a number of the past National Auxiliary Presidents and her leadership team. And I would ask that those folks also stand and be recognized.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* A gentleman that is serving as the National Commander of the Sons of The American Legion which is a valued part of our American Legion family, Mr. Tommy Cisna from Illinois.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* And, finally, I would like to take the personal opportunity to give some special recognition to the one person who has been the key to my success in this organization and beyond that in life. The road to becoming National Commander is paved with sacrifices and this wonderful woman has made many of those sacrifices in her support of our service with The American Legion family. I would not be here today without her help, my lovely wife,

Ann.

Ann, please.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, The American Legion has a proud tradition of advocating on behalf of America's veterans and this testimony reaffirms our commitment to ensuring all eligible veterans of this country receive the benefits and healthcare that they have earned through their service.

Providing the legislative priorities of our organization before a Joint session is an extremely valuable opportunity. I am proud to be representing The American Legion here today and thankful to the Chairman and the members of these Committees for providing this opportunity and recognizing the importance of receiving testimony.

I feel it appropriate, as have the Chairman and several of the members, to take a moment this morning to recognize that exactly seven years ago today, our great nation suffered a horrible attack of terrorism that changed the course of our history.

On that fateful morning while 19 terrorists bent on

inflicting pain and destruction on the American people boarded planes in Boston, New York, and Washington, D.C., hundreds of our dedicated legionnaires donned their American Legion caps and filled this building as then National Commander, Rick Santos, prepared to present testimony.

As we all know, that testimony was never delivered. As the events of that morning unfolded, the resolve of the nation was strengthened and The American Legion reaffirmed its commitment to not only the men and women who serve and have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, but to all Americans who depend so much on the National Security policies of this country.

As we gather here today, let us once again reaffirm our commitment to all who have and to all who are wearing the uniform of this nation and work together to provide them with the quality healthcare, disability compensation, rehabilitation, and transitional programs that they have earned through their honorable military service.

The American Legion applauds the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress for recommending fiscal year 2008 funding allocations for many VA accounts that meet or exceed funding targets proposed by The

American Legion in testimony presented earlier this year.

We are also thankful for the hard work of both chambers in passing a comprehensive and effective GI Bill that more accurately reflects and compensates for the sacrifices made by America's servicemembers and families, whether they be active duty, Guard, or Reserve.

But we have more to do. The American Legion is very strongly opposed to contracting out VA's services. The American Legion does not support recently discovered plans by the VA to farm out to any private company the development, implementation, or ongoing administration of the new GI Bill Program.

The American Legion has worked diligently for years to bring into existence a GI Bill that finally meets the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century veteran.

"The Post 9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Act of 2008" was that bill. Now it is VA's obligation, duty, and mission to fulfill the requirements set forth by the law. It is not the obligation, the duty, or the mission of an outside contractor.

VA has over a quarter million employees and a highly

advanced information technology presence that is better equipped than any outside contractor to fulfill the obligations of this critically needed new benefit.

The American Legion brought the GI Bill into the world when past National Commander, Harry Colmery, drafted "The Servicemens Readjustment Act of 1944." We all know the return on investment as America began a half century of economic prosperity attributable to that legislation.

The purpose then as it is now was to reward honorable military service with education and home ownership benefits worthy of a veteran's sacrifice. There was no question whose responsibility it was to provide that benefit to fulfill its provisions.

VA exists for just such purposes. VA is also held accountable by the veterans of this nation and most certainly by those veterans who belong to The American Legion to fulfill those duties. VA can do it.

Moreover, especially when it comes to something so important as the GI Bill, we do not want anyone else to do it for them.

It also strikes me as strange that the decision to call

for bids from private companies come so soon after the Bill was passed. If a cost-benefit analysis was conducted to outsource or not to outsource, I have to wonder if VA employment opportunities for disabled veterans were factored into that equation.

The new law takes effect in August 2009. In that amount of time, it seems VA could develop, implement, and begin to administer the new GI Bill Program that would be the envy of private industry with existing VA staff and new VA employees where needed.

VA exists to fulfill obligations just like this. It is our position that we should let them.

The War on Terrorism, Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom have already generated nearly one million discharged veterans, all of whom are guaranteed access to healthcare through VA for the first five years after their return home.

Hundreds of thousands of OIF and OEF veterans are now using their VA healthcare benefits, increasing the workload of a healthcare system that was overburdened before the war began. It is a sacred and time-honored obligation of The

American Legion to make sure these veterans have the services they need and timely access to the care they have earned and that they deserve.

By working together, The American Legion and members of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees have made considerable progress in recent years to meet these obligations. We have offered up American Legion services across the nation to care for those who come home severely wounded through our Heroes to Hometowns Program and through our core of expert service officers to assist all those with whatever handicaps they may experience as a result of their service.

We work with Congress, the White House, states, and local communities, every level, to ensure that our government, but particularly the VA, has what it needs to provide quality healthcare, disability compensation, rehabilitation, and transitional programs to all eligible veterans. We have made progress, but we are not there yet.

The process of providing adequate and compassionate services to our veterans is continuous. We must stay on top of the changes in healthcare, in technology, and foremost



among the veterans we serve.

With that in mind and on behalf of The American Legion, I would like to outline a few of the areas of concern that are included in our full testimony.

The budget reform for veterans' healthcare. In the past two years, the annual discretionary appropriations have represented a dramatic improvement over years of consistent budgetary shortfalls.

However, even those two outstanding appropriations did not follow the normal appropriations process. One was achieved through a year-long continuing resolution with significant markups for VA medical care. The second required the President to declare a need for emergency appropriations for VA medical care.

The American Legion believes the absence of appropriate urgent changes in healthcare funding will continue to add to the strife that has plagued VA as well as the veterans it serves.

New veterans may soon discover their battles are not over. Instead, the nation's newest heroes will inevitably fight for the life of the VA healthcare system as veterans in

the 20<sup>th</sup> century fought for care they were eligible to receive.

With the influx of those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the demand for various clinical providers, nurses, space, and structural peripherals are mounting. As each fiscal year approaches, assured funding is essential to proactively meet various challenges faced at VA medical facilities.

