

THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF  
AMVETS, JEWISH WAR VETERANS, MILITARY OFFICERS  
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA, GOLD STAR WIVES,  
BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION,  
NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ASSOCIATION, IAVA,  
AND THE FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION

- - -

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16, 2011

United States Senate,  
Committee on Veterans Affairs,  
Joint with the  
House of Representatives,  
Committee on Veterans Affairs,  
Washington, D.C.

The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 9:32 a.m., in Room G-50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Patty Murray, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, presiding. Present: Senators Murray, Begich, Johanns, Brown of Massachusetts, and Boozman. Representatives Miller, Bilirakis, Roe, Filner, Brown, Braley, Walz, and Barrow.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MURRAY

Chairman Murray. Good morning and welcome to this joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs' Committees to hear the legislative priorities of a number of our dedicated Veterans Service Organizations. We are glad to have you all.

This morning, we are going to hear from representatives of the Blinded Veterans Association, the Fleet Reserve Association, the Gold Star Wives of America, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, the Jewish War Veterans, the Military Officers Association of America, the Non-Commissioned Officers Association, and AMVETS. Again, welcome to all of you, and I look forward to your testimony and perspectives.

I also, of course, want to welcome our colleagues from the House of Representatives who have come all the way across the Capitol. I am glad you found us this morning. Great to have you all here.

As the new Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I am eager to continue my work partnering with everyone here to hold the VA to the highest standards in providing quality health care and more timely and accurate benefits, as well as to carry out the level of oversight of the VA that our veterans deserve.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. As many of you know, these are issues I have worked very hard on throughout my 16 years as a member of this Committee, and they are issues that, as the daughter of a World War II veteran, I have had a personal connection to for long before that.

I know that when we send our young people off to fight a war, the last thing they should have to do is fight for the care and benefits they deserve when they return home.

And I know that ensuring that the VA is working for our veterans -- and not against them -- often begins with the VA budget.

Again, let me say that, on balance, and given that other agencies are facing budget cuts, VA's 2012 budget is a very good starting place from which to work. The President has requested an overall increase of \$5.9 billion in discretionary spending over last year. And while health care spending is in good shape in that request, there are some weaker points in the budget. The proposed cuts in spending for construction and non-recurring maintenance are very troubling, and I am also concerned about cuts to the VA Inspector General's Office, which as you all know plays a vital role in making sure that there is transparency and accountability at the VA.

I will be working alongside many here to make sure we can improve upon that request, because like all of you, I know that the VA budget is more than just a spending document. It is a statement of our values and goals for veterans' care. For me, the budget must reflect this simple fact: that care and benefits for our veterans are a cost of war, and that this has never been more important than right now, as we see more and more devastating injuries coming out of the war in Afghanistan.

Over the past few weeks, we have seen new data that shows dramatic increases in amputations among casualties of the current conflicts. Some of the most shocking statistics is that twice as many wounded soldiers need a limb amputated than in the previous two years. The ever-increasing number and severity of these injuries means more and more veterans will be coming home badly hurt and need years, if not a lifetime of care and services.

Among those services that we are working to provide is the Caregivers' program, which provides support for those forced to leave careers and health care behind to care for a wounded loved one. I am heartened to see that many of you have identified this as one of your priorities, as well. As many of you know, when the Caregivers' bill was voted on in Congress, not a single "no" vote was cast against it. Let me repeat that. In an environment that, as we all know, is too often overly partisan, every voting member agreed to this new benefit. Yet now we are seeing delays and questions about who is eligible. That is unacceptable and I am committed to working with Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Filner, and Senator Burr to change it. And once again, as soon as the Caregiver program gets up and running in a manner consistent with our intent, we will be in a better position to think about ways to expand the benefits to veterans of earlier wars.

I also saw that many of you cited the need to help our veterans find meaningful employment when they return home as a top concern, and that is a view that I very much share. Last Friday, we saw an annual unemployment number that tells

the story of the challenge we face: Young veterans aged 18 to 24 coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan have an unemployment rate of nearly 22 percent, and Reserve and National Guard members have an unemployment rate of 14 percent.

One of my top priorities in this Congress is going to be improving outreach and services to our veterans so as - to bring down those unacceptably high rates of unemployment. I introduced legislation in the last Congress focusing on vocational, apprenticeship, and on-the-job training opportunities that became part of the new G.I. Bill, and I am now preparing a new measure for introduction in the very near future that will help provide additional outreach and assistance to help put our veterans to work when they come home. I will need your input and your help on this measure, and I look forward to working with all of you very closely on that.

I do not have to tell any of you that we have a lot of challenges confronting us today, whether it is making sure women veterans, who are coming to the VA in higher and higher numbers, have the care they need; fighting to once and for all end the epidemic of veterans homelessness; addressing our broken claims system; or, ensuring that veterans who have the skills and discipline to succeed in the civilian workforce have a shot at a good job. We have got to do more, and we have got to work together at every step.

Last month, I was in my home State and sat down with veterans whose lives are impacted by the work that we do here each day. I heard from a Vietnam veteran with PTSD whose son, a National Guard member, recently committed suicide after returning from the battlefield with PTSD. I heard from a female Iraq veteran, who told me what I hear too often: that when she calls the VA, she gets asked if she is calling for her husband. I heard from veterans about the claims backlog, problems with access to care, holes in the education benefit, barriers to employment, and much more. Our work is not done--these veterans deserve better.

So 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. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. And with that, I will turn it over to Chairman Miller for his opening remarks. Good to have you here.

#### OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MILLER

Chairman Miller. Thank you to the Chairman of the Senate VA Committee for hosting us over here. I look forward to working with you.

I do have a full statement that I want to have entered into the record, but in view of time, I would just like to condense it a little bit and also apologize a little early.

I need to step over in a few minutes to the House Armed Services Committee. We have General Petraeus testifying. But I will return, hopefully by about 10:30.

We are all working, I think, together to do the things that you need us to do and you expect us to do. We are all focused. Senator Murray, myself, Ranking Member Burr, Ranking Member Filner sent a letter to the President about the Caregivers' program. I do not believe any of us are satisfied with the rollout. We have let the Secretary know that, and we are working with him to try to make sure that the intent of the law is fulfilled. As the Senator has already said, we voted unanimously to pass this piece of legislation. Our intent was very clear, and we will continue to move forward.

So, again, thank you so much for inviting us over to your side of the Capitol. We look forward to hearing the testimony, and again, I ask unanimous consent that my full statement may be entered into the record.

[The prepared statement of Chairman Miller follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

I will note that there is a lot going on in both sides of the Congress today. We are going to have votes at 10:30. I know Chairman Miller has to leave for a quick hearing shortly and will come back if he can. Members will be coming in and out, but I want everyone to know that your testimony will be part of the record, and I do appreciate your patience with us as we try and manage the need to be both on the Floor and here in the Committee, as well.

With that, I am going to turn it over to Representative Walz, who will give his opening statement.

#### OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. WALZ

Mr. Walz. Well, thank you, Chairwoman Murray, and thank you to Chairman Miller for your unwavering support of veterans.

I am going to ask for unanimous consent to submit my full statement, but again, thank you to each of you. Thank you for the tireless advocacy, the visionary proposals to try and make sure that the care of this nation's veterans is always a priority, in good times and in bad. It is one thing that must remain consistent, and having all of you folks here is a good reminder of our moral responsibility.

So I am deeply honored, and I was noticing, Sergeant Major Overstreet, you had to write that on there. I want to do the same thing up here and just write Sergeant Major on the front of this--

Mr. Overstreet. I did that so you would know there are friendlies in the audience.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Walz. Well, we certainly appreciate all the work. I certainly associate myself with the remarks of my colleagues on the Caregivers Act. We have made much

progress over the past couple of years, but as we all know in this room, if one veteran is left without care, if one veteran is homeless, if one veteran has to fight their own government for benefits they have earned, that is simply wrong, and we will not rest until everyone is cared for.

So thank you, Senator, and I yield back my time to the people we came to hear.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Walz follows:]  
/ COMMITTEE INSERT

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much. Senator Burr was not able to be here at the top of this Committee hearing, so Senator Johanns is going to now give his opening statement.

#### OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHANNS

Senator Johanns. Let me just say thanks to the Chair. I appreciate you pointing out how busy we are these days, because we are all trying to be in two or three places at once.

But I want to indicate to everybody who is on the panel and going to speak to us today how much we, number one, appreciate your service. I do not think we can say that enough. We enjoy remarkable freedoms and liberty in this country because veterans throughout our history have stood up when our nation needed them, and so I start today with just my deepest appreciation and admiration for each and every one of you.

Secondly, I have been on the Veterans' Committee on the Senate side about two years. I say back home in Nebraska, one of the greatest honors I have as a United States Senator is I have a seat on the Veterans' Committee. I have the ability to actually have a direct impact on what is happening to veterans and for veterans.

We listen hour after hour to some of the challenges that veterans face, and I want you to know as I wrap up my thoughts here today that on veterans issues, my experience is-- and I am confident it is true-- there are no sides. There are no Republicans and Democrats. This is really about us trying to figure out how best to help our veterans. It is one of the most bipartisan groups in the entire Congress, and I would not want it any other way.

So we are going to listen carefully to what you have to offer. My hope is that we will just continue to do all we can to improve the system of services for our veterans as a statement of our appreciation for the commitment they have made.

Thank you, each and every one of you. God bless you.  
Chairman Murray. Thank you very much, and we will now hear from Representative Filner, Ranking Democratic Member.

#### OPENING STATEMENT OF MR. FILNER

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Madam Chair. We welcome all of you. We look forward to your testimony.

