

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Bernard Sanders, Chairman
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of The American Legion

September 10, 2013

Good morning and welcome to this joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees. Today we welcome The American Legion, Commander Dellinger, and his leadership team who will present the legislative priorities of The American Legion, the nation's largest veterans service organization.

Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to the newly elected national commander. Commander Dellinger I look forward to your presentation today and to working together on behalf of this nation's veterans.

I would also like to acknowledge Milton Willis, who has travelled here from Vermont. Milton thanks for making the journey to be with us today.

And finally, I'd like to thank all the members of The American Legion for this tremendous show of support and for their honorable service to this Nation. The knowledge the Legion gains from its daily interactions with veterans is an invaluable resource for members of these Committees and the Congress as a whole, as we continue to work to address the issues of importance to you.

Committee Action

Earlier this year, these Committees had an opportunity to hear from a number of veterans service organizations at hearings just like this one. These VSOs identified their priorities, just like you will today, and offered recommendations to address the challenges confronting America's veterans and their families.

I'm proud to say we've worked hard to address those issues. Before recess, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee ordered reported a significant amount of legislation to address a number of the concerns identified earlier this year. Among other actions, we've moved forward on legislation to –

- Support VA's efforts to transform the claims system;
- Eliminate veteran homelessness;
- Provide veterans with meaningful employment; and
- Improve the health care offered to America's veterans and assistance to their caregivers.

Let me touch on a few of these important issues in more detail.

Claims backlog

It's no secret the number one issue on every veteran's mind, and perhaps the largest challenge confronting VA, is the claims backlog. In the Senate, we moved quickly to hold a hearing to examine some of the causes of the backlog and to receive an update on VA's efforts to address this issue. We'll continue this

oversight with another hearing on this issue in the very near future.

At the March hearing, we heard from VSOs, who offered their assessment of VA's efforts similar to what Commander Dellinger will do today. In fact, Commander Dellinger, today your testimony notes, and I quote, "there are recent signs that we may be reaching a tipping point toward progress, and that is cause for guarded optimism."

I share your guarded optimism. While we've seen a steady decline in the backlog, clearly there is much, much more work to do. Veterans deserve not only timely but accurate decisions. I'm committed to working with VA to address this problem.

Military Families – Caregivers

Just as we work to ensure veterans receive the compensation they have earned in a timely fashion, so too must we safeguard the promise of quality health care for those who served, particularly for our most severely injured veterans.

VA's Caregiver Program allows seriously wounded veterans to receive care at home, provided by a family caregiver. Historically, these caregivers have done this without any support from the federal government, but in 2010, caregivers of post-9/11 veterans became eligible for:

- A tax-free monthly stipend;**
- Reimbursement for travel expenses;**
- Health insurance;**

- Mental health services and counseling;
- Training; and
- Respite care.

As of July, more than 10,600 veterans and their caregivers have benefited from this important program.

These benefits and services gave caregivers the support they needed to provide the best possible care for their loved ones. However, when the law was passed, these services were not made available to the family members of veterans of other eras.

I have introduced S. 851, the Caregivers Expansion and Improvement Act of 2013, to extend these services and benefits to the caregivers of veterans of all eras. Through this expansion, family members who have been providing care to eligible veterans from all eras would be able to access the same supportive services as the caregivers of our most recent generation of veterans.

I am pleased this bill was ordered reported out of the Senate committee and hope my colleagues will join my effort to expand this important program to all of our veterans and the family members who work with unwavering commitment to care for them.

COLA

We also have an obligation to ensure the benefits we provide veterans and survivors do not erode over time. As Congress returns and the debate over spending and the national debt

continue, we cannot forget the debt we owe to veterans and their families – after sacrificing for our well-being, the least we can do is ensure theirs.

I remain steadfast in my opposition to the Chained Consumer Price Index. This change in how annual cost-of-living adjustments are calculated would mean that veterans who started receiving VA disability benefits at age 30 would have their benefits reduced by \$1,425 at age 45, \$2,341 at age 55, and \$3,231 at age 65.

Adoption of Chained CPI would substantially cut the benefits of more than three million veterans and survivors. This would be an injustice to the honorable men and women who have proudly served our nation.

I also remain committed to ending the practice of rounding-down cost-of-living adjustments. The COLA bill we recently reported to the entire Senate would end this practice. To some it is mere pennies, but I know these small amounts of money add up over time and make a significant contribution to the financial stability of millions of veterans and survivors.

The round-down is a great example of an issue that was brought to my attention by the VSOs, and I will continue to work to put an end to this unfair practice.

Expansion of VA Services – Your Vision

Finally, let me speak a moment about a firmly held belief. I believe the VA does a number of things well. There will always

be room for improvement, but my vision is a VA that brings in *all* who have served this country and provides them with the benefits and services they have earned.

This goal is the reason outreach continues to be a top priority of mine. We must ensure veterans do not struggle in silence or feel like they have nowhere to turn.

- No veteran should be unaware of the benefits to which they are entitled.**
- No veteran should ever be discouraged from reaching out to VA for help in the future because of a negative experience with the claims system.**
- No veteran should ever feel accessing earned benefits is not worth the effort.**

VA must continue to transform itself in order to be an agency that provides earned and deserved benefits in a timely manner. VA must be an agency where all veterans and survivors feel welcomed and supported. You have my commitment that I will continue my efforts to recognize this vision.

Conclusion

The issues I have mentioned are only a small fraction of what we can and must do for our veterans.

Commander Dellinger, once again, welcome and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on where we should be focusing our

efforts. I also look forward to our work together on behalf of those who have served and sacrificed for their country.