The American Legion believes the solution to the Veterans Health Administration recurring fiscal difficulties will only be achieved through meaningful reform of the federal appropriations process as recommended in 2003 by the President's task force to improve healthcare delivery for our nation's veterans.

This task force clearly identified the consistent mismatch between VA healthcare funding and the growing demand for healthcare services.

The American Legion and eight other major Veterans and Military Service Organizations have joined forces to urge Congress to provide annual federal appropriations that are timely, predictable, and sufficient. These three components,

timeliness, predictability, and sufficiency are critical for effective long- and short-range decision making by the VA management.

The Partnership for Veterans' Healthcare Budget Reform recommends advanced appropriations for VA healthcare. The American Legion believes this change would assure both timeliness and predictability in the delivery of services.

Under advanced appropriations, VA medical care discretionary appropriations would be approved prior to the start of the next fiscal year. Should the sufficiency of the advanced appropriations be in question, we would have an opportunity to address any shortfalls while testifying for the remainder of the VA appropriations for that fiscal year.

The American Legion recommends reform of the federal appropriation process with regard to VA healthcare that would guarantee timely, predictable, and sufficient annual appropriations.

In addition, The American Legion believes that Congress should allow VA to bill, collect, and retain third-party reimbursements for Medicare on behalf of Medicare eligible veterans.

Nearly all veterans pay into Medicare for their entire working lives. However, when they are most likely to need medical services from the one hospital system designed specifically for them, they must turn elsewhere because VA cannot bill Medicare. This is wrong and we would urge you to correct this injustice.

The American Legion firmly believes that making VA a Medicare provider and reforming the current budget process will enable VA to fulfill its healthcare delivery mission.

TBI care. Together we must work toward providing more comprehensive screening and treatment for mental health issues unique to combat veterans such as posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

These injuries have become known as the signature wounds of the wars we are fighting today and VA must be capable of providing the care that our returning heroes deserve.

As we address the growing problem of PTSD, The American Legion is also concerned with the impact of this condition on the women of this nation's Armed Forces. Every day the women of America play a more and more prominent and active role in the military. In numbers far greater than any previous time

in our history, women face the rigors of combat. Yet, many also must struggle with the after effects of sexual trauma sustained in the military.

This has been recognized not only in House Resolution 397 but also by the men and women of The American Legion who represent our nation's veterans at the Regional Offices and at the Board of Veterans Appeals. Those folks have noticed rising numbers of claims for this issue as the number of women veterans rises every day.

Adequate and compassionate care of our veterans demands that the VA must stand ready to expect, screen for, and treat this growing problem facing our female veterans. Therefore, The American Legion supports legislation such as "The Women Veterans Healthcare Improvement Act" in both the House of Representatives and the Senate and, furthermore, the House of Representatives "Military Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Act," which specifically addresses this issue.

The VA's Office of Inspector General has examined VA's ability to meet the needs of veterans who suffer from traumatic brain injury. TBI patients from around the country were interviewed at least one year after completing inpatient

rehabilitation. Some of the challenges noted by family members who care for these veterans include the necessity for complicated special arrangements and the absence of VA rehabilitative care in their communities.

Case management working at treatment centers and several secondary centers noted limited ability to follow patients after the patient's discharge to rural areas and the lack of adequate transportation. These limitations place undue hardship on the veterans' families as well.

Veterans have shared many examples of families devastated by the demands of caring for TBI injured veterans. They have sacrificed financially. They have lost jobs that provided the sole income for the family and they have endured extended separations from children.

It is important that the veterans turning to VA for care of traumatic brain injury receive the highest level of treatment and rehabilitation available.

Toward that end, The American Legion applauds VA for designating five VA medical centers as level one polytrauma rehabilitation centers. Due to the advances in battlefield protection for our warriors, a large of number of troops are

surviving combat injuries that would have proven fatal just a decade ago.

These state-of-the-art facilities provide specialized rehabilitation to help these severely injured patients actually reach the highest level of independence and functionality that they are capable of achieving.

Another unique aspect of the polytrauma centers is that those needing care for traumatic brain injury, amputations, blindness, and psychosocial mental health issues can receive that care in just one location.

We applaud VA for developing these unique care facilities, but we must ensure that screening for TBI is more comprehensive and veterans are able to access quality care no matter where they reside.

The American Legion System Worth Saving Report for 2008 focuses on the Department of Veterans Affairs nursing home care units. Members of the task force visited 49 of those units throughout the VA medical center system. The task force's report highlights the issues affecting the delivery of general healthcare as well as long-term care in those nursing home care units.

The demand for VA nursing home care continues to escalate due to the aging population of America's veterans as well as long-term debilitating injuries sustained by those warriors fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The Veterans Millennium Healthcare and Benefits Act of 1999" required that VA improve access to long-term care for severely disabled veterans and ensure that alternatives to nursing home care are expanded. It is our hope that by visiting these facilities and creating this annual report we are helping to ensure that VA receives the resources needed to meet the long-term healthcare needs of America's veterans.

VA has yet to develop a long-term care strategic plan with well-articulated policies that address the issues of access and integrated planning for the long-term care of mentally ill veterans. The American Legion supports the publishing and implementation of a long-term care strategic plan that addresses the increasing long-term care needs of America's veterans.

The American Legion urges Congress to support adequate funding for VA to meet those long-term care needs and I would encourage each of you to review the 2008 System Worth Saving



Report at your convenience.

Mr. Chairman, The American Legion remains committed to ensuring that VA carries out its historic and statutory responsibility to also provide other benefits to veterans. VA has a statutory responsibility to ensure the welfare of this nation's veterans, their families, and their survivors.

Providing quality decision in a timely manner has been and will continue to be one of VA's most difficult challenges.

According to the Government Accountability Office, although VA made progress earlier this decade in reducing the size and age of its pending claims backlog, it is currently losing ground. This is due in part to an increase in filing of claims including those filed by OIF and OEF veterans.

Inadequate staffing levels, inadequate continuing education, and pressure to make quick decisions resulting in an overall decrease in quality of work have been a consistent complaint amongst Regional Office employees interviewed by The American Legion staff during Regional Office quality checks.