We talk here a lot about our budget and the processes that we have put in place. I think we have come to a point where, with a couple of our problems, we cannot just be satisfied with the way things have been done and where we just sort of approve of them and, for example, we hire 10,000 more claims adjustors to get the backlog down when nothing ever seems to get better.

I think we have to think very differently about a couple of these problems. Let me just give you two examples, if I may, Madam Chair, in the time I have.

First, as every one of my colleagues will tell you on Memorial Day and on Veterans Day, dealing with our veterans is part of the cost of war. We have to do this. It is part of the cost of war. And yet every year, we have to fight for every nickel and dime for veterans because it is not actually part of the cost of war. It is a separate budget. So I have decided --and I hope I get my colleagues' support for this eventually --, to add to every bill that we pass for appropriations for war a surcharge for a trust fund for the veterans who come from that war. Right now, I am doing an arbitrary 15 percent because the VA is 15 percent of the defense budget. But we all say it is part of the cost of war. If we are going to pay a trillion dollars for the next few years in Iraq and Afghanistan, let us put several hundred billion away for our veterans. I mean, that is the kind of thing we ought to be thinking about.

Yes, we have done forward funding. That is great, by the way. It was a top priority of most of your groups. That is, we have funded the VA a year in advance. So we are going through this stuff with the Continuing Resolution, and there is no real budget in place, and yet the veterans' health care system is still funded this year. That was a great thing.

But I think we have to move even further. Some of my colleagues say that this will raise the cost of war too much. And as my grandchildren would say, "Duh." Yes, we ought to know the real cost. In a democracy, if you are going to vote for a war, you had better know the cost of the war, and part of the cost of war is our veterans. So let us figure in that cost. And so I hope you guys will think about a veterans' trust fund that we add to pending spending bills for the war.

Another thought outside the box: How many of you are Vietnam veterans here today? A good many. I do not have to tell you that we did not treat you right when you got home. One of the things we did not do right was look at Agent Orange. We denied it had any impact for decades. Then we said, oh, it is a minor impact. Then, oh, if your boots were on the ground, you will get it. Oh, if you can prove that there was Agent Orange. This is ridiculous. We have done tremendous harm to hundreds of thousands of your comrades.

It seems to me that people get sicker fighting the VA bureaucracy than they ever got sick from Agent Orange, maybe. So why do we not really say welcome home to the Vietnam veterans and grant these Agent Orange claims?

People have been fighting them for 30, 40 years. Let us give our Vietnam veterans some peace. Let us grant these Agent Orange claims. Let us get those off our backlog so we do not have to deal with them and move on to other problems.

So I hope you all join with me in thinking beyond pilot programs, where we try to fix this and fix that by hiring more people. It is not working. It is not working for our Vietnam veterans. It is not working for those who have died before their disability claims were adjudicated. So let us think differently and really say, welcome home, veterans.

Thanks so much, Madam Chair.

Chairman Murray. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman Murray. Again, we have votes coming up at 10:30. We have got several members who have joined us. I am going to ask each of them if anyone has a quick opening statement before we turn to each of our witnesses.

Representative Bilirakis? He just left.

Senator Brown?

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BROWN OF MASSACHUSETTS

Senator Brown of Massachusetts. Madam Chair, I will just defer to the witnesses. I look forward to being here. I know we are bouncing back and forth.

I do want to just thank you for one of the things I actually thought you have done very well and that is talking about the fact that the Marines are required across the board to actually attend a Transition Assistance Program. I would like to speak to you further about doing the same with the other branches, as well, because as you know, 21 percent unemployment is unacceptable, so I look forward to working on that issue, in particular.

Thank you.

Chairman Murray. Great. Thank you very much.

Representative Barrow?

Mr. Barrow. I thank the Chair, but in deference to our witnesses and in the interest of time, I will waive any opportunity to make an opening statement.

Chairman Murray. All right. Thank you very much.

With that, we are going to turn it over to our panel for this morning, and I want to remind each one of you to keep your oral presentation to five minutes. Your full statement will be printed in the record of the hearing.

First of all, we are going to start with Dr. Roy Kekahuna, the National President from the Blinded Veterans Association.

STATEMENT OF ROY KEKAHUNA, NATIONAL PRESIDENT,  
BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION

Mr. Kekahuna. Good morning, everyone. Madam Chair Murray, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Senator Burr, and Congressman Filner, and other members of the Committees of

Veterans Affairs, on behalf of the Blinded Veterans Association, BVA, we appreciate the invitation to represent our legislative priorities for 2011. BVA is the only Congressionally mandated Veterans Service Organization exclusively dedicated to serving the needs of the national blinded veterans and their families.

The more wounded service members returning from Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF, other new generations of seriously eye injured being added to the thousands of wounded previously from Operation Iraqi Freedom, OIF, and known now as the Operation of New Dawn. It is vital that we ensure that these new combat injured veterans and those from previous wars have full continuation of high-quality vision and benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs dedicated from this Congress.

You have got my full testimony and I hope you will read it, but I would like to address just a couple of factors, number one being in 2008 and 2009, this Congress passed the bills for the Center of Excellence for Vision Care, the Center of Excellence for Hearing, and the Center of Excellence for Loss of Limb. Today, one is only halfway on its feet because people are still waiting for Memorandums of Understanding between the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. I can get a Memorandum of Understanding done in five minutes. Why is it taking three years?

The other thing that I have a problem with relates to staffing at the Center of Blinded Excellence. Colonel Gaglian has been there for three years yet he was without an office, without a desk, without a computer, and this is the way we are starting these centers and we should have funding for that now, not later. And if we put it in the Defense appropriation budget for war, it should be a separate line item.

And the other thing is that when Congress put these measures forward, it did not put time lines on it. It should be earmarked that there is a time line to get these things accomplished, not years, because a lot of our veterans that are coming back today may never see it.

Along with that is the registry that should have been accomplished since 2009, and they are still waiting for another Memorandum of Understanding. What we need to do is make sure that registry is put forward. I will give you a prime example using myself: From the time I was in combat and they started doing field surgery, there was no record of my field surgery. With the advent of science today, this should be done. When they do the surgery anywhere, it is put into the Department of Defense records and the Veterans Affairs should be able to look at it. That way, when the VA finally gets these veterans, they know exactly what happened to them in the battlefield, when they get immediate surgery, and all along the line. I know I was cut up in Guam and I was cut up in Cox Air Force Base, but there are no records of what they did in my files at all.



But I can tell you it happens, and we need to make sure that the registries go along with these centers for visions of excellence, and as well as with those for hearing and limb loss.

This must be mandated and funded immediately because we need to have veterans really feel like they are welcomed home.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Kekahuna follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

We will now turn to John Davis, the Director of Legislative Programs for the Fleet Reserve Association.

STATEMENT OF JOHN R. DAVIS, DIRECTOR, LEGISLATIVE PROGRAMS, FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION

Mr. Davis. Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Representative Filner, and other members of the committees, thanks for the opportunity to express FRA's views. My name is John Davis, and I am here representing FRA's National President James Scarborough.

FRA strongly believes that the cost of war should include treating the nation's wounded warriors and is deeply concerned about the backlog of claims at the VA. The Association appreciates the thousands of additional claims adjustors hired since 2007. Despite the additional resources in manpower, the backlogs of disability claims continue to increase. It is becoming clear that the VA does not need more people, but needs more automation of their disability ratings system.

FRA believes there is strong bipartisan support to reform the system and improve the antiquated paper claims process to eliminate bureaucratic delays and ensure more uniformity between the branches of the military and the VA in how they rate disabilities. The VA has an overriding responsibility to maintain an effective delivery system. That said, the VA can properly deliver benefits to veterans only if it has modern technology, adequate resources and staffing.

FRA strongly supports the Administration's effort to create the Joint Virtual Lifetime Electronic Record. An electronic health record for every service member would be a major step towards the Association's longstanding goal of a truly seamless transition from the military to veteran status for all service members and would permit DOD, VA, and private health care providers immediate access to a veteran's health care data.

The recently enacted caregivers' stipend provided by the VA is beneficial to those caring for wounded warriors. However, FRA shares the concerns of the leadership of both committees about the slow pace of implementation. A recent Navy Times survey indicates that 77 percent of wounded warrior caregivers reported that they had no life of their own, 72 percent feel isolated, and 63 percent suffer from depression. Oversight and adequate sustained funding are

essential to making this program a success.

The Association continues its advocacy regarding the need to reverse the current VA policy that prevents the so-called "blue water" veterans and military retirees who were deployed off the coast of Vietnam and may have been exposed to Agent Orange from filing claims associated with this exposure. FRA strongly supports the Agent Orange Equity Act, H.R. 812, sponsored by Ranking Member Filner, that will reverse the VA's decision preventing blue water military retirees and veterans from claiming presumptive status for the diseases associated with Agent Orange exposure.

The Association eagerly awaits the Institute of Medicine report, scheduled to be released in May 2011, that will likely validate the 2002 Royal Australian Navy report that demonstrates that the desalinization process used on Australian and U.S. Navy ships off the coast of Vietnam magnified the dioxin exposure contained in diminutive amounts of the Agent Orange herbicide found in the drinking water.

FRA appreciates the efforts of the VA to expand presumption in the last year to the crews on ships from inland waterways and harbors and for certain Korean veterans, among others.

FRA appreciates the lifting of the temporary 2003 ban on enrolling Priority Group 8 veterans and is encouraged by the VA open enrollment for some of these beneficiaries. The ban significantly limited access to care to more than 260,000 veterans that have been impacted by this policy. Our nation made a commitment to all the veterans for their service, and limiting enrollment conveys the wrong message to our service personnel currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and those who have served in the past.

