

1 JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
2 THE AMERICAN LEGION

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4 WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2020

5 United States Senate,
6 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
7 House of Representatives,
8 Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
9 Washington, D.C.

10 The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m.,
11 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry
12 Moran and Hon. Mark Takano, Chairmen of the Committees,
13 presiding.

14 Senators Present: Moran, Boozman, Rounds, Tillis,
15 Sullivan, Sullivan, Tester, Brown, Manchin, and Sinema.

16 Representatives Present: Takano, Lamb, Brindisi, Rose,
17 Pappas, Cunningham, Cisneros, Peterson, Allred, Underwood,
18 Roe, and Bost.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MORAN

20 Chairman Moran. The Committee, everyone. The hush
21 suggests that it is time to commence our meeting, and I am
22 happy to do that.

23 Over the past few weeks we have had the pleasure and
24 the ability to learn from a number of veterans and veteran
25 service organizations. Today we gather with the American

1 Legion, and this is our fifth hearing and final legislative
2 presentation by a VSO.

3 Commander Oxford, thank you and your fellow
4 Legionnaires for joining us, my colleagues and I, one of
5 which is seated next to you. We are looking forward to
6 hearing from you and learning the Legion's top legislative
7 priorities.

8 As we have done previously, only to keep up with my
9 colleagues here, I would take a moment to recognize the
10 Kansans who are here from my state, members of the American
11 Legion, friends and important citizens of our state, one and
12 all. If they would stand and be recognized, I would
13 appreciate seeing their presence.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Moran. Thank you and thank you for the
16 conversation we had in my office yesterday.

17 All of you, your willingness to join us today is a
18 testament of your unwavering commitment to your brothers and
19 sisters in arms. As we all know, transforming the VA into a
20 21st century VA is a monumental task that requires all hands
21 on deck. Veteran service organizations, like the American
22 Legion and their members, play a critical role in this
23 process. You are the front lines and see first-hand where
24 the VA is thriving and where it faces challenges.

25 I have indicated many times that what I know, and my

1 legislative priorities are in large part determined by the
2 conversations I have in Kansas and across the country with
3 veterans, and certainly the American Legion is a significant
4 component of my knowledge of where attention is needed.

5 American Legion gives voice to veterans who at times
6 can feel unheard or marginalized. You also provide an
7 annual check for our communities and help make certain that
8 we are on the right track. My father was a member of the
9 American Legion post in my hometown and I am the son of the
10 American Legion and I am honored to have that distinction
11 and honored to do so in respect for my father.

12 Commander Oxford, while I was reading over your written
13 testimony I noticed the Legion and I share a number of
14 priorities, and I am glad for that, from enhancing suicide
15 prevention to addressing toxic exposure to improving women's
16 health care. You have my commitment that the Senate
17 Veterans' Affairs Committee will continue to work with you
18 and the larger veteran community on addressing these and
19 other priorities.

20 We look forward to your presentation today and will
21 continue to work with you to make certain that veterans'
22 voices are heard and that they receive the care and
23 attention that they deserve.

24 It is my pleasure now to turn to Chairman Takano, the
25 Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TAKANO

2 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Chairman Moran. It is a
3 honor to be here for the last, but certainly not the least,
4 joint House and Senate veteran service organization hearing
5 of the year. I would like to welcome all of the American
6 Legion members and auxiliary members who have joined us
7 today, and I look forward to your testimony.

8 Before we get started I would like to recognize all of
9 our members from my home state of California. Would all the
10 Californians please stand or raise their hand.

11 [Applause.]

12 Chairman Takano. Welcome. Welcome.

13 Reading today's testimony it is clear that we share
14 many of the same priorities. We must address the national
15 crisis of veteran suicide. Veterans must receive high
16 quality health care. We must understand the full impacts of
17 toxic exposures and make sure that another generation of
18 veterans does not have to wait for the benefits and care
19 they need and deserve.

20 In addition, as our veteran population grows
21 increasingly more diverse, we must support our women, LGBTQ,
22 minority, and Native American veterans. The legislation we
23 passed must improve access to culturally competent care for
24 all veterans.

25 As Chairman, I have made reducing veteran suicide my

1 number one priority. It is our job to create sound, well-
2 researched policy and not simply perpetuate approaches that
3 are not proven to prevent suicide. And we take that
4 responsibility very seriously. Our approach to suicide
5 prevention takes into account multiple factors that could
6 reduce veteran suicide, everything from lowering the
7 economic burdens on veterans to increasing access to care
8 and improving crisis intervention for those at high risk.