It is an extreme disservice to veterans, not to mention

unrealistic, to expect VA to continue to process an ever-increasing workload while maintaining quality and timeliness with the current staff levels.

The current wartime situation provides an excellent opportunity for VA to actively seek out returning veterans from OIF and OEF, especially those with service-connected disabilities, for employment opportunities within VBA.

Despite the recent hiring initiatives, Regional Offices will clearly need more personnel given current and projected future workload demands. However, VBA must be required to provide better justification for the resources it says are needed to carry out its mission and in particular how it intends to improve the level of adjudicator training, job competency, and quality assurance.

The American Legion strongly supports additional staffing and urges that appropriations be made with that view in mind and that improved training programs be implemented.

Since 1996, The American Legion in conjunction with the National Veterans Legal Services Program has conducted quality review site visits at more than 40 Regional Offices for the purpose of assessing overall operations.

This quality review team visits a Regional Office for a week and conducts informal interviews with both VA and Veterans Service Organization staff. The quality review team then reviews a random sample of approximately 30 to 40 recently adjudicated American Legion represented claims.

Currently the team is finding errors in approximately 20 to 30 percent of the cases reviewed. The most common errors include the following:

Inadequate claim development leading to premature adjudication of the claim;

Failure to consider reasonably inferred claims based on the evidence of record;

Rating based on inadequate VA examination and underevaluation of disability, especially mental conditions.

These errors are a direct reflection of VA's emphasis of quantity over quality of work. This seems to validate The American Legion's concerns that emphasis on production continues to be a driving force in most VA Regional Offices, often taking priority over such things as training and quality assurance.

Clearly this frequently results in premature

adjudication, improper denial of benefits, and inconsistent decisions. The emphasis on production continues to take priority over training and quality assurance.

Although VBA's policy of production first has resulted in many more veterans getting faster action on their claims, the downside has been that tens of thousands of claims have been prematurely and arbitrarily denied.

The American Legion strongly recommends a substantial change in VBA's work measurement system. A more accurate, reliable work measurement system would help to ensure better service to veterans.

Ultimately this would require the establishment of a work measurement system that does not allow work credit to be taken until the decision and the claim becomes final.

Additionally, The American Legion supports the development and construction of a veterans' justice center and courthouse for the Court of Veterans Appeals for Veterans Claims in an appropriate location within the District of Columbia.

In 2004, Congress requested a feasibility study to determine the need for a dedicated veterans' courthouse.

Recognizing the court's increasing workload, Congress called for a follow-up study in May of 2007.

The time for studying the need for a new courthouse has passed. The time for construction has come. The American Legion asks that the development and construction of a dedicated veterans' courthouse be a top priority of the next Congress.

Mr. Chairman, The American Legion appreciates the strong relationship we have developed with these Committees. With increasing military commitments worldwide, it is important that we work together to ensure that the services and the programs offered through the VA are available to the new generation of American servicemembers who are now returning home.

You have the power to ensure that their sacrifices are indeed recognized, honored, and consecrated by the gratitude of a grateful nation. The American Legion is fully committed to working with each of you to ensure that America's veterans receive the entitlements they have earned. The brave men and women who are serving in our Armed Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and throughout the world deserve no less.

I look forward to working with each of you throughout the next year to improve the lives of all of America's veterans. As we bring home a new generation of veterans, VA must be capable of striking that balance between meeting their needs and the needs of past veterans already in and just beginning to access the system.

By working together, we can provide a strong VA for all veterans, past, present, and future. And The American Legion stands ready to work with you to accomplish those goals.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the time for our testimony this morning.

[Applause.]

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Thank you.

[The statement of David Rehbein appears on p. ]

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The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Commander, and we will have some questions from the Committees.

Mr. Michaud who Chairs our Health Subcommittee, you have the floor.

Mr. \*Michaud.\* Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

And, Mr. Commander, I want to thank you very much for your testimony here this morning. I agree with pretty much everything that you said, especially the GI Bill. I am definitely opposed to contracting out the management of the GI Bill.

Assured funding, that is another issue that is extremely important. It is one thing to have a good budget, but you have got to make sure that you have that budget in a timely manner that is sufficient to deal with what the VA has to go through.

I also want to thank, you know, the Auxiliary as well for your ongoing support and advocacy for our veterans here in this nation. I really appreciate what you have been doing over a number of years.

And a System Worth Saving is a very valuable tool I know

for myself. And I really appreciate it. I read it every year. I appreciate what you are doing with that report and look forward to looking at it as well.

One of the things that, you know, naively before I got elected to Congress just over six short years ago, I always heard politicians from both sides of the aisle praise our veterans, thank them for their service, and how we have got to take care of our veterans, that they earned it and we have got to do everything we can.

But when I got elected to Congress, what was amazing is the fact that veterans would have to come down here year in and year out and fight for funding for the VA which really was amazing to me. And it is unfortunate that you have had to do that over a number of years.

It is great to have additional funding for the VA, but you have to have it in a timely manner. But also, you have to have the programs, especially today when you look at what is happening in Iraq and Afghanistan with traumatic brain injury, posttraumatic stress disorder, dealing with female veterans' issues since the demographics have changed since, you know, with more females in it.



And so we have got to make sure that we readjust VA with new programming so they can take care of some of these ongoing concerns.

Senator Akaka had mentioned much work lies ahead and I agree with him a hundred percent. There is a lot of work that lies ahead of us in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress.

I really appreciate the way in which Chairman Filner and Ranking Member Buyer have been working over the last couple of years.

And, actually, before I came here this morning, I decided to run a list of the bills that we were able to pass in the House during the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress and we have actually done a lot of work, a lot of issues dealing with our current conflicts, a lot of legislation dealing with past problems within the VA. We have passed approximately over 64 pieces of legislation in the House of Representatives.

When you exclude the naming bills and some of the resolutions, it has been over 38 bills over the last two years and we still have more that we will be passing this year before we adjourn.

And that leads me to my concern and what Senator Akaka

had mentioned when you said much lies ahead. When I ran the Senate, what they have done over the last couple of years, they have passed 19 bills.