FRA believes authorization of Medicare subvention for eligible veterans would improve access for Medicare-eligible veterans and enhance health care funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Under current law, VA hospitals are not reimbursed for care provided to Medicare-eligible veterans who must choose between receiving veteran-centric specialized care at a VA hospital or getting reimbursement outside Medicare through the VA.

The Association thanks Chairman Miller for conducting oversight hearings on alleged violations of the Service Relief Act that provides a range of protections for service members. That hearing, though, focused on alleged violations by only one bank. FRA members wonder if this is only a tip of the iceberg regarding violations. FRA would welcome more oversight by both committees to ensure agencies are monitoring and enforcing this important law.

Thank you, and I will take any questions.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Davis follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

Vivianne Wersel, Chair of the Government Relations

Committee for the Gold Star Wives of America is our next presenter.

STATEMENT OF VIVIANNE CISNEROS WERSEL, CHAIR,  
GOVERNMENT RELATIONS COMMITTEE, GOLD STAR WIVES OF  
AMERICA, INC.

Ms. Wersel. Madam Chairwoman Murray, Ranking Member Filner, and members of both committees, I am pleased to be here today. I am Vivianne Wersel, Chair of the Government Relations Committee for Gold Star Wives and the widow of Lieutenant Colonel Rich Wersel, United States Marine Corps, who died suddenly a week after returning from a second tour of duty in Iraq.

Gold Star Wives is a Congressionally-chartered organization of approximately 10,000 widows and widowers. Our spouses died while on active duty or as a result of a service-connected cause. Our widows represent World War II, Korean War, Vietnam, Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and every period in between. For this testimony, I will refer to all GSW members as widows.

I am honored to testify today, but am very saddened my testimony will show no changes to this last year. None of our issues passed the last Congressional session.

GSW seeks parity with other Federal survivor programs by changing the computation of the Dependency Indemnity Compensation, the DIC, from 43 percent to 55 percent of disability compensation. Bringing this into alignment with other Federal survivor programs will have a positive impact on 330,000 affected widows.

Every January, I receive numerous calls from widows asking why there is no DIC increase again. I explain that DIC would increase if there was a cost-of-living allowance increase. One widow stated that whoever determines COLA apparently had never visited her town, because her rent, gas, and electric had increased, and so had the price of food. She further stated, "I just cannot cut any more corners."

GSW is grateful to Congressman Walz for sponsoring legislation on this issue, including language precluding any offset of the Survivor Benefit Plan, the SBP, by the DIC. We are also grateful to Senator Bill Nelson and Congressman Joe Wilson for their sponsorship of S. 260 and H.R. 178, to remove the SBP-DIC offset. Gold Star Wives seeks the elimination of the SBP-DIC offset, also called the Widow's Tax. As most of you know, the SBP and DIC are two different plans enacted by Congress with two very different purposes. Widows should not have to bear the burden of an offset when these two plans were originally designed to work together and be provided together without offset.

Congress created some bandaaid fixes to the offset, such as remarrying after the age of 57 or reassigning a widow's SBP to her children so her children receive the SBP without offset. But these fixes do not remove the inequity for all impacted. The band-aid fixes are like putting a bucket under a leaky roof. Rather than using a bucket, just

fix the roof. Rather than make more band-aids for the offset, eliminate the offset.

Recently, a North Carolina widow inquired if the DIC offset would be eliminated in her lifetime. She wants to move into a living facility, but cannot afford it. She needs the SBP paid in full to make the move. She knows there are band-aid fixes, but she stated she was from the old culture and married once for a lifetime. For her, the thought of dating or remarrying at the age of 94 is completely out of the question.

[Laughter.]

Ms. Wersel. In 2005, Congress enacted concurrent receipt for retired veterans rated 100 percent disabled. What Congress did not do was to include their widows and the widows of active duty deaths whose spouses rated 100 percent disabled. After all, one cannot be more disabled than dead.

We respectfully request your attention to our written testimony for further details on these two important issues and other GSW issues pertinent to the VA.

In conclusion, each of us faithfully stood by our spouses despite hazardous duty, multiple deployments, and numerous family moves, some widows never having an opportunity to have a family and others forced to serve as both mother and father to their children. Widows often lost longevity in their careers or had to give up careers due to multiple family moves. Now, we are faced with the challenge of removing numerous inequities. Our husbands would be appalled at the lack of action taken by Congress to care for their widows and children. They should be shocked to learn their wives and children had to walk the halls of Congress and beg for the benefits they had worked so hard for on the battlefield. No other group of widows and children are forced to be paraded for all to see. These families should be heralded as heroes themselves for surviving the life of a military family. Let me remind you of President Lincoln's quote engraved on the VA headquarters building, "to care for him who has borne the battle, his widow and his orphan."

Thank you for the opportunity to again testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have concerning today's testimony. Thank you.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Ms. Wersel follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you.

Next, we welcome Tom Tarantino, Senior Legislative Associate for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

STATEMENT OF TOM TARANTINO, SENIOR LEGISLATIVE  
ASSOCIATE, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF  
AMERICA

Mr. Tarantino. Madam Chairwoman, Ranking Member, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting IAVA to present our legislative priorities for 2011. On behalf of the 200,000 member veterans and supporters, we would like to

thank both committees for your commitment to our nation's veterans. In the last several years, you were instrumental in the passage of the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill, advanced appropriations, record VA budget increases, mandatory face-to-face mental health screening for every service member, most recently, upgrades to the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill that expanded benefits for over 400,000 service members. Thank you.

As an Iraq veteran with ten years of service in the Army, I have seen firsthand the difficulties that many veterans face when transitioning from active duty service member to veteran. I have seen wounded warriors who have made extraordinary sacrifices on the front line return home with physical and mental health injuries. And I have also seen young veterans who spent most of their formative years in uniform struggle to find a job after leaving service. For both, the transition is difficult and seemingly impossible. It is for these veterans and millions of others who support them that each year IAVA asks, is our country prepared to build and support the next greatest generation?

Unfortunately, with skyrocketing veteran unemployment, record high suicide rates, and hundreds of thousands of veterans desperately waiting for their earned VA benefits, we are far from being able to answer yes. But we are confident we can do it and we present these committees a blueprint for addressing these issues head on to ensure that every veteran has the unwavering support for the transition home. We are ready to work with you to fundamentally change the way America cares for its veterans and to build the next greatest generation.

Now, this year, we believe Congress must focus on five priorities. Employ the next greatest generation. Prevent suicide among troops and veterans. Reduce the VA claims backlog. Improve care for female veterans. And ease the transition home by fully funding the VA. All of these priorities are in my written statement as well as a recently released policy agenda. For the sake of time, I will focus on how to employ the next greatest generation.

Our newest veterans face a tough economy and serious employment challenges. In 2010, the unemployment rate for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was a staggering 11.5 percent, leaving over 210,000 combat veterans struggling to find gainful employment in the most severe economic recession in decades. You must act now. You must pass a comprehensive veterans jobs package that creates jobs for veterans, protects jobs for veterans, and promotes veteran entrepreneurship.

Creating jobs for veterans means finally solving the tough problems that we have largely ignored in the past. Veterans gain valuable skills and experiences in the military, and we must ensure that they can translate these skills to the business and academic worlds to ensure that veterans have an opportunity to use the technical skills they acquire as a result of their military education and

experience. We have already invested millions in these men and women each, so why not profit from this investment?

We recommend Congress order a study and report of the similarities and the differences between military and civilian skills, vocational certifications, and licenses. This study must be conducted through coordination with private business and trade groups, educational institutions, and the Departments of Labor, Education, Defense, and Veterans Affairs.

We cannot create jobs unless employers are willing to hire, so Congress should incentivize the hiring of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans by creating a robust structure of tax credits and tax relief for employers. For example, we must reauthorize the Work Opportunity Tax Credit for veterans and make filing that credit simple and information about that tax credit available to employers.

It is not enough to simply get veterans to work, though. We also have to protect our Guard and Reserve forces from job discrimination. Currently, USERRA regulations are weak and hard to enforce. By creating standardized civil and criminal procedures for those who violate USERRA, we will give USERRA the teeth it needs to protect veterans' employment.

IAVA also recommends that Congress expands USERRA to cover members of the National Guard who are called to active duty for domestic response. Presently, a Guard member activated for home State deployment operations is not protected by USERRA, meaning that you could have a member of the Louisiana National Guard cleaning up the BP oil spill standing next to a member of the D.C. National Guard who deployed across State lines on the same beach, but the D.C. National Guardsman is protected by USERRA. His job is protected, but that person cleaning up their own community can be fired from their job in that same community.

Congress should also encourage entrepreneurship among new veterans. IAVA recommends that Congress expand the Small Business Patriot Loan Program by establishing a national outreach campaign. It should also guarantee that veteran-owned small business gets bonding similar to the structure of the VA Home Loan Guarantee. We should also expand the Entrepreneurship Boot Camp for Veterans beyond just veterans with disabilities. Every veteran should have access to this, and we should use the Small Business Centers across the country as well as the 16 Veteran Business Centers to coordinate with community colleges to make these programs available.

Caring for the men and women who defend our freedom is a solemn responsibility that belongs to the lawmakers, business leaders, and civilians alike. In the past several years, we have seen a turning point in the way we provide for our nation's warriors. However, we must remain ever vigilant to continue to show men and women who volunteer to serve their country that we all have their backs.

Thank you for your time and attention. I will be happy

to answer your questions.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Tarantino follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

Stephen Zeitz, National Commander for the Jewish War Veterans is next. Welcome to you.