9 One critical step towards addressing veteran suicide is
10 to expand access to emergency mental health care for
11 veterans in crisis. That is why I introduced H.R. 5697, the
12 Veterans Access Act. This legislation would ensure all
13 veterans, regardless of their discharge status or
14 eligibility for other VA health care benefits, have access
15 to the emergency mental health care they need. I look
16 forward to working with the American Legion to pass this
17 bill and save veterans' lives.

18 We also have a duty to ensure this administration
19 recognizes the impact of toxic exposure during military
20 service, and that VA takes action before it is too late.
21 Our veterans should not have to wait 40 years for the VA to
22 recognize that a veteran is suffering from past exposure in
23 order to get the benefits they earned.

24 For example, I am urging the administration to add four
25 diseases to the Department's presumption list that we know

1 to be linked to Agent Orange exposure. This will ensure
2 many more veterans can access crucial VA disability and
3 health care benefits. I know that with the support and
4 insight of the American Legion we can continue to hold the
5 administration accountable and work to fulfill the promises
6 that we have made to our veterans. And let me just
7 emphasize, our Vietnam veterans have waited too long. Now
8 is the time to add those conditions to the presumptive list.

9 I look forward to hearing your testimony and thank you
10 all for the work that you have done and service to veterans
11 and their families.

12 I now yield back, Mr. Chairman.

13 Chairman Moran. Mr. Chairman, thank you, and I now
14 recognize the Ranking Member of the House Committee,
15 Congressman Roe.

16 OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

17 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning,
18 Commander Oxford. It is a pleasure for me to be here with
19 Chairman Takano, Chairman Moran, and Ranking Member Tester
20 to welcome you and your fellow Legionnaires to Washington.
21 This is my 12th and final year in Congress and so my final
22 time attending this hearing, and when you leave, Commander,
23 they send you this sheet called Departing Members. I am not
24 planning on departing. I am just leaving Congress.

25 It has been an honor for me to attend the Legion's

1 annual hearing, joint hearing, all these years. And as I
2 prepare for my retirement I can say, without a moment's
3 hesitation, I am filled with tremendous pride and hope for
4 our country's future, because the patriotism and the passion
5 of Legionnaires across this country, many of whom I have had
6 the privilege of meeting and getting to know personally.

7 I want to thank each and every one of you for your
8 continued service. In particular, I want to welcome the
9 Legion's stellar national leadership team who work
10 tirelessly day in and day out under the direction of
11 Commander Oxford. And I thank you for your staff. They
12 have been great to work with.

13 Sir, I am so grateful for your decades that you spent
14 defending our freedoms, first in the Marine Corps and then
15 in the Army, and now as the National Commander of the
16 American Legion. I am glad to see you are here with us
17 today, and I also want to acknowledge the members of the
18 American Legion auxiliary. And we know who does all the
19 work, the auxiliary. The many hats that you wear as
20 spouses, as volunteers, as caregivers and more, it does not
21 go unnoticed or underappreciated, and I thank you for that.

22 Finally, I want to say a special hello and thanks to
23 the Legionnaires who are here today from my great state of
24 Tennessee. I met with you. If you would please stand so we
25 can recognize you. I know Bob is here. Yep, there we are.

1 [Applause.]

2 Dr. Roe. Commander Oxford, you know, in your
3 testimony, quote, "The American Legion believes veterans
4 have given this country far more than what is asked in
5 return," end quote. I could not agree more with you. It
6 would be impossible for me to detail all of the work that
7 the American Legion has performed throughout your more than
8 a century of service or the value that the Legion continues
9 to bring to bear on matters of military veteran national
10 security policy even now.

11 It is with the help of the Legion and working with our
12 Committees and with our partners in the Trump administration
13 that the Department of Veterans Affairs has undergone such a
14 positive transformation over the last few years. Thanks to
15 our mutual efforts I am proud to report that veterans today
16 have greater access to care, greater control over their care
17 than ever before. Veterans can use their GI Bill benefits
18 whenever they choose.