When you exclude the naming bills in the Senate and one resolution, they have passed seven bills. Out of seven, two are a cost of living which leaves five bills that passed in the Senate.

We have a lot of work that we have to do. And my question to you, Mr. Commander, is when you look at the workload and the bills that we have passed in the House compared to the seven in the Senate, what is The American Legion doing to really encourage Congress to move on a lot of these program issues?

We have a lot of issues with TBI, PTSD, rural access to healthcare. What is The American Legion doing to help move that process along, especially if you relate it to the Senate since that seems to be where the log jam is?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* I agree with you, sir. Well, our work is never done. No one that is doing good work is their work ever done.

And with the changes and improvements in healthcare, we

are thankfully saving the lives of many of our service men and women that would have been lost in prior wars, but we are bringing them now home with increasingly large challenges that need to be made.

The American Legion can simply do no more than continue to advocate as we have in the past to continue to push that adequate appropriations be made, that the delivery of healthcare services and benefits to our veterans be made in a timely manner, and we will continue to perform that advocacy. We will continue to ask those questions and provide the pressure that we can put on in wherever place it needs to be provided to make sure that our veterans are served in the manner that they should be.

We have had some visits up on the Hill and we will have some more this week and next and continue to ask those questions and put pressure in those places that we can to provide that advocacy. I think that is probably the best answer that I can give you to that question, but our veterans will have our full support.

Mr. \*Michaud.\* Thank you very much, Mr. Commander.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you.

Mr. Boozman, you are recognized for five minutes.

Mr. \*Boozman.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And, again, appreciate your being here. Appreciate your testimony.

As always, we really do appreciate the Auxiliary and the hard work that they do.

When you are at a function and you look around and the guys are visiting, usually the ladies are taking the tickets and cooking or doing what else needs to be done. We really do appreciate your hard work.

You mentioned the problem of the VA healthcare and the funding in the sense, you know, that we do not get on the stick and do what we need to do in the sense of getting our appropriations bills done on time. That is a problem for this Congress. It has been a problem for past Congresses. It does not really matter who is running the show here, that really is a problem.

And it is difficult to plan what you are going to do in the next year. You know, all of us that have been in business understand that you cannot do that.

You have got a guy next to you, Congressman Latham, that is on the Appropriations Committee that works hard to get our funding in place and, yet, again, it is difficult.

Can you elaborate? You mentioned, you know, going to multi-year funding. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* I can some, yes, sir. And we appreciate the efforts of the Appropriations Committee members. We understand that they work hard and there are sometimes things in the process that simply get in the way of everybody working hard.

As far as what we are recommending for an appropriations process, we would like to see an authorization and an appropriation for two years out so that I believe right now we are working on the appropriations for next year. We would like to see us be working on the appropriations for the following year so that a base amount would be set for that year and then as time got closer, if adjustments needed to be made, there would be adjustments.

They would not be starting from, maybe unfortunate words, ground zero. But maybe they are appropriate words on today. But we would not be starting from ground zero each

year with a limited time period. We would have a longer time to develop that appropriation and make sure that it was right and make sure that the folks out in the VA medical care centers had some good idea of the funding that was coming for their planning purposes.

So what we are looking for is to start the process a year earlier.

Mr. \*Boozman.\* Very good. I think that, again, you know, common sense dictates that that has merits and, yet, you know, we kind of have to work through things.

Mr. Chairman, I really would like perhaps at some time if we could maybe have a roundtable discussion, have the VSOs, and then the appropriators, you know, the appropriating, you know, Subcommittee that handles that sit down and, you know, with the VA Committee and just kind of talk that through, you know, the pros and cons of doing that and with the funding not being mandatory.

And I have got mixed emotions on mandatory versus the other. Mandatory does not always mean adequate funding. And so, again, I think that perhaps, you know, it might be a good idea to have some sort of discussion and kind of talk through

that.

The complexity of the VA system now compared to how it was when it was initially set up and all of the things that it entails now, especially with, you know, with us being at war and in a situation that we have not been in a long time, I think that your idea really has a lot of merit.

I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Mr. Chairman, if I may for just a moment with Mr. Boozman, without supplying you a list, but it can be supplied, there are some federal agencies that already have this sort of advanced funding so that it is not something completely new to this government. It is done in other places. It is just done in smaller amounts, but we can get you that list if you would like.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The \*Chairman.\* And thank you, Mr. Boozman. I hope we can have such a roundtable early next year. Before Mr. Latham leaves, maybe, Tom.

Mr. \*Boozman.\* He is trying to commit you.

The \*Chairman.\* Hey, Tom, before you leave, I want to follow-up. I would hope that the appropriators would join us

in such a roundtable on these ideas.

Mr. \*Latham.\* I would love to.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, sir. I knew we would get something out of you before you left.

[Applause.]

The \*Chairman.\* We planned this highjacking. Thank you, Commander, for bringing him in. These guys are hard to reach.

Mr. Hall who Chairs our Disability Assistance & Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, you are recognized.

Mr. \*Hall.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Commander, for your testimony. Thank you to the Directors and Chairmen who are here with us, to the Auxiliary Presidents and former officers. And thank you especially, well, to all of you from the Legion who are here and especially the New York Delegation, Michael Tocars, John Tipping, Al Carpenter, and Charles Mills. If I missed anybody, I am sorry, but it is great to have some of my fellow New Yorkers here.

I would thank you again also for your support in drafting and passing H.R. 5892, "The Veterans Claims



Modernization Act of 2008," which passed unanimously from the Subcommittee and from the full House of Representatives, and I think it was 429 to nothing, something like that. I was humbled and pleased to see all green up on the board when we voted on it. And it is one of those bills I hope the Senate will look at.

And I spoke to Chairman Akaka and Senator Burr today. Our staffs have been speaking to each other. Whatever comes out of the Senate, we hope the provisions of this bill will or at least most of them will be included because they address the backlog which at the end of July, I am told, was 838,000 claims pending which is something our country should--it is, I think, a scandalous situation that we are sending troops into harm's way, but not taking care of them in a prompt fashion when they come back.

So that is one thing I am extremely concerned about and grateful for your help with. And if you are speaking to any Senators today as the day goes on, please feel free to mention it.