STATEMENT OF STEPHEN R. ZEITZ, NATIONAL COMMANDER,  
JEWISH WAR VETERANS OF THE USA

Mr. Zeitz. Chairman Murray, Chairman Miller, members of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans Affairs, my fellow veterans and friends, I am Steve Zeitz, the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA, who celebrated our 115th anniversary March 15, yesterday.

JWV is Congressionally chartered and provides counseling and assistance to members encountering problems dealing with the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and I am also proud that we are part of the Military Coalition, which is 30 associations of veterans' organizations representing our retired and active military service personnel. And I am proud of the fact that here today with me is our National Executive Director, Colonel Herb Rosenbleeth, who is the President of the Military Coalition.

On March 2 and 3, our National Executive Committee members met here in Washington with Representatives and Senators as part of JWV's Capitol Hill Day. It was a single honor for me to present a JWV Medal of Merit to the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida, the Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. JWV's presentation to the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee reflects our strong interest and our great concern for world events, and we advocate health care and compensation for veterans.

I also think that we should have--that we need supporters from both the House and the Senate, and S. 4 and H.R. 12, that we support the memorial for Jewish chaplains of VA that were killed during service to our country.

I think that the people that have served and paid their dues previously, military people, that we are opposed to any increase in TRICARE costs because these people have already paid their dues and I do not think that they should be further sanctioned or with any other additional costs.

We would like to also have the support of both the Senate or the House in supporting the chaplain for Congress for Rabbi Resnicoff, who is a retired military--I am sorry, I lost my thought--he is a retired military chaplain, and I believe he would do great service to our country.

I also think the Military Coalition that we have is proud to be a proud member and active participant in the Military Coalition. Robert Zweiman, who is National Commander, is the JWV's National Chairman, serves on the Board of Directors of the Coalition, and our National Executive Director, Herb Rosenbleeth, also is involved in

that.

I think that we should do a lot of things for our veterans that have not been done. They have already paid their dues to this country and they should be well recognized. Right now, my own personal opinion, I do not think that the veterans are recognized in sufficient order by any members of Congress. I would welcome anything that we can do for the veterans. I think it is very important that the government and the people of the United States recognize the sacrifices and contributions that the veterans have made to our freedoms.

And that is about it. Any other questions, I will be glad to answer.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Zeitz follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

Our next presenter is Colonel Robert F. Norton, Deputy Director of Government Relations of the Military Officers Association of America.

STATEMENT OF COLONEL ROBERT F. NORTON, USA (RET.),  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, MILITARY  
OFFICERS ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

Colonel Norton. Thank you, Madam Chair, Ranking Member Filner, and members of the committees. I am honored to be with you here today to share the views of the Military Officers Association of America, our legislative agenda for the year.

Before beginning, I want to thank you, Senator Murray and Chairman Miller, who is over on the House side at the moment, for agreeing to take on a leadership role on behalf of those who have worn the nation's uniform, their families and survivors. On behalf of our 375,000 members, we appreciate your dedication to this committee and to the work of our veterans across the country.

I would like to focus on three areas for my prepared statement: First, the implementation of the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Care and Benefits Act; secondly, jobs for veterans; third, survivor benefits.

MOAA is very grateful that the committees recently sent a bipartisan letter that you referenced at the outset of this hearing, a letter to the administration on the urgency of implementing the Caregivers Act. I will quote from the mother of a severely wounded warrior. "The cost for Shane to be in assisted living versus in my medical care, there is no comparison in cost. I am 54 years old. I need health insurance. What is going to happen if I am not able to take care of him?" We believe that caregivers who obviously meet the intent of the law and the other provisions of the law should immediately be enrolled in CHAMPVA health coverage.

MOAA also recommends close attention to other key measures in the Caregivers Act, provisions for women and rural veterans, including pilot projects for readjustment



counseling of women warriors in group settings, newborn infant care, and graduate level education for counseling and care of veterans suffering from military sexual trauma and PTSD. For veterans in rural areas, including our National Guard and Reserve veterans, there are important measures in the Act that need to be aggressively implemented. In short, MOAA recommends that the committees conduct a series of oversight hearings on the implementation of the Caregivers and Omnibus Veterans Benefits Act.

Turning now to jobs for veterans, we believe the VA's campaign to eliminate homelessness is sound, but we would emphasize that homelessness essentially is the end stage failure of a process that begins on active duty. With at least one in five veterans suffering from PTSD, early intervention before, during, and after transition is critical for a successful readjustment and for reemploying our veterans when they return home.

Moreover, we believe that DOD and the VA need to do more to recruit, and I will emphasize the word "recruit," separating veterans into the new G.I. Bill. Job training authority under the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill opens up on the first of August. Many community colleges offer vocational training as part of their programs. In this struggling economy, it makes sense to enlist veterans into training and education that will equip them to compete in the jobs market.

MOAA also believes employers have a stake in this effort, and we recommend support for legislation that offers real incentives to hire and retain veterans. I would like to associate myself with Tom Tarantino's comments from IAVA on that point. One example is that Senators Baucus and Grassley have introduced a bill that would provide a \$2,400 tax credit for those veterans who have served at least 180 consecutive days of active duty. This would be an incentive for our employers to hire veterans returning from war.

Lastly, survivors issues. We urge equity in DIC for our survivors, and I associate myself with our partners and friends in Gold Star Wives and the other members of the Military Coalition. We should set the DIC at 55 percent of the compensation of a 100 percent service-connected veteran, placing our survivors on equal footing percentage-wise with the survivors of disabled Federal workers.

We also ask for your support in lowering the age for receipt of DIC for remarried widows from 57 to 55. That is simply the standard that is available for receipt of survivor benefits throughout the rest of the Federal Government.

And finally, MOAA also believes that survivors of those who died since 9/11 deserve the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. Their children already have the new G.I. Bill, thanks to Congress, under the Gunnery Sergeant John D. Fry Scholarship Program. We are working with a member of the House and we believe that this can be done without tampering with pay-go rules. In other words, we believe that this benefit could be

transferred as an entitlement from the service member upon death to the surviving member, and we appreciate your attention to that proposal.

I thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you today, and again, I look forward to your questions and thank you for your service to our veterans.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Colonel Norton follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you.

Gene Overstreet, President of the Non-Commissioned Officers Association, is next.

STATEMENT OF H. GENE OVERSTREET, PRESIDENT, NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

Mr. Overstreet. Thank you, ma'am. Congratulations, Madam Chairman and Ranking Member Filner, and thank all of the committee members for what you do for our veterans on a daily basis. I think it is important that most of our veterans know exactly what your goal is and what your challenges are to get us to that point.

I am Gene Overstreet. I am the President of the Non-Commissioned Officers Association of the United States of America. With me today is Dick Schneider, the Association's Executive Director, and Matt Dailey, the Association's Military Affairs.

We always invite active duty military here, but I do not see them here today. Obviously, they did not make it for some reason. And we also invite our foreign joints here. They are NCOs and petty officers from other countries that represent 25 other countries out there and they love to come here and see what opportunities we have to speak directly to the lawmakers, because some of them do not have that in the countries that they serve, and we think that is of great importance.

NCOA is celebrating 51 years of service to our members as a fraternal and patriotic organization. Aside from the diverse programs that we have in NCOA over the past 51 years, I would like to highlight just a couple of those things that we do.

First of all, I have heard from many of the committee members up there and my colleagues here about how important it is for making that transition from the military to civilians for our active duty, Guard, and Reserve. In 1973, NCOA started with ten job fairs a year. Basically, we went out and got companies that were interested in hiring our military and brought them all together, and since that time, we have really kind of been the duty experts on the job fair business. Several years ago, we got out of that business simply because so many other people got into the business, and that was okay with us simply because that as long as our members were getting jobs and were making that smooth transition, we did not have a problem with that. With the economy the way it is today, many of those guys have gone

out of the business again.

Once again, NCOA stepped up with our job fair program. This year, we are going to host 40-plus job fairs across the nation. We have already started. We started in January. We basically have gone out and gotten companies that are hiring, and that is a challenge in itself, to get those companies that are still in business and are still hiring. What we did when we initially started this is we wanted to teach the military how to write their resume. We hired an old Sergeant Major who had written a book and his book was, Does Your Resume Wear Combat Boots?, and we had him teaching our military how to make that transition from military to civilian terminology. And along the way, we taught them how to do interviews. We taught them how to market themselves. We taught them the value of their training. We also taught them what their security clearance and other things like that was worth.

So we bring companies to the table. Like I said, normally, we have about anywhere from 500 to 600 job seekers. Those are young men and women that are separating from the military, and 80 percent of them are right in the position of transitioning at that time that come to our job fairs. So once again, we are trying to reach out and touch those folks. We do not advocate for anybody to get out of the military, but all of us are going to get out sooner or later, even me. I did not want to, but, I mean, it is just one of those things.

So, once again, we are trying to do what we can because we have heard--I would suggest today if you put our agendas over the top of everyone else, we all have the same agendas. That is the reason I am not going to hit every agenda by line item, but we support our folks at the table here and all the other associations and the things that they have to say.

One thing I would like to say before I run out of time here, and I would be remiss if I did not say this, is we would like to convey our appreciation to the Secretary of the VA. He is doing a great job, and we know that he is doing a great job. He has taken on a tough leadership role there. He has been an enthusiastic advocate for veterans. He has a lot of things on his plate, and I tell you, they are all working concurrently here and we think it would be undue if we did not recognize the things that he is doing and the things that you are doing for the veterans there.