19 Veteran unemployment reached near record lows.
20 Veterans getting their appeals for disability compensation
21 decided faster and more efficiently, thanks to Mr. Bost
22 right here, his bill. Veterans of the Blue Water Navy are
23 receiving the benefits they have earned, and that took way
24 too long to get done. Fewer veterans are homeless. Fewer
25 veterans are dependent on opioids. The widows tax has been

1 repealed. And the VA has more funding, more staff, and has
2 risen from one of the lowest-ranking agencies to one of the
3 top six best places to work in the Federal Government.

4 And I know in my own hometown of Johnson City,
5 Tennessee, I almost never hear a negative comment about the
6 VA hospital there. I am extremely proud of that.

7 We should all be proud of those successes, even as we
8 acknowledge that work remains, much of which is detailed in
9 the commander's testimony. Looking ahead, we must remain
10 steadfast in our efforts to prevent veteran suicide by
11 instilling hope and purpose in all of those who have served
12 and doing a better job of leveraging communities of care to
13 support them and their families; to empower veterans to
14 succeed in their civilian lives, to realign and modernize
15 the VA health care system so that it meets our nation's
16 veterans where they live and serves them well; to expand
17 VA's caregiver program so that it serves caregiver veterans
18 of all eras; to those who have experienced toxic exposures
19 during their time in uniform; and to continue aggressive
20 oversight of every aspect of VA, our nation's second-largest
21 bureaucracy; to ensure that every veteran who walks into a
22 VA office, facility, or clinic receives timely, quality
23 care.

24 I look forward to discussing these issues and more with
25 you today, Commander Oxford, and to building on our

1 successes over the past three years on behalf of
2 Legionnaires and veterans across the country. I salute you
3 and I yield back my time.

4 Chairman Moran. Congressman Roe, thank you very much.
5 I am going to recognize, in just a moment, Senator Tillis.
6 Commander, I want you to know that you are going to see me
7 depart just momentarily, about the time that you begin to
8 testify, and I hate that.

9 Dr. Roe. Please leave, not depart.

10 Chairman Moran. Oh, depart. I am not departing.
11 Thank you.

12 [Laughter.]

13 Chairman Moran. I intend to come back alive and well
14 in just a few moments. I have a couple of bills pending
15 another committee that are being voted on. But I will
16 return to make certain that we pay significant attention to
17 what you have to say and the questions and answer that I
18 will learn from.

19 At this moment let me now turn to my colleague from
20 North Carolina, Senator Thom Tillis. Thom is a member of
21 our Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, active, fully
22 engaged, and a great ally in the effort to make sure that
23 veterans are well cared for.

24 And I now recognize, you, Senator Tillis.

25 Senator Tillis. Thank you, Chairman Moran, Chairman

1 Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished members of the
2 Committee. If I may, as a point of personal privilege, ask,
3 anybody who is from North Carolina, either currently or
4 passed through North Carolina in relation to your service,
5 please stand up or raise your hand.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Moran. Senator Tillis, you one-upped all of
8 us, and with that I am going to walk out on you, not the
9 Commander.

10 [Laughter.]

11 Senator Tillis. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and
12 first I am very proud to be sitting next to Bill Oxford. I
13 have had the distinct pleasure of getting to work with him
14 many times over the past several years in his many
15 capacities, as he has continued to serve after his military
16 service. He has virtually held every position one could
17 hold within the American Legion, both in North Carolina and
18 at the national level.

19 Bill Oxford was elected National Commander of the
20 American Legion on August 29, 2019, during the
21 organization's 101st national convention in Indianapolis.
22 He has been a member of the nation's largest veterans'
23 organization since 1986. A native of Lenoir, North
24 Carolina, Mr. Oxford is a paid-up-for-life member as well as
25 the past commander of Post 29 in Lenoir. He served as the

1 Department Commander of North Carolina American Legion from
2 2010 to 2011.

3 He is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps. Mr. Oxford
4 was an aviation electronic technician for the A6 Intruder
5 and served in Vietnam during his initial enlistment. After
6 being discharged as a sergeant in 1970, Mr. Oxford joined
7 the North Carolina National Guard. He subsequently attended
8 Officer's Candidate School and transferred to the U.S. Army
9 Reserve where he ultimately retired as colonel after more
10 than 34 years of military service.

11 A former mayor and city councilmember of Cajah's
12 Mountain, North Carolina--I think the did not think I could
13 pronounce that right; they gave me a phonetic one--he has
14 worked since his high school as a high school student with
15 most of his career choices being in maintenance and
16 engineering field.