I agree and support the idea of budgeting one year in advance. The courthouse for the CAVC, absolutely. I think

we have had enough studies and we should start designing and building.

I am concerned also about your comments on and the issue of the impact on women with increasing numbers of women serving. We have seen that on the West Point Board of Visitors which I also serve on. They and the other academies have been accounting on their scale the same problems of educating our male warriors to take care of their comrades or female warriors and also when they return here to provide women who have experienced not just the emotional trauma of combat but also the trauma of improper treatment by their male comrades with appropriate therapy that does not consist only of sitting in a room full of other men who they may or may not feel like opening up to.

So these are relatively new because our country has never had so many women fighting and wearing uniform of the country before, but we are trying and we are working on, you know, catching up with these problems.

I do not want to take, you know, more time than I already have, but I wanted to ask you one question. You spoke about privatization of GI Bill benefits. I agree with

you and I think in general, I am philosophically opposed to privatizing the job of the VA in many areas.

I think the VA was created to be our country's arm of delivery, the agency that delivers support to our veterans. And I get nervous when I hear about, for instance, in my district the sale of the Montrose VA facility on the Hudson River which is river-front property that, you know, they are not making any more of this millions of dollars of value for the highest and best use by the CARES Commission which to me, that might mean a marina and restaurants and condos for the public at a high price rather than using five empty buildings and lots of acreage that was intended for the care of veterans to be continued to be used for the care of veterans.

And on the other hand, we have passed, this week, we passed legislation to allow private providers to help rural veterans who live too far away from a VA facility. So obviously there is a role for public-private partnerships here.

And I am wondering if you could give me a quick indication of where you think that line is, especially regarding TBI and PTSD where we are seeing, I think, the

system currently is overwhelmed and I have private providers coming to me asking if they can help.

And on one hand, I want the help because it is a time sensitive matter to get our veterans the care right away. On the other hand, I do not want to let the VA off the hook and tell them they do not have to do it.

So where do you think we should draw that line?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* You know, as we address the situation of where is it appropriate for the VA to go to outside sources for help, I think we need to draw a line based on where is the VA capable and not capable of providing that help.

As we look at some of our rural veterans and the access to healthcare that they need, it is simply not possible for the VA to be out there for every one of them. We have many places in this country that it takes several hours. We still have places in this country where the children board at school because it is too far from home.

So I think in those situations, it is more than appropriate for the VA to be providing contract care and they already have that capability with fee-basis work.

But in the situation of the GI Bill, the VA has proved

in the past that they are capable of handling the GI Bill. They did it after World War II, Korea, Vietnam. The Montgomery GI Bill, it is not something new. It is not something that they do not have the expertise.

So I think as we are trying to draw that line and determine whether it is inappropriate or appropriate to go to outside contractors, I think we need to look at where the VA simply cannot provide the service, do not have the resources, do not have the capability.

I hope that addresses what you are asking of me, sir.

Mr. \*Hall.\* It does. Thank you very much.

I yield back.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Hall.

Chairperson of our Economic Opportunities Subcommittee,  
Ms. Herseth Sandlin of South Dakota--

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The \*Chairman.\* --who we fondly call Big Mama.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* I am not that big yet, I do not think.

The \*Chairman.\* Strike that from the record.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Commander, for the testimony and for all of your members for traveling to Washington for this legislative presentation.

I would like to acknowledge my good friends, Wayne Vetter and Jean Schoemaker from South Dakota who are here, who make frequent trips here and get a chance to see them a lot. Back home in the State, appreciate their advocacy on behalf of South Dakota's veterans and, of course, their participation with The American Legion at the national level.

As you may know, Ranking Member Boozman and I are having an oversight hearing with the Subcommittee today on the issue of how the VA is going to implement the new GI Bill.

And while I share my colleagues who have spoken on this issue a healthy dose of skepticism whenever the VA is outsourcing, contracting, privatizing, whatever term we want to use here describe what we think the direction they are headed in this instance, I am going to reserve judgment for now.

I mean, the reason we are having the hearing today is to learn. And the only reason some of this information has come to light to any of us is the questions we have been asking at

the staff and member level to the VA about how they are going to meet this rather aggressive time line we have given them to have this ready to be implemented fully by August of next year.

We do plan to have another hearing before the end of the month where we will be inviting the VSOs and some other organizations to comment further and we will look forward to hearing from The American Legion at greater length on this particular issue at the time.

I think we have to delve into the transparency of the contracting process, you know, precisely what are they looking to contract. Is it solely an IT function? How will the current VA employees be treated who are charged with and have the expertise of administering these benefits? Did we miss opportunities? As you stated in your testimony, did they do a cost-benefit analysis?

They seem to be rushing this issue. What about all of the opportunities of hiring newly returning veterans and veterans from past wars to develop the expertise to help administer this truly important benefit?

But I do anticipate that as we learn more, that if we

steer them in a different direction, they may then ask for an extension of time.

So could you perhaps respond to what The American Legion--the priority obviously would be to keep it in the VA for you and to have it done by August of next year, but if they do say, well, if we are going to ramp up and we are not going to contract out for any portion of administering it, we may need a longer period of time to get it fully ready to go.

What would your position be at that point? And that is a little bit premature because we have to find out more information, but I am trying to determine as you answered Mr. Hall's question about where that line is, I appreciate your response, but what about just the time that the VA may need to fully be prepared and not make a huge number of mistakes or get a backlog of claims then for the GI Bill benefit?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* First let me say that we very much appreciate your and Mr. Boozman's quick response to this. We are also looking forward as you are to the answers that you will receive this afternoon. That quick response that you folks have shown is critical to making sure that the VA does not have to ask for that additional time.



You know, if we can address this problem now and get things sorted out, we will not run into a situation in January and February where we are starting over. And I think that is critical to making sure that we meet this implementation date of August 2009.

One of the things that we all need to remember, I think, is that even though the VA may outsource some of these functions and responsibilities that they do not diminish their responsibility, their accountability too.