Again, I realize my time is running out here and I just want to thank you for what you do for our veterans. Once again, when we deploy those veterans, we owe them the best training and the best equipment that money can buy. And if one should fall in battle, we should take care of them. If one should not come back, we ought to take care of their families because we do it and we ought to take care of them. And, like you said, any time I deployed, they never asked me if I was a Democrat or a Republican. I did not fight for Democrats or Republicans. I fought for America, and that is

who ought to take care of them.

Thank you very much.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Overstreet follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you.

Our final witness this morning is Jerry Hotop, National Commander of AMVETS. Welcome, Commander. We look forward to your presentation.

STATEMENT OF JERRY HOTOP, NATIONAL COMMANDER,  
AMVETS

Mr. Hotop. Thank you. Chairman Murray, Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Burr, Ranking Member Filner, and distinguished members of the Senate and House Veterans Affairs Committees, I am AMVETS National Commander Jerry Hotop, and on behalf of AMVETS, AMVETS Riders, AMVETS Ladies Auxiliary, the Sons of AMVETS, and all of our other subordinate organizations, I would like to extend our gratitude for being given the opportunity to share with you our 2011 legislative agenda and goals.

AMVETS is proud to serve our active duty military and veteran members by being their voice to you, our nation's leaders. AMVETS guiding principles in developing our 2011 legislative agenda comes from three sources: AMVETS annual adopted resolutions, the 2010 AMVETS Symposium for 21st Century Veteran Findings, and finally, the concerns voiced to us by our membership. You have my complete written statement for the record detailing all of AMVETS 2011 legislative priorities, so today I will briefly speak to our priorities regarding underserved veteran and military populations.

As a result of our ever-changing veterans and military populations, AMVETS believes it is of the utmost importance VA and DOD stand ready and are equipped with necessary personnel, programs, and equal access to care regardless of a veteran's gender or where they reside in the country. Today's diverse veteran and military communities have unique and complex needs that VA and DOD have not had to face before.

Women are serving in the U.S. military in record numbers and our nation is welcoming home the first generation of female combat veterans. According to DOD, as of 2010, women make up 16 percent of our active duty military forces and 18 percent of the National Guard and Reserve. Today, women service members are being deployed to the same combat zones as their male counterparts. However, DOD has not been able to keep up with the needs of our ever-changing military force. For example, the standard issue military combat uniform issued to women service members was designed for a male's body. According to VA, there has been a steady rise in the number of long-term injuries directly related to inadequately designed gear for female service members. AMVETS strongly believes it is in the best interest of our female service members and the entire

fighting force to equip our women service members with properly designed gear as well as equal access and availability of gender-specific health care.

Another very large and apparent changing demographic of today's fighting force is location. Today's military is comprised of rural and remote veterans at a percentage far exceeding other demographic groups. In fact, more than 46 percent of veterans enrolled in the VA health care system live in rural or remote areas. Given this fact, when a service member returns from combat and transitions back into civilian life, they are often returning to parts of the nation where they do not always have immediate access to VA health care or services. AMVETS strongly urges VA to adapt many of their programs, strategies, and locations to meet the growing needs of our rural, remote veteran population.

Furthermore, these strategies should also include the Secretary's initiative to end homelessness among veterans within five years, as well. While AMVETS applauds VA in their efforts to end homelessness, we believe there is still much to be done. AMVETS believes there needs to be more devoted and widespread staffing as well as newer, more innovative programs, such as mobile outreach and care teams. We must go to the veterans, not just simply sit back and hope the veteran comes to us. Mobile teams should be immediately implemented and widely utilized to ensure homeless veterans and rural and remote veterans have access to the care and resources they need.

This is not a handout. This is providing the entitlements and care they have earned through their service to our country. We often see that the ones with the most need will be the last to ask for help. However, many times, all these veterans may need is the opportunity to have someone that is easily accessible and willing to lend a hand.

AMVETS urges this Congress and this administration to ensure that proper funding is available to reach those veterans that have fallen through the cracks. Those brave men and women sacrificed their rights to protect ours and deserve only the highest quality and availability of care and resources we have to offer them.

Again, Chairmen Murray and Miller, Ranking Members Burr and Filner, and all of the distinguished members of the committees, AMVETS thanks you for affording us the opportunity to share with you our legislative priorities for 2011. This concludes my testimony and I stand ready to address any questions you may have for me. Thank you.

[Applause.]

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hotop follows:]

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much.

I want to thank all of the witnesses for your excellent testimony and thoughts and ideas that we really appreciate you bringing to us, and we will work with you on all of them.

I just am going to ask one question this morning because, as I said, we have votes and members are going to be going back and forth, before i turn it over to Dr. Roe. As I said at the beginning, I intend to introduce legislation in the upcoming weeks to address the needs of returning veterans for opportunities for gainful employment. I am deeply concerned about the number of veterans who are coming home and cannot find a job in a very challenging environment. We are all going to be working on legislation. I look forward to your ideas on that. But in order to make sure it works, I wanted to throw out a question to any of you who had some thoughts about why the rate of unemployment among younger returning veterans is so high. Mr. Tarantino?

Mr. Tarantino. Well, there are many reasons, Madam Chairwoman. First of all, we have a culture in corporate America and in civilian America that just does not understand military skills. I think this is probably one of the first generations where our corporate leaders, by and large, have never served in the military. That is one of the negative consequences of an all-volunteer force, even though I do believe the volunteer force is the most professional way to go.

So what we do not have is a cultural understanding of what military skills mean, and as a country, we have never done the work to quantify what the hard and soft skills are. You have a situation where a medic, a combat medic with ten, 15 years of service gets out of the military and in most States they cannot even drive an ambulance. That is insane.

When I was an acting company commander, my medics would take time out of the training schedule at a local community college to get their EMT license. Mechanics would take on their own personal time and every time that I could get them to go get their ASE certifications, because nobody wants to be 38 years old, retired from the military, and start out as an apprentice.

So we need to do that work. We need to be able to actually quantify what these skills are, what these certifications are, and what the things are that we learn in the military and exactly how they translate it, and then present it both to veterans so that I do not have the word "Humvee" four times on my resume, because I have been wearing boots in most of my 20s, and that the HR manager or that CEO says, "Hey, I am interested in hiring veterans, but I do not understand what their skills are," they can say, "Oh, this is exactly what this means. I understand this. I get this. These people can be useful to me." And I think if we crack that nut, you are going to see that unemployment rate go down.

Chairman Murray. Excellently stated. I appreciate it.

Does anybody else have a thought on that?

Colonel Norton. Madam Chair?

Chairman Murray. Yes?

Colonel Norton. I would like to offer a few comments regarding National Guard and Reserve veterans. I think one

of the big challenges we have with our Guard and Reserve veterans is that the Transition Assistance Program, TAP, basically does not work, does not really exist for them. As you know, often they process rather quickly off active duty. They return to hometown communities and the support services that they need in terms of returning to the marketplace really do not work that well.

There have been some interesting innovations out there. For example, we have heard that in the State of Florida, the National Guard supported an in-country survey of its National Guard unit before it returned home from Afghanistan and they used that information regarding employment, employability, unemployment, and so forth, and they networked with Florida employers and they made that part of the Yellow Ribbon process coming home so that as they processed off active duty, returned to the local communities, there was a partnership already working with and for them regarding employment.

So those kinds of things, I think, need to be specially tailored for the over 800,000 members of the National Guard and Reserve who have served since 9/11, and we now have over 250,000 who have multiple combat tours. We have a highly experienced group of Guard and Reserve members, but as you said earlier, they are also struggling with employment back in their home towns. Thank you.

Chairman Murray. So make their service relevant to current employers and make their transition relevant to actually where they live, not to where they separate.

Colonel Norton. Exactly.

Chairman Murray. Okay. Anybody else with a quick comment?

Mr. Overstreet. Madam Chair, I think, also, it is an education process and it has to be in that transition assistance, as well. If they do not get it in transition assistance, they need to get it on follow-on.

For example, oftentimes, if you think you are ten feet tall and bulletproof, you cannot wait to get out because you know someone is going to hire you right away. That does not happen, because you have to sell yourself. You have to lay those skills out and you have to go there and actually market yourself. The young men and women that we have coming out of the military, you know, they are not good at blowing their own whistle, so to speak, and you have to teach them that if you are going to go into the civilian community and that civilian workforce, you have got to go in there and you have to sell it.

So, once again, this is part of that education process in the Transition Assistance, because people are just not standing by waiting for you to show up on their doorstep, and they need to know that. If they know that going into it, most of them get right in. Most of them get a job.

The second thing that I would point out, if they do not get a job relatively soon, they kind of get disheartened. Once again, I think the more disheartened you get and the

longer you go without a job, you start to feel like you are unsuccessful. Well, then you know what we have as far as homeless veterans out there. I think it is very easy to slide into that group or just slide into some other group there, particularly if you have PTSD or some of these other things to go along with that.

So, once again, I think the time to get them is right before they out or while they are getting out and educate them and let them know, hey, it is just like being in the military. You need to get out there and get it done.

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much. I really appreciate it. And any other thoughts that you would like to submit for the record, I would really appreciate because I think this is really important, and I appreciate all of you working on it.

At this time, in a bicameral and bipartisan spirit of cooperation, I will turn it over to Dr. Roe. We do have votes happening right now on the Senate Floor, so we will have members going back and forth. But I appreciate all of your testimony and your work with us. Dr. Roe?

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. [Presiding.] Thank you. I will yield at this time to Mr. Filner.

Chairman Murray. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Mr. Filner. Thank you, Mr. Roe.