17 Mr. Oxford has also served his community by
18 volunteering as a coach, umpire, referee, administrator in
19 several youth athletic programs, and he has also served as
20 the public address announcer for Post 29 American Legion
21 baseball team.

22 Mr. Oxford's lifelong record of service to our nation
23 and to our community have prepared him well to lead the
24 American Legion. His theme as National Commander of the
25 American Legion is "a foundation for the future," as the

1 organization enters its second century of service. That is
2 a fitting theme for Mr. Oxford's tenure, given our work
3 together on the Legion Act, a bill that expands eligibility
4 for membership for the American Legion to veterans of all
5 eras. I was proud to co-lead this bill with Senator Sinema
6 and worked closely with the American Legion to successfully
7 get the bill signed into law just last summer.

8 With that, it is my great privilege and honor to
9 welcome a fellow North Carolinian, Bill Oxford, to this
10 hearing on behalf of the American Legion. I know you are
11 going to do us proud.

12 [Applause.]

13 Senator Tillis. And, Mr. Chairman, I did tell him not
14 to mess up.

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1 STATEMENT OF JAMES W. "BILL" OXFORD, NATIONAL
2 COMMANDER, ACCOMPANIED BY JOSEPH SHARPE, DIRECTOR,
3 VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION DIVISION; DANIEL
4 SEEHAFFER, CHAIRMAN, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND
5 EDUCATION COMMISSION; MELISSA BRYANT, NATIONAL
6 LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR; CHANIN NUNTAVONG, DIRECTOR,
7 NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION
8 DIVISION; RALPH BOZELLA, CHAIRMAN, VETERANS
9 AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION; AND VINCENT
10 TROIOLA, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATION COMMISSION

11 Mr. Oxford. I will try my best. Thank you, Senator
12 Tillis, for the kind introduction and for your bipartisan
13 leadership in such areas of concern to the American Legion
14 as burn pit exposure, timely VA health care delivery, and
15 career opportunities for veterans.

16 And, Chairman, if I might, before I proceed I would
17 like to take a moment to recognize all of the past national
18 commanders of the American Legion. Gentleman and lady,
19 would you please stand?

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Oxford. And the past American Legion Auxiliary
22 past National President and Current President, Nicole Clapp.

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Oxford. And past National Commander of the Sons of
25 the American Legion and their current National Commander,

1 Clint Bolt.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Oxford. Folks, we have got a great team.

4 And I would also like to say thank you to the members
5 of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs for
6 once again giving us this opportunity. The American Legion
7 has delivered the legislative priorities of our nation's
8 veterans and their families to Congress in hearings just
9 like this for more than 10 decades, and those priorities
10 have produced impressive results--fair health care and
11 timely benefits for veterans disabled by military service,
12 from mustard gas to Agent Orange to IEDs; a code of respect
13 for the U.S. flag; an arm of the Federal Government solely
14 dedicated to the needs of veterans; veterans preference
15 hiring; a GI Bill of Rights that changed the world and
16 continues to do so; recognition and pursuit of effective
17 treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans;
18 support for caregivers of disabled veterans; improved
19 services for women.

20 Our journey can be traced back to the original purpose
21 of the American Legion when World War I veterans came home
22 to virtually no help or support from the government that
23 sent them to fight. Our mission today is a continuation of
24 the work they began. From World War I we learned that we
25 needed a VA. From World War II we saw what could be

1 accomplished for the entire nation through GI Bill benefits
2 and veterans' preference hiring.

3 The Vietnam War later produced an expectation of
4 accountability from the Federal Government that veterans
5 exposed to toxic herbicides during their service, and those
6 who came home with invisible wounds, would not be dismissed
7 or forgotten.

8 We continue this mission on all those fronts. Between
9 Vietnam and 9/11, the American Legion and Congress worked
10 together to reinvent the Veterans Administration, one that
11 is now described, and I quote, "the best care anywhere."
12 Today so many of these issues, and new ones for a new
13 generation, continue to occupy the American Legion's
14 priority list.

15 That is because the American Legion, Congress, the VA,
16 the Pentagon, and the White House all share in a continuous
17 mission to ensure that these important laws and policies are
18 effectively implemented, given critical oversight, and are
19 constantly improved. Implementation, oversight and
20 improvement--that triad is the prevailing theme in the
21 American Legion legislative priority list for the second
22 session of the 116th Congress.