What would our reaction be if the VA came back and asked for additional time? I think we would need to hear more from them as to why they need it, what the situation is that they find themselves in that they cannot meet this deadline. They have not yet, I do not believe, said that this is an unrealistic deadline at this point.

So thanks to your timeliness and the hearings that we are going to have this month, I am hoping that we can forestall that possibility.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Very good.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* But if it comes, then we will have to evaluate it when it comes. I cannot foresee exactly right

now.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* I appreciate that. And like you said, hopefully today's hearing will be enlightening for all of us as we get ready then for a follow-up hearing toward the end of the month inviting more testimony at that time.

I do want to acknowledge and thank the members of the American Legion Auxiliary. As a proud member of the Auxiliary myself, I always appreciate seeing you and all the great work that you do for veterans and their families across the country and the importance of--well, I guess we will be seeing more men in the membership of the Auxiliary in light of the number of women veterans that are returning home, that we appreciate The American Legion. That got a lot of laugh. I am looking forward to seeing the membership. But I really appreciate the support of the bill that Ginny Brown-Waite and I have introduced on women veterans' healthcare from The American Legion.

And one other issue that I would like to explore, if I could with the Chairman, I know I am going over time, but it will only take one second. Mr. Chairman, may I take an additional minute?

Mr. Boozman and I have also been holding a set of field hearings across the country in Indiana, South Dakota, Arkansas on the Transition Assistance Program. And in a number of these hearings, we have heard from servicemembers, from Veterans Service Organizations, and others about how there really is overwhelming support for the Transition Assistance Program, the services and information they provide to members and their families as they seek to transition to civilian life.

And I believe that the program should be made mandatory. We may have to take a series of steps to get there, but could you just state again for the record The American Legion's position on the Transition Assistance Program and whether or not you would support making the program mandatory.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* I am not sure about the desire to make it mandatory. We consider the program to be very, very important. One of the challenges we face in any transition program like that as folks come out of the military and go home, their primary focus is getting home.

We have found that some of the most effective programs, particularly as regards to the National Guard and Reserves,

may come 30, 60, 90 days later after they have gotten home, gotten settled back in, and then they become more focused on what is going to happen in the rest of their lives.

So the mandatory part of it, that is not something that we have a position on if I am--we do, sir. Then I am mistaken and I apologize for that.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Well, I do not know that you are necessarily mistaken. I think you are answering it more in terms of some of the National Guard and Reserve when they come home.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Uh-huh.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* And we have to work through how to get the Transition Assistance Program effectively administered to National Guards men and women and Reservists either upon demobilization or offering these courses to them more generally. And that is some of what we have explored in the field hearings.

But let me ask you this question. For transition assistance that is offered to active-duty military personnel that is currently being offered at a base, would The American Legion support making that mandatory--

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* --at the bases where it is currently offered?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Absolutely.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Okay. Very good, because we just do not want people falling through the cracks and, you know, transitioning out from active duty into civilian life and not having had the benefit of the resources that are being provided.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* We learned in and after Vietnam that bringing people home and bringing them out of the uniform and into civilian clothes and having them home in 24 hours was not the thing to do.

Mr. \*Robertson.\* Commander, if I may, from the beginning of the Transitional Assistance Program, the goal was to try to get the military to make these young men and women available for the sessions and that was the big problem because many Commanders, once they knew that a servicemember was getting out, they got all the details that nobody else wanted to do up until the time of separation.

So we really tried to make it a mandatory requirement

that everybody be allowed to participate in these things within six months of separation, so that gave them a little window to maneuver. But over the years, it has kind of been diluted.

But if there was some requirement that would make the young men and women go through this, because many of them went into the military right out of high school and have never really been in the job market and they really do not know how to market their skills that they have obtained through military training and that was kind of the goal, was to make them better prepared and to start their job search before they got out of the military rather than after they got out of the military so that there would not be that break in their earning power.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Thank you, Mr. Robertson.

And thank you, Commander.

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Mr. Chairman, Ms. Herseth, let me apologize for that mistake.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Oh, no. That is okay.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Let me simply say that points out the

value of having well-educated, well-trained staff with you.

Ms. \*Herseth Sandlin.\* Well, they do a great job for you. And I think maybe I did not articulate it as clearly to be specific to the active-duty personnel on the bases where it is currently offered.

So thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you.

Congressman Walz from Minnesota is the highest-ranking enlisted officer ever elected to Congress, so Sergeant Major.

Mr. \*Walz.\* Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you, Commander. Congratulations to you.

Past Commanders, Madam President, and all of the rest of you, this is a day I look forward to every time I see this on our schedule. As a Legion member, I often see myself as testifying to you, not the other way around, of what we are doing.

Your voice has been clear. Your voice has been consistent. You have been there generation after generation. And your mission is very, very clear, secure this nation and care for our veterans. And for that, I am very, very

appreciative.

And it is appropriate you are here on 9/11. I got a chance to see Mr. Robertson out in Denver. I know he was also in our great State of Minnesota and I thank those Minnesota members who are here.

But the one thing I think that is important, this organization was at both political conventions with exactly the same message, no difference whatsoever. It is not political. It transcends politics. It is about doing what is right. It is bringing in expertise. It is helping us get legislation, get policy that works for our veterans. And for that, I am very, very proud.

And I often think, too, on this day, I think many of us, it is very difficult how we deal with this. I know they said there was a ceremony out at the Pentagon. Some of us think of this day in private. But I also think what this nation has always done so well is in the deepest, darkest times, we have been able to rise to a point where we see opportunities in the darkest challenges.

And I remember very clearly those first few days when I saw flags go up on every house of my neighbors who I never



saw fly a flag before and I saw people talk to one another with a sense of respect and comradery and Americanism that I had not ever felt in my lifetime to that degree.

And what we are doing for our veterans and the way this Committee works together bipartisanly, you hear it and you can feel it, poses great potential of what we can do together.

Our strength lies in our diversity of opinion. There is no doubt about that. But our true strength lies in the idea that we can come together with these diversity of opinion and do what is right.

So I applaud you. And I think all of us in this room and many of you have been fighting, you have been literally fighting for this nation in uniform and you have been fighting as Legion members to make sure that we change the way this nation views our veterans.

