

Chairman Sanders

Earlier this year, this Committee heard from veterans service organizations about their priorities, which reflect the needs of the men and women who have served this nation. Today's agenda reflects important work by Senators on both sides of the aisle. The legislation we will consider today is a very good start in addressing the needs identified by the VSOs earlier this year.

Given the large number of bills on today's agenda, I will highlight just a few of the important pieces of legislation that I have introduced in an effort to address the challenges that continue to confront veterans and their families.

While our country continues with its economic recovery, we must ensure that veterans are not left behind. Veterans possess the skills, discipline, and leadership necessary to succeed in a 21st-century workforce. Yet, we continue to find high unemployment rates among veterans, especially the youngest generation. Our nation's veterans, who have served and sacrificed for this country, deserve a fair shot at a fulfilling career; the ability to support their families; and an opportunity to prosper as they resume civilian life.

We have a responsibility to those who served in the military, and that includes providing practical solutions to any reintegration challenges they may face. That is why I am proud to have introduced the Veterans Equipped for Success Act of 2013, which would provide our veterans the tools necessary to successfully transition to the civilian workforce.

This bill would establish a three-year pilot program that will partner certain unemployed veterans with employers in the private-sector; and provide employers a wage subsidy of up to 75 percent of the wages paid (capped at \$14,000 a year), along with incentives to hire these veterans. The program not only stimulates job creation, but would also provide veterans with the valuable work experience and civilian skills they need to obtain long-term employment.

The Veterans Equipped for Success Act also focuses on providing employment opportunities and civilian work experience to the youngest generation of veterans, those between the ages of 18-30, who have the highest rates of unemployment. It does this by establishing a three-year pilot program pairing veterans with private-sector employers for one year; and requiring employers to provide veterans mentorship, job shadowing, and valuable civilian work experience.

There is clearly a need for improved employment opportunities for veterans, particularly our younger transitioning veterans. DOD paid nearly one billion dollars in unemployment last year, and I'm worried that number may grow as we expect approximately one million servicemembers to transition out of the military service within the next few years.

This legislation would help veterans meet the challenges of competing in the civilian workforce and fills gaps not addressed by current programs. I'm pleased to have the support of MOAA, The American Legion and PVA as we work to ensure veterans have the opportunity to gain valuable skills and the work experience necessary to successfully transition into the civilian workforce.

As I have said before, the fact that nearly 70 percent of claims are pending longer than 125 days is completely unacceptable. Furthermore, the inability to provide compensation benefits in a timely manner tarnishes VA's reputation among the very population it serves. I never want a veteran's negative experience with the claims system to prevent him or her from seeking any other benefit or service such as mental health care or help in battling homelessness.

VA has set ambitious goals, put forward a plan, and has been working hard to transform. Yet, despite these facts, we continue to see unacceptably long wait times. Clearly, there is still much room for improvement and a lot of work still to be done. That is why I introduced the Claims Processing Improvement Act of 2013.

VA must do a better job of showing not only Congress, but also veterans and their survivors how VA plans to accomplish the ambitious goal of eliminating the claims backlog by 2015.

That is why this bill would require VA to publicly report, on a quarterly basis, information on both VA's quarterly goals and actual production. This would allow Congress and the public to see both the successes and failures of VA's transformation efforts, measure VA's progress, and allow for quicker adjustments when necessary.

Additionally, this legislation would address the challenges of the claims system by providing long-term reforms that will improve VA's claims process from start to finish – from the regional offices located across the nation to the Board of Veterans' Appeals. I would like to highlight just a few important aspects of this legislation. This bill would strengthen VA's work credit and work management systems; support the hiring of veterans in claims processing positions; and streamline the process for gathering evidence from federal agencies.

Despite all the attention being paid to initial claim decisions, I remain very concerned about the staggering number of appeals at the Board. That is why this bill also contains a number of provisions that would improve the Board's ability to operate efficiently.

As we all know, a decade of war has had a major impact on our military families. Over 6,600 servicemembers have died in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, leaving behind spouses and children who relied on them.

Earlier this year, this Committee heard from the Gold Star Wives of America about the significant challenges that survivors continue to face, such as the need to improve Dependency and Indemnity Compensation benefits and qualification requirements. The Survivor Benefits Improvement Act of 2013 would address many of these challenges. Among other things, it would create a pilot program to provide grief counseling in retreat settings, which includes child care for widows and widowers whose spouses died while on active duty in the Armed Forces; and ensure adequate compensation while removing barriers to benefits for surviving spouses and children. This legislation would make a real and positive impact in the lives of the surviving spouses and children who have lost a loved one as a result of service to this country.

Finally, if veterans are unaware of their benefits, then nothing we discuss here today will help them when they need assistance. For this reason, I introduced the Veterans' Outreach Act of

2013, which would require VA to carry out a two-year demonstration project that would provide grants to state and local government agencies, and nonprofit organizations in order to better coordinate VA's outreach efforts. Greater coordination would raise awareness of available benefits and services among the veteran population.

The claims backlog, veteran unemployment, and the provision of adequate support for surviving family members are just a few of the important challenges that we must continue to work to overcome.

I look forward to hearing the input of VA and the various VSOs who are here with us today.