

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Senator Patty Murray, Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of Various Veterans Service Organizations
March 21, 2012

“Good morning and welcome to this joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans’ Affairs Committees to receive the Legislative Priorities of a number of dedicated veterans service organizations.

This morning we will hear from representatives of:

- The Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America,
- The Military Order of the Purple Heart,
- The National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs,
- The Non-Commissioned Officers Association,
- The Retired Enlisted Association,
- The Wounded Warrior Project,
- And Vietnam Veterans of America.

I want to welcome you all and I look forward to your testimony and perspectives. I’m also pleased to have Bruce McKenty here from my home state of Washington.

And of course, welcome to Chairman Miller and my colleagues from the House. Thank you for coming across the Capitol to be with us today for this important hearing.

As I continue to sit down with veterans from across my home state, I hear many of the same things many of those who will testify today hear from their members:

Our veterans are concerned that they:

- Can’t get access to health care, including mental health care, when they need it;
- Continue to wait for months for a decision on their claim; and
- Aren’t aware of the services that are available to them.

Veterans tell me about the obstacles to employment they continue to face. Some are afraid to write the word “veteran” on a job application.

Last year’s passage of the bipartisan “VOW to Hire Heroes Act” was a great first step in tackling the high rate of unemployment among young veterans. But much remains to be done.

We must focus now on building partnerships with the private sector to ensure they have the information and tools they need to hire and train veterans.

We need to take advantage of the broad support among businesses and employers across the country who want to do the right thing and hire a veteran.

So I will continue to highlight the tremendous skills, leadership and talent that our veterans bring to the table. And, I will continue to work with employers across the country to ensure that our veterans can find careers here at home.

While we focus on jobs, we also can't lose sight of the educational benefits our veterans are taking advantage of.

When veterans use their GI Bill benefits, we need to make sure they have the right information to make the best choices about their education and the school they choose.

I'm pleased to say that I'll be introducing a bill next week that targets how educational institutions are recruiting our veterans, and ensures veterans are given a clear picture about an institution's track record with other veterans.

But whether it's:

- Education,
 - Jobs,
 - Mental health, or
 - The broken claims system,
- each of these challenges serves as a constant reminder of the important work ahead to fulfill our obligation to America's veterans.

With help from all of the organizations here at the table today, we passed a law to provide benefits to the caregivers of the most severely wounded warriors.

With your help we also were able to take the Administration to task and ensure that the program was implemented as Congress intended.

The Caregivers legislation we passed also made improvements to the care that VA provides for women veterans.

While VA's care for women has been slowly improving, there are still areas where it can improve further.

In particular, VA must ensure that its entire health care system – from its emergency rooms to its waiting rooms – are prepared to meet the needs of women veterans, including those who have survived military sexual trauma.

VA should also make sure that care is accessible to women when they need it, through timely appointments, extended clinical hours, and in convenient locations.

I will continue to follow up on these issues and a number of others to ensure that women veterans see the improvements they deserve.

Despite a tough fiscal environment, President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have done a good job putting together a budget that reflects a very real commitment to provide veterans with the care and benefits they have earned.

Yet there are still areas of concern.

For the third year in a row, VA has proposed cuts in spending for major construction and maintenance.

Last year, for the first time, VA's budget outlined the Department's construction needs over a ten year period.

Yet it is troubling that VA's budget requests over the past two years have been just a fraction of this clearly defined need.

As more of our servicemembers come home, the demand on VA's facilities will only continue to grow.

We must make sure VA has the resources it needs to ensure its facilities are built to last.

It's also clear that the claims backlog has been growing too large for far too long. If we're going to overcome the backlog, VA must transform its system.

This year I will continue to:

- Closely monitor transformation efforts; and
- Push VA to eliminate unnecessary practices and fix common claims processing errors.

Another area I continue to be concerned about – and I'm sure all of you in the room today are concerned about as well – is mental health.

For servicemembers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, VA has projected an increased demand of over 200 percent for mental health care by Fiscal Year 2020.

We need to take a hard look at whether the Department's proposed five percent budget increase is enough to meet the projected demand for mental health care.

Not every veteran will be affected by these invisible wounds. But when a veteran has the courage to stand up and ask for help, VA must be there: every – single – time.

VA must be there with not only timely access to care, but also the right type of care.

Challenges like PTSD or depression are natural responses to some of the most stressful events a person can experience.

And we will do everything possible to ensure that those affected by these illnesses—

- Can get help,
- Can get better, and
- Can get back to their lives.

Finally, I'm concerned about the questions and uncertainty surrounding the effect of sequestration on our veterans.

Our veterans deserve clarity on this issue – clarity that I've been working hard to provide.

I've taken my concerns directly to Secretary Shinseki and to the Acting Director of the Office of Management and Budget.

And, I've requested a formal legal opinion from the Government Accountability Office to help provide resolution.

The challenges facing our veterans are great. But so too are the opportunities to fulfill our obligations to these brave men and women.

I look forward to working with every group here today to ensure we are doing everything we can to improve the lives of those who have served and sacrificed for us.

I'd like to now turn to Chairman Miller for his opening statement."