And for all of those who raised your hands as Vietnam veterans, there is never going to be enough apologies that are given for the way we did not do what was right when you came back.

But instead of sitting there and taking that as a

negative, you turn it into a positive and there is not a person coming back from Iraq, from Afghanistan, from anywhere in the world that is not welcome. All of us have witnessed someone in a uniform walking through an airport while people are cheering. That is because of your work. That is the attitude we changed.

So I can tell you also this organization's roots in our communities run incredibly deep. I am a high school teacher. And one of my proudest moments was for years, I have been nominating and helping get kids to Boys and Girls State and one of my students, and thank you for what you have done, and one of my students was Minnesota's Governor at Boys State and that was a proud moment for me. And that as a teacher, educating our young on civics, on what it means to be an American, what it means to let politics go away and get policy.

And the issues we are talking about here today, they are difficult and I hear this. I was going to ask questions, but they were asked, I think, on this, this issue of how do we get care to our rural veterans. I have no doubt whatsoever that those that are coming up with ideas and if it involves

contracting out some of these services, I, too, like Mr. Hall, I have reservations about that, but I have no doubt whatsoever that those people who are suggesting it care for our veterans so deeply, they just want to get this right. And that is one way that they are putting out there to get it.

So I think that this Committee has figured out a way. We can debate these things. We can figure out how to get there. And it is your leadership and it is your voice for your organization, Commander, that makes sure that we get that right, done civilly, done right, and get us there.

So I am just here, as I said, to testify to you to say thank you. You are getting this right. You are changing not only how our veterans see each other, you are changing how neighbors see each other. And we are getting there.

And I think some say, as you said it right, Commander, or Mr. Robertson, too, I believe said we are never going to stop fighting these things. We are always going to continue to fight for what is better, continue to get things right. But the change in the tone of this is dramatic.

So thanks for being here. Thanks for your--they are not

suggestions. They are guideposts for us to work from to try and get to where we need to go. And we will work out the differences amongst ourselves. But in the end of the day, this nation is going to be better for it. Our veterans are going to be better cared for and we can move forward. So I thank you.

And I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Walz.

[Applause.]

The \*Chairman.\* Mr. Snyder of Arkansas.

Mr. \*Snyder.\* Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just a couple points, Commander. I appreciate you being here today.

Both Ms. Herseth Sandlin and Mr. Boozman have left, but they have been doing such a great job on this GI Bill issue for years now, pulling harness on it. I wanted to make a couple of corrections.

His pronunciation is Boozman, not Boozman, Commander. Every time we call him Boozman, he loses another percent of the vote. So it's Boozman.

And, Mr. Chairman, I can assure you that Ms. Herseth

Sandlin does not deserve the title of Big Mama. My wife is pregnant with triplets and I know what Big Mama is.

Also, Commander, yesterday you all had someone testify before Mr. Michaud's hearing. It is just one very specific bill. Carol Shea-Porter has a bill that deals with this New Hampshire situation where they do not have a VA hospital within New Hampshire. And we have all these issues of access. For some people, it is long distances on straight roads. And for other people, it is not so long distance, but on narrow roads.

I think New Hampshire does have that special problem that they do not have a VA facility in New Hampshire. They do not have the distances of Kansas, but they have narrow roads and some weather that can sometimes be quite icy.

And you are evaluating that building now, right, Steve, and looking at that? I mean, we are never going to have a system that is exactly equitable all over the nation, but I think our New Hampshire veterans must feel a certain frustration that they do not have any major facility, either a military base with medical facilities or a VA hospital. And she has one approach to look at that problem.

I had one specific question I wanted to ask you about. As the years have gone by here, in my twelve years, this is probably the time that our nation is under most economic stress and uncertainty, unemployment rate 6.1 percent. You know, you almost get reluctant to pick up the paper each day as you see some of the threats in the housing market and some complications that a lot of us have not seen before. This does not seem to be just a normal kind of economic downturn. We have got some uncertainties out there in terms of energy crisis and housing and things like that.

At the same time, we continue to hear about from both individuals, providers, and business, both big and small the pressures of paying for health insurance.

My two questions are this. Are the reports you are getting from your leadership throughout the country that we are seeing more veterans under economic stress and their desire to try to solve those economic problems? And, second, where does that put you with regard to the issue of the Priority 7s and 8s at our VA system?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* As far as economic stress is concerned, I do not think that by and large there is a great deal of

difference between the veterans and the rest of the country except that we have a number of veterans that have come home with service-connected problems that they have to deal with on top of what stress the economy is putting on them.

In our estimation, as far as Category 7s and 8s, we believe that the budgets that are being passed right now are sufficient to allow the 7s and all of the Category 8s back into the VA medical care system. We believe that the Congress has stepped forward and provided.

Frankly, we agree with the Congress on the amount of money that has been appropriated the last two years. It has been a real step forward. It has been a real gratification. Why the 7s and 8s are not currently all back in the system, that is a decision that needs to be made by the VA Secretary.

Mr. \*Snyder.\* We have had that debate through the years. As we begin this next year, in my view, the debate is different now. We talk about the safety net during times of economic difficulties and that is a potential safety net for a significant number of people that we all care about.

And so I hope the nature and tone of that debate will be somewhat different. Of course, I would like to hope that we

are on a boom next time, economic boom. That would be one way of addressing some of these issues too. But the reality is we are probably going to be struggling for some time and that is a potential part of the safety net for some veterans' families.

Thank you, Commander, for your service.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* One of the principal tenets that we work from is that it does not matter what the economy was when that man or woman went off to war. They went and now that they have come home, their care is a continuing cost of war. And we need to make sure that we continue that care regardless of what the economy is like that they come back to.

Mr. \*Snyder.\* Thank you.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Thank you.

[Applause.]

The \*Chairman.\* Mr. Buyer.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* Thank you, Mr. Commander.

There are some points I would like to touch on. One is a comment that you just made with regard to the budget increases over the past two years. You should say over the



past three years.