Thank you all for your eloquent testimony. As someone pointed out, you match in a lot of ways because the priorities are pretty clear. As I have been thinking about some of the priorities that you have--seamless transition, jobs, taking advantage of the educational benefits, the stigma of mental health issues, the necessity of adequately funding support for those with mental health issues, and on and on--I want to throw something at you all in my theme of thinking outside the box. I am going to handle all these in one big, comprehensive program here.

When you all go into the military, each service has its own preparation we call boot camp, ten, 12 weeks or so of making sure you understand what war is and comradeship and working, the ethic that you need, and, of course, the physical skills. But when we discharge you, we do not give you a de-boot camp, or a re-boot camp, or the transition to the civilian side. It is a whole different world, I think you would agree, and many of the skills, many of the things, many reactions that you have internalized become counterproductive, in fact.

It seems to me we ought to take--the TAP program, I do not think, is working. I have been there. I think everybody was asleep, including the instructor. I think that the DOD and VA should cooperate in having the last eight, ten, 12 weeks, whatever, of active duty as your de-boot camp, where our discharged guys and gals can join their peers, because we know that the isolation that comes on discharge gives a lot of problems right away, say with your



company of soldiers and your family, who are so important both in treatment and in diagnosis of physical ills, to go through, first, a complete and adequate physical examination.

We are discharging guys--I think, Tom, you agree with me--and young women without knowing if they have PTSD, if they have brain injury, and this is going to be with them their whole lives if we do not adequately diagnose it, and we give them a two-question questionnaire, which they know if they check "yes" on anything, they will have to stay a little longer and the stigma of that, so they check "no" and everybody gets out and everybody is fine. And I am talking about Colonel Norton with the National Guard in this, too, and Reserve units. So we are talking about everybody.

So let us give everybody--there is no stigma if everybody has to go through it. And the spouses are there, the children are there to help with that diagnosis and early treatment. Let us get everybody diagnosed before they leave. And then let us give them some time still in a structured way with their comrades, all the vocational kind of training, the certification kind of stuff that we have got to do, that we should be working on here. Tom, I agree with you. I mean, truck drivers, by the way, they have been driving trucks all around Iraq and yet they do not have a Commercial Drivers License when they leave, and they say, I am not going through a six-month course. I know this stuff.

So the vocational stuff, the educational benefits that are due them and their families, let us get that all in a de-boot camp where they have this transition. They are decompressing, but they have got the support of their family and their company there, and we can get everything in a far less structured way, I mean, in a far less pressured way and talk about all this stuff in a way that maybe they will listen and it will mean something. And we are leaving everybody on their own. We are not providing the help that we should have. We send them to battle, we give them this training, and then we say, okay, go find a job, or go get some education or whatever, and it is impossible.

We set up sort of a re-boot camp situation in San Diego. A formal admiral is running it. And just stuff like how you dress and what are your job expectations, how are your relationships with your employees. If you think you are supposed to stay to do the job like you have been trained and they want to leave at 5:00, I mean, that causes some problems. You have got to at least be aware of all that stuff and people have got to go through this.

So I am hoping that we can try to set up something like that, and if you have any reaction, I would be glad to hear it.

Mr. Overstreet. You know, sir, I think that is a good theory simply because several years ago, many years back, we recognized when you take that service member out of their family and they are out of their family for so long, there is almost a reorientation back to the family. We even sent

people overseas that were coming back after a six-month deployment to tell certainly the Marines and sailors, okay, you remember when you left home and your baby was this size? Well, he is not that size anymore. He is this size. He does not even know who you are. He was so small when you left, he does not even know.

So you are expecting to jump exactly back in where you left, and guess what. Your family has progressed six months, also. You have been gone for six months. And so you need to know that it is going to be different. And, by the way, when you come back in and you are going to run the checkbook and you are going to take over the car and you are going to take over--who has been doing that while you have been gone? It has been your wife. So you have to understand that.

So just for a six-month deployment, if there is a reorientation, I could not imagine what a combat situation is for reorientation.

Mr. Filner. Thank you, sir. You know, it is a--Dr. Wersel?

Ms. Wersel. I would like to add to that. When there is no husband, especially during an active duty death, we are forced to take our husband's place and transition and matriculate into the community, and I can speak on that because I had to put on big-boy pants and compete for a job and I really did not know how to do that because I never really had to compete. As a military spouse, you do not compete for a job. You have to take the first job going your way or coming your way, because if you wait for the perfect job, you have orders and you move again.

So any programs that you have, remember, there are surviving spouses that would probably fit into that transition to matriculate into the public sector for employment. Thank you.

Mr. Filner. Thank you for always worrying about that, or always making sure we worry about that, too. Thank you. Tom?

Mr. Tarantino. Mr. Filner, I would make sure that any mandatory TAP-type program, which I think is absolutely necessary and they should be mandatory, and, in fact, it is completely nuts to me that it is not, but the thing that we need to do is look at the different levels that people are leaving the military.

I sat in TAP. I was a 30-year-old captain--well, 29, whatever--but I was sitting with 20-year-old privates and I was sitting next to a 45-year-old sergeant major, basically laughing at people when they were learning how to tie a tie in the front of the room, because, frankly, it was a waste of my day. I did not need to be there.

So we need to understand that people enter and leave the military and enter the workforce at different levels. So if we want to transition them, we need to transition them to where they are going to go into the market. If I am a 30-year-old captain, I am not going to go to an internship

and start over as if I was 21. It is just not--that is not where I am at. Or if I am a retired colonel, I am not going to start over as a junior associate somewhere. It ain't going to happen.

So we need to train them for what they are going to see, but we need to train them in a way that is compatible with the market. I do not need the on-base employment transition guy talking to me. I need to be talking to someone from Harvard Business School. I need to be talking to someone out in the civilian market who actually hires people and knows how this works.

And then I need to actually have some follow-on support. When I leave that TAP program, there should be a couple months where I can have some sort of follow-on service, so I will say, hey, I am out in the market. I have got this going on. What is the deal? If I have got follow-up questions, if I need access to some resources for six months to a year afterward, because for me, it took me ten months to find a job. And what I am doing now is nowhere near what I thought I was going to do.

Mr. Filner. Thank you. If I may have 30 seconds--I know I am out of time--I just--again, I started off the session by saying we have got to do things differently. The two examples, the incredible unemployment rate for returning veterans and the suicide rate is the highest in history, those two things alone should say it is time to do it differently. We are just doing the same old thing and yet things are getting worse, so let us do it differently. Thank you, certainly.

Mr. Roe. Next, Sergeant Major Walz.

Mr. Walz. Thank you, Dr. Roe. I appreciate it. And again, thank you all for your testimony. I always leave, and I have to tell you, I think today's testimony was insightful and is as wise counsel as we have ever seen. This is really getting at the heart of things, trying to come up with real, workable solutions. Tom, at the end there, that is very insightful on exactly what it takes. I think all of us who have been there are shaking our heads yes. I am oftentimes wishing all of our colleagues could see this, because it seems to many of us in this room, this is so simple to see. Why can we not get it right?

And I have to tell you, Vivianne, that nothing since I have been in Congress has been more disappointing--and trust me, there have been many--but nothing has been more disappointing than our failure to engage and move this issue with our survivors. It just seems as wrong as can be. It just seems--I can tell you, in Southern Minnesota, when I bring this issue up to people, there is not a single constituent there who does not agree with this, that we have got to fix this. And if I bring up health care, we are 50-50. If I bring up the war in Afghanistan, 50-50. Bring up tax cuts, 50-50. On this issue, 100 to zero. Do this right. I do not mind paying. This is what we are supposed to do. So it is very frustrating, very frustrating. So--

[Applause.]

Mr. Walz. And I am just glad to say that you are there. Gold Star Wives are there, all of the rest of the folks who line up with you on this. We will win this thing. We will win it, and it will be before you and I hit 40--

[Laughter.]

Mr. Walz. and we will get that--

Ms. Wersel. That will be one more year.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Walz. That is right.

Ms. Wersel. You have one year.

Mr. Walz. One more year, we have got to get it done, so we will get there.

But just a couple more things. President Kekahuna, aloha.

Mr. Kekahuna. Aloha.

Mr. Walz. A guy from Minnesota, any time I can get a chance to say that, I am taking it. I appreciate your testimony. You are being very patient with this, because I have lost patience on the implementation of the Centers for Excellence. I have lost patience on it, and I just want to ask a couple of questions.

Can you explain to me, what happens if we do not fund these? What happens that we have drag our feet two years? You are waiting on--let us all be very clear here--a piece of paper this time. It is a proverbial piece of paper, a Memorandum of Understanding. Since you have not gotten that, how does that impact the mission of the center?

Mr. Kekahuna. It never opens.

Mr. Walz. Which means what to those heroes you brought in to see me before who were hurt in Iraq, who lost their eyesight, who are looking for that leadership? What happens to them? What is the situation?

Mr. Kekahuna. They disappear into the system and they are left behind. The biggest problem that we have with these young men and women coming back today, they are left behind because there is no registry of where they are at, what happened to them, because the system is not there. With the Center of Excellence for Visual Impairment, they will have someone registering every blinded veteran that comes in with the merger of the registry from DOD to the VA.

Mr. Walz. And we required the registry, correct?

Mr. Kekahuna. We asked for the registry--

Mr. Walz. Years ago.

Mr. Kekahuna. --we approved the registry, but it has not happened.

Mr. Walz. Now, I understand that the registry is there and they actually took some of your folks out there and they put in a fictitious name and showed how it works, and then you asked the question that everybody in here is asking, why do you not put in a real veteran's name and use it, and they said--

Mr. Kekahuna. Well, we cannot do it until we get the letter of memorandum, an MOU between DOD and VA, and that is

not--that is not a reason to me.

Mr. Walz. It is not a reason. It is not an excuse. It is unacceptable. I go back to this--and it does go back to seamless transition. It fits into the fact that many of you are talking about here. Colonel Norton brought up, again, incredibly wise counsel on homelessness about getting to the root problem. Get to the systemic cause of homelessness before you deal with it. Any time you try and deal with the symptoms of a bigger problem, you end up spending money with very little positive outcome. So I think you are being incredibly wise on that.

Mr. Zeitz. But--

Mr. Walz. Mr. Zeitz, please, go ahead.

Mr. Zeitz. Steve Zeitz. What I would like to see happen is to help these veterans coming back home is the VA is overloaded, I believe, and why do they not use local facilities and hospitals for counseling and to get back into the workforce or back into treatment.

Mr. Walz. Yes, go ahead, Mr. Kekahuna.

Mr. Kekahuna. For the blinded veterans, in particular, there is no other organization in the world that is as good as our blind centers, because they come to us for advice. We bring in these young men and women from other countries because they do not have the same situation in their countries. It is called Operation Peer Support. By providing something like that, we have the ability to share our knowledge to these people--

Mr. Walz. How much money are we talking about on these?

Mr. Kekahuna. Say it again?

Mr. Walz. What is the appropriation amount on the Center for Excellence?

Mr. Kekahuna. About \$10 million, and \$10 million for hearing and \$5 million for limb.

Mr. Walz. I certainly do not want to--all of us know we have got to balance this budget, but \$10 million, we have spent that much on interest on the debt since Mr. Kekahuna and I have had this conversation, just to be very clear on where the situation is at. Blinded veterans injured in combat did not cause the debt, and now to ask them that we cannot get this done, this is a very frustrating situation.

I am going to yield back. If we have time for a second round, Dr. Roe, I will come back around.

Mr. Roe. Thank you.

Ms. Brown?

Ms. Brown of Florida. Thank you, and let me just say, I am thanking the Chairman for holding this hearing. For a period of time, we discontinued the hearings, and I think they are very important, particularly when we get the independent veterans and the different veterans in town. We need to hear what they have to say.

But first of all, let me just say, how many people here are from Florida, because we have one of the largest growing veterans populations. Thank you for being here. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Ms. Brown of Florida. I am very proud that since 2007, Congress has increased the service budget for VA to the highest level it ever had, the largest in the history, and I am also pleased about the advance appropriation becoming the law. For a long time, I did not think that was possible. With all of the political politics going on in Washington, at least veterans are not going to be held hostage because of the politics in Washington, and I am very grateful with that, because we already know what we are going to get for 2011 and we are working on the 2012 budget.

I am also reminded of the words of the first President of the United States, George Washington: The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justifiable, should be directly proportionate to how they perceive that the veterans of earlier wars are treated and appreciated by their country, and I think that is true then and it is true today.

A couple of comments, and I want your response on that. Coming back last week to Washington--I am from Jacksonville--I noted that they have discontinued all of the homeless lunch programs, and you know, one-third of those that receive the lunch are veterans. I am working to see what we can do about alleviating that, but it is not just giving them a lunch or giving them a meal. It is how we address the problem. And you mentioned more aggressive outreach. I am interested in knowing how we can get the Veterans Affairs to work with more community groups to get at this. I do not know whether it is a mental health problem, but how can we combat this because it is very disturbing to me. Response?

Colonel Norton. Congresswoman, if I may offer a comment on an initiative that we are just in the early stages of pursuing in the Military Officers Association, we have 420-some-odd chapters around the country and we are putting together what we call a Community Blueprint. We are going to test drive it in three local communities around the country, and the idea is along the lines that you describe. It is to take our local chapters, chapter members who are engaged in the community and have them network and collaborate with local community providers in areas like outreach to veterans, counseling towards jobs, mentoring, working on all kinds of things related to giving them the kind of support that they need.

This is a work in progress. I do not have anything to report on this. But I also know that there are a lot of other groups that are doing this, and the VA, as I understand it, is also interesting in partnering with local communities and I think this is something that really needs to be emphasized, as well. The Feds alone cannot do this--

Ms. Brown of Florida. Absolutely.

Colonel Norton. Thank you.

Ms. Brown of Florida. And we have the stand-down programs that we participate, but what is that, once a year

or twice a year? That is just not enough.

The question about how we help veterans returning get jobs, and you mentioned we need to do something out of the box, well, we already have the community college system and the educational system. The question is, how can we marry the two to work together so that the veterans can get credit for their skill, because we understand the educational system--I think that is Tom, I cannot see the last name over there--the programs are already in place. In Florida, we have one of the best community college systems, and the college system, how can we get them credit, because let us say we have got a shortage in teaching, a shortage in nursing. How can we get credit, college credit, for those kinds of programs? How can we work closely with the educational community, because that is not anything new. That is something that is understandable. That is something that the employers understand.

Mr. Tarantino. Yes, I mean, and this actually--I have a lot of personal experience with. I am a community college graduate myself, from California, and I think through my military service in my civil affairs school, I got five units of physical education, which was awesome but had nothing to do with the civil reconstruction stuff that I learned in civil affairs school.

You know, this is the key. The key is accessing community-based nonprofits, community education programs, and our vast community college network. There are small programs all across the country. I know in Minnesota, they are doing a small program to try to matriculate from military education to civilian education. The National Midwest Governors Association is doing something similar for vocational skills.

The problem is that we do not have a really good system to identify where those skills and where those military educational courses translate. We do not have a ruler that says, well, this course is actually equivalent to this course. And so what ends up happening is it is slapdash. It does not make sense. It is regional. We need to actually study it, first of all, and we need to create a set of national standards so that every college who actually wants to do something like this has something they can take off the shelf and say, okay, this is exactly in line with how we are matriculating students to higher education or through vocational programs, so this is what we can use.

Right now, that does not exist. They have to do it by themselves. And I will tell you what, if I am a small community college in a rural area, I do not have the time and money to do that. So let us do this on a national level and give them the tools to set their veterans up for success.

Ms. Brown of Florida. I am not disagreeing with you. What I am saying is that we need to work with the educational institutions. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. The schools in my area of Florida, we have number

one community colleges, but we need to work more with the military in some way bringing these institutions together to come up with some kind of standards. We do not have to start over.

Mr. Tarantino. Absolutely, and just to reiterate off that, this thing, the study that I am talking about, cannot be done by the government. It should not be done by the government. If it is, we are going to fail. It has to be done with the cooperation of local community colleges, with the business sector. It has to be done from the people who are actually interacting with this population on up in cooperation so that we can--that is how we set national standards.

Ms. Brown of Florida. And I am not disagreeing with you, but you cannot do it without the government telling us what skills that you have. So it has to be working together. Thank you.

Mr. Roe. Thank you. I would, being from Tennessee, I would argue that nothing in Florida is number one, just from a--

[Laughter.]

Ms. Brown of Florida. Wait until we have that basketball game coming up.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Roe. Unfortunately, it has already been had.

Mr. Braley?

Mr. Braley. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to thank everyone who is here for this very important hearing.

I live in Waterloo, Iowa, home of the Five Sullivan Brothers Veterans History Museum for the State of Iowa, and every child in Waterloo knows the story of sacrifice of those five brothers. Thirty years ago this week, we buried my father in a small country cemetery in Iowa about 200 yards from the farmhouse he was born in and that he left at the age of 17 to go to boot camp in Camp Pendleton before landing on Iwo Jima the day both of the flags were raised there. And at his funeral, at the cemetery, my cousin, who was a Marine Corps artillery officer in Vietnam, showed up, came all the way from Hawaii so that somebody would be there to play "Taps" at his funeral.

Those are the types of memories that I bring as Ranking Member of the Economic Development Subcommittee of the Veterans' Affairs Committee in the House, and we want to hear from you. And especially, we want to hear from returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, Mr. Tarantino, about the abysmally high rate of unemployment that they face in this country, which is a stain on this country right now.

As I was listening to you describe your frustration, it reminded me of the pre-Cana classes I went to as a 26-year-old, surrounded by high school students who were getting lectures on buying life insurance after I had completed my professional degree and it was completely out of place for the setting. And as you were talking, it occurred to me what we really need is we need a SCORE-like program for our



veterans, a program where we tap into the amazing potential in this room and across this country of people who have walked through this experience and know the frustration of making that transition to a civilian workforce that views things much differently than what you have experienced in a military setting.

So I am really interested in working with you and hearing your suggestions on what we can do to tailor these programs for the appropriate level of the people who participate in them, because I have sat through those programs and you tune out if you feel like your needs are not being addressed and we cannot afford that when we have so much at stake with these veterans who are desperate to reintegrate into the civilian workforce. So I look forward to hearing from you.

Mr. Zeitz, I want to talk about the memorial in Arlington Cemetery, because I have to tell you, short of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Rabbi Gittelsohn's speech at the dedication of the Fifth Marine Division Cemetery on Iwo Jima is the most eloquent description of what democracy means in this country that I have ever heard, and it is sad that not every student in this country is required to study it and learn what sacrifice is really all about. And I look forward to working with you to eliminate this embarrassment and making sure that people like Rabbi Gittelsohn, who gave their lives for this country, are appropriately recognized at Arlington Cemetery.

Mr. Zeitz. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Mr. Braley. One of the things that I am concerned about, and I would love to hear from anyone on the panel, is at this time when veterans are struggling with so many issues, one of the first things I got involved in when I was elected to Congress in 2006 was passing the Joshua Omvig Suicide Prevention Act that was introduced by my good friend and veteran Leonard Boswell from Iowa, and I knew Joshua Omvig's parents very well. They lived in Grundy Center, Iowa, just south of where I live.