It was the in the summer of 2005 when we conducted the budgetary hearings and we discovered the flaws in the budget modeling that resulted in the new budgetary process. So I just wanted to clarify the record, and do you concur?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Yes, I do.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* All right. Thank you. The other--

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Obviously it began during that period to get this--

Mr. \*Buyer.\* That is okay.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* --problem sorted.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* I understand. I just want to keep the record correct. The other is, there are so many maintenance issues that we on the Committee work on and we engage with you on, but they do not get a lot of notice and recognition. But there is an ongoing issue and it deals with our third-party medical recovery issues. And these have been ongoing for a while.

And what we have done, and we work cooperatively here with Mr. Michaud in his leadership and the Chairman himself, and for about the last six or seven years, we have been

working on this. The legislation that we are moving to the Senate right now is to establish seven VA consolidated patient accounting centers. We call them CPACs. And as we do that, we are then going to turn to the VA and have these, they are revenue cycle management contracts that improves the system with IT tools and other management tools.

And the results from the pilot out of Asheville, North Carolina is pretty extraordinary. So we get the budgets and there are expectations with regard to a recovery and then we are going and by what they are doing with these new revenue management cycle tools is exceeding it far beyond what we could have ever--in other words, we are leaving a lot of money on the table. This is sort of like a business. It is a business. And we are leaving money on the table.

And so Chairman Michaud and I and in cooperation with Chairman Filner are working on this. And the Sergeant Major has also been a good participant.

But I just want to let you know, it is on the table, Steve, as we proceed. We are working cooperatively with the Secretary and the VA is now engaged.

I would also like to let you know working with this

Secretary, I have known Secretary General Dr. Peake for a very long time, and he is extraordinary. And I welcome your opportunity to build a relationship with him. There is no moss on this man's stone and it does not take you very long to figure out who is the smartest man in the room when you talk to him. But he is very humble and he is very sharp. And so I welcome you to do that.

Secondly, I know you have a busy schedule coming up, but often organizations love to go to Walter Reed and Bethesda and they do not go to the burn unit at Brooke. And, please, if it is not on your schedule, get it on your schedule as soon as possible.

You are nodding your head. It is already on your schedule?

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* That is something, sir, that we have been discussing. Not only Brooke, but some of the other areas where we have large numbers of troops on medical hold. We want to go there. We want to evaluate the conditions that they are seeing, what they are experiencing.

I appreciate you bringing that up because, yes, our thinking is very close together on that.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* I had a good conversation with John Barnes who owns Panther Racing and they have the National Guard car in the Indy Racing League. And so I spoke with the Surgeon General of the Army and got his okay. And I sent that Panther Racing Team and the National Guard Indy car down to Brooke.

And so all the little things that we can do down there, it is a good thing. These are some pretty horrific scars, but their heart is just the same. It is just the aesthetics and we need to let them know it is okay. And there is a lot of mental trauma there.

One thing that is different on the Republican side here of the Committee, two of our professional staffers are no longer with us, so I would like to inform the Legion of that. And we had a leadership transition on this side.

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, and I being one of only three Reservists here in Congress and in the Senate, I employ a lot of Reservists, I have had eight members of my staff called to active duty since September 11<sup>th</sup>. And two of them, Jim Lariviere and Jeff Phillips, have left the Committee and are now on active duty.

Jeff Phillips, he reported to active duty. He was promoted to Brigadier General in the Army. And Jim Lariviere was promoted to Brigadier General of the United States Marine Corps.

So two of my staff have now been promoted to General Officers and are both on active duty. And I wanted you to know that.

And Kingston Smith who is right behind, Kingston many of you have known for many, many years on the Committee. He is a decorated Vietnam veteran, a pilot, and he is now the Staff Director on this side. So I wanted you to know about the staff changes that have occurred here.

And I have an open door. I have a phone. You can reach me any time you want and please do not hesitate to do that, Commander.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Thank you, sir.

I personally have had several very good conversations with Jim Lariviere and congratulations to him on that promotion and to the other members of your staff.

And thank you for hiring those folks, having those folks that are continuing to serve. We understand the challenges

that go on when people are deployed and have to leave their job for a year or 18 months and then come back. That creates a challenge for everyone around them. They need our support.

Mr. \*Buyer.\* The last thing, if I may, Mr. Chairman. I am getting ready to leave. I am going to go to a meeting. And I want to bring this and put it on the table for you.

This meeting I am about to have is an issue that has been bothersome to me for a long time and the Chairman is very well aware of it. It came up about three years ago.

When we opened up the VA and said to the active duty, when you transition, you can come to the VA, it is okay, Guardsmen, Reservists, it is okay, we never anticipated for us to be a bill payer on dental. And that is what has been happening.

So we are going to meet with the Surgeon General here in a second. We are going to meet with the Chief of the Reserve and the National Guard Dental Corps. It is an issue that is not going to go away. We in the VA are paying, a bill payer for something active duty should be doing. And we need to rectify that and I want to work with you.

Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

The \*Chairman.\* Thank you, Mr. Buyer.

Thank you, Commander, your staff, and all your members for being here for a few days and talking to the members. It is very important that you do that.

You know, it used to be back in the days of Sonny Montgomery that 80 percent of the Congress were veterans. Now it is barely 20 percent. Less than a hundred members of the House of Representatives are veterans. That does not mean that they are against veterans. It means they just do not have, and I am in the number, do not have the same experiences.

And we need you to bring those experiences to all the members of Congress. You will help our Committee who gets familiar with these issues for their support because they just are not as familiar with the issues as in the past a typical member of Congress was.

So hopefully you will bring those stories, those messages, your program, your platform which was very well-stated and very comprehensive. And we thank you.

Commander, you have the last word if you would like to say anything and reflect on some of the issues we talked

about this morning.

Mr. \*Rehbein.\* Only once more to say thank you for the Committees for hosting this testimony and to--well, 9/11 carries a lot of memories for a lot of us. But for one individual, I am told it carries many happier memories because I believe it is Senator Akaka's birthday today. And I would like to see that that gets on to the record even though he is not here to receive our best wishes.

But thank you for allowing us to be here today and thank you for the attention that you have shown to veterans' issues in the past.

The \*Chairman.\* And we will continue to work with you.

This meeting is adjourned.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 11:32 a.m., the Committees were adjourned.]