And we thought we were making an impact on addressing the alarming problem of suicide among veterans, and yet the numbers continue to grow. The incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans of all ages and the need for quality mental health treatment continues to challenge us. So I would be interested in hearing from you of what more we should be doing to address those problems.

Mr. Tarantino. Well, I would say one of the first things we can do is we can do a well-funded research-based integrated national outreach campaign, and I am not talking about the stuff they have now where some guy inside the VA took a graphic design class, is putting together posters and slapping them on the sides of busses. We do not need Tom Tarantino or any of us out there telling the VA what to do.

We need Don Draper telling the VA what to do, okay. We need to get the advertising in the professional community. We need to talk to the people who know how to talk to America, the people who are effective. We need to have them meet with the VA, partner with them, and do a national outreach campaign that people are going to see, that they are going to get, and that they are going to understand so we can reduce the stigma so that we can tell people who are out there that are suffering that there is help out there and that they are not alone and that there are other veterans out there, and we need to stop just targeting veterans. You know, I am a knucklehead and there are 2.2 million knuckleheads like me who are probably not going to listen to a billboard. But, guess what. My mom is and I am going to listen to my mom or my girlfriend or my parents. If we are going to reach out to veterans, we have to start reaching out to everyone, because if only veterans are reaching out to veterans, and if only veterans are caring and engaged, we are all going to fail.

So, I mean, this is something that IAVA has been tackling on our own through our partnership with the Ad Council, through our outreach campaigns, through our social network community of veterans, where veterans can talk to each other. This is something the DOD and the VA really need to engage on and they have to start looking outside of just the military community.

Mr. Braley. Thank you.

Mr. Roe. Thank you. Thanks for your testimony.

I would like to introduce a friend of mine, Bill Kilgore, the previous AMVETS Commander from Kingsport, Tennessee, who is in the audience today, and his wife, Brenda is the, I think, the Auxiliary Treasurer now. So, Bill, thank you for being here. I thank all of our presenters from being here.

And Tom, if you have any time this afternoon, at 4:00, I have two university presidents coming from Tennessee, one where I went to college, Austin Peay, which is where the 101st Airborne is, in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. They have some real expertise there. I met with the President last night and I would like, if you have a chance, and then Chancellor Jimmy Cheek from UT--the real university for Ms. Brown--will be in my office at 5:00. So if you have time this afternoon, I would like if you could drop by. I would appreciate that.

A couple of things. One that I want to work on this year, I think, is the Caregiver Act. I met a lady in my office in Morristown, Tennessee, about three weeks ago and she came in because of an issue with the VA, and as I listened to her story, it unfolded a problem that I had never really thought about addressing. She is married to a

young soldier who was shot in the neck in Vietnam in 1966 and is just a little short of being quadriplegic. He has some use of his arms. And she was 19 years old in the service when he went in and had a baby at the time, as the Sergeant Major was talking about, as I did when I went overseas, had a 12-week-old baby. When I came back, he did not know who I was.

So anyway, she has cared for her husband for 44 years. I mean, she has done everything imaginable. His life expectancy, they told him, would be about--told her at Valley Forge when he came back from Vietnam -- would be about seven years, and as a doctor, they were being generous, probably, at that time. She has cared for him for all this time, but she could not work during that time, so she has no Social Security benefits. He obviously is 100 percent disabled, but if he dies, what is she left with? A thousand dollars a month, and that is just not right.

If I have ever seen a travesty in my life, that is it, and we had a hearing on this last week, on the caregivers, and that needs to be done yesterday. These folks are taking care of mothers and daughters and wives. I mean, she is a hero to me, I am telling you. I have met an American hero, and many of them are the wives and family members who take care of these injured people.

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. I have seen three soldiers who have been incredibly traumatized in the last four or five days here whose families whole lives are changed. There is a young medical student in Johnson City, Tennessee, where I live, who has lost his right arm in a Blackhawk helicopter crash several years ago and he is a senior medical student, a great story, but he could never be a surgeon like I was because he does not have both hands.

I have a tremendous urge to get this right, and I know from the Vietnam era--and there are some Vietnam era guys sitting there, I know--when we got home from the service, it was not done right. It needs to be done right now, and I am dead set on it.

The second thing I want to mention, I think, are jobs, and Tom, you mentioned that and that is what we are going to talk about this afternoon. But it is also an understanding, and you hit the nail right on the head, when employers do not understand a soldier who has been in the military.

And the example I give, when I went on the City Commission in Johnson City, Tennessee, just as Operation Iraqi Freedom took place, we had a bunch of guys called up, and some of them had salaries that paid a lot more money than their MOS in the military. And none of the other people on the council had ever served--good people, but they had never been in the military. So I said, look, this guy is leaving here as a police sergeant and he has got a pretty good salary, a lieutenant, I mean. He has been here in Johnson City for 25 years. He has got a good salary. So he

goes off and his paycheck is a lot less. His family suffers. Well, they are already suffering with him being gone. And once I pointed out that we should pay these people exactly the same, so if you work for our city now and you go serve this military, your salary does not change. You get the same salary and the same job when you come back.

The problem with private business now is we have deployed our troops so many times that those jobs go away when they come back, and that is a huge problem, because I can see the business side, where a soldier has been deployed two, three, four times, and the Sergeant Major clearly pointed out about these families. I mean, I do not know how you hold a family together that the deployment has been there for three, four, and five--I have seen six times, six deployments. We are putting tremendous stress on our military.

So jobs, I want to talk about that. And the last two things, and it has already been mentioned, the suicide, and the other one is homelessness. I think one of the greatest tragedies in the world is to see a warrior who has served this nation honorably to be living under a bridge. It is just not acceptable in America and we should do everything we can to see that does not happen or ever happens again.

I am going to stop and just listen for any comments, and then I will have my closing comments. Tom, are you going to be able to make it today, I hope?

Mr. Tarantino. I will be there.

Mr. Roe. Okay. Very good. I will see you then.

Well, finally, I will conclude by simply saying that I am going to be a very physically conservative Congressman. That is what I came here to do, to balance this budget. But the one place I will never apologize to anybody for funding are our veterans.

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. I yield to Mr. Walz.

Mr. Walz. Well, thank you, Mr. Roe, and I appreciate it again. Thank you all for being here. We have got our work to do. Keep the faith. The public knows it is the right thing. It is our sacred responsibility to care for these veterans.

I can say, and I just mention, Mr. Davis, this issue with the Civil Relief Act. We had the hearing, which I am very pleased happened. We saw some immediate response from JPMorgan Chase. It was interesting to get a call from their CEO at my office, and I can tell you that Mr. Dimon said, you were right. We deserved everything we got publicly. We want to make it right. They came out and put together a very strong plan. They want to hire 100,000 veterans. They are getting there, and I told him how much I appreciated that and quoted President Reagan and said we certainly trust you, but we are going to verify that to make sure that it happens.

You are right about there are other groups out there. We need to stay on it. I think the public, if we do our

job, the public certainly understands this. I am really pleased to hear Dr. Roe, and I know he has proven it in his time here, this commitment to get this budget balanced, but Vivianne, we have no reason when people come to us to tell us that now is not the right time to offset on the DIC because it is too expensive, that is hogwash, and we know that. Now is the right time. It is long overtime. So even though it is a tough climate, we are not going to back off. Let us keep pushing it.

So thank you all for your time. I yield back.

[Applause.]

Mr. Braley. Just briefly, Madam Chair, I want to follow up on your comments, Mr. Tarantino, about the importance of getting rid of the stigma of mental health treatment. I get very emotional talking about this because I lived this with my father. He was diagnosed with severe depression on multiple occasions when I was in high school. It was not until 11 years after he died that the key to unlock his depression was discovered by my brother, who worked at a VA hospital in Knoxville, Iowa, and it was another veteran who had worked with my father after he came home from the war who was able to relate the incident that unlocked the key for why he suffered so greatly during his adult life.

And I was fortunate to get his military service records long after he died and piece together a lot of that missing story and was able to get a book written by his commanding officer that described an incident when they landed on Iwo Jima the first night, when they came under heavy bombardment and 35 members of his unit were killed that night and one of them was his good friend, and that was the story that this veteran related to my brother.

And so we all have a responsibility to help the people we love get the treatment they need, and oftentimes the person who is suffering is the last one to realize they need help. And so I look forward to working with you and making sure that we are getting the word out to friends and family members, because I can tell you, everybody who came to our house and sat down at our table and talked to my dad and cried with him and helped him get the treatment he needed, and I can tell you the people who treated him as if he had some disease they did not want to be associated with who never showed up. We are losing too many veterans. They have done too much for us, and that is why solving this problem is so important. So I look forward to working with all of you.

[Applause.]

Mr. Roe. Thank you very much. We have a caucus called the Invisible Wounds Caucus, and I would encourage you to join, that I founded with one of the other members last year.

First of all, I thank every one of you in this room who have been here, have come here to spend your time to come to Washington to continue to inform us about veterans' issues.

I live a mile from a veterans hospital, so I get informed pretty regularly at home. I want to thank all of you all for your service to our country and to our nation. Sergeant Major, it is always nice to have somebody that talks like I do here. I appreciate that.

[Laughter.]

Mr. Roe. Once again, thank you for your leadership in your organizations. I know there is a tremendous amount of work that you do for the love of this country, this great America that we all live in, and the love for veterans.

Thank you very much, and without other comments, this meeting is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:20 a.m., the Committees were adjourned.]