23 Let me start with VA health care. Much has been
24 promised, and even more is expected, from the VA MISSION
25 Act. That legislation was borne of a deadly crisis six

1 years ago when veterans whose medical appointments were not
2 scheduled, even though some in the VA thoughtfully claimed
3 they were. We all worked hard over the last six years to
4 convert that crisis into confidence in the VA's future.

5 Today we are in a better place on VA accountability,
6 but an overriding issue attached to the meltdown of 2014
7 persists--timely access to care. As we press forward with
8 such innovations as Project Atlas, which aims to make good
9 use of American Legion post homes to provide VA telehealth
10 services for veterans, we remain highly concerned about
11 another issue--oversight of non-VA providers.

12 We understand the primary objective, delivery of care
13 for veterans as quickly and efficiently as possible, but the
14 long-term strategy must not lead the VA any further down the
15 road to privatization.

16 In some areas where community care has been offered
17 through the Choice program, which the MISSION Act replaces,
18 non-VA providers are unwilling to accept VA patients, due to
19 compensation differences or timely payments. That leaves
20 serious concern that veterans will be forced to seek out the
21 provider of least resistance rather than VA's best care
22 anywhere.

23 We must always remember why the VA is special and must
24 be protected. You will find these reasons in the testimony
25 books before you today. In them you will see, for instance,

1 how treatment for combat-caused PTSD and TBI is a VA
2 responsibility, not one delegated to the private sector.
3 Advances in alternative therapies for these conditions are
4 coming from veterans and VA success stories, stories we are
5 still discovering every day, from equine therapy to yoga to
6 peer support to clown therapy to PTR MS. These are dots for
7 the VA to connect in support of veterans facing PTSD, not
8 for other providers.

9 When you combine the chronic pain of military injuries
10 with PTSD or TBI, and then prescribe a pharmaceutical
11 cocktail to blot it all out, a common result is isolation,
12 and isolation is a major contributor and the most
13 heartbreaking issue facing veterans today, the high suicide
14 rate.

15 The American Legion conducted an online mental health
16 survey in 2019 that showed our respondents, 30 percent,
17 personally, knew a veteran who died by suicide. Sixty-seven
18 percent indicated they would be willing to get formal
19 suicide prevention training to help reduce the rate.

20 As more and more victims of military sexual trauma step
21 forward to report these unthinkable violations of trust, we
22 must stand together behind the American Legion policy on
23 this matter--zero tolerance. But for survivors, we call on
24 Congress to provide emphatic oversight to ensure that VA is
25 well resourced to install effective, discreet, and easily

1 accessed services, administered by qualified professionals
2 for these veterans.

3 And like treatment for PTSD and TBI, care for MST
4 survivors is a VA responsibility, not a provider unlikely to
5 understand the military dynamics involved.

6 Women veterans are currently over 2 million, and are
7 increasing by nearly 18,000 per year, and represent the
8 fastest-growing group entering the VA system. We have found
9 that VA medical services specific to their needs are
10 inconsistent and lacking in many areas.

11 In our shared vision to provide oversight and make
12 improvement in critical areas, we must continue to ask our
13 nation's VA health care facilities how they are fulfilling
14 the needs of women veterans, hold them accountable to
15 necessary changes, and critically measure their performance
16 in the name of responsible oversight.

17 The American Legion's System Worth Saving and regional
18 office action review site visits provide our organization
19 important insights into the challenges and best practices of
20 the VA medical system in local communities. Typically,
21 these visits begin with town hall meetings where veterans
22 openly discuss the performance of their VHA and VBA
23 providers. I would like to invite Members of Congress and
24 their staff to join us in these events for the most
25 important level of oversight, first-hand from the veterans

1 we serve. Each year, the American Legion prepares and
2 distributes a System Worth Saving report to Members of
3 Congress and the Veterans Administration so they can use our
4 findings to implement changes and share success stories that
5 can be emulated elsewhere in the system.

6 Significant progress has been made at VBA to reduce the
7 backlog of undecided claims and appeals, and the Appeals
8 Modernization Act is already exceeding expectations. We are
9 confident this will continue as we watch the backlog shrink
10 in the months ahead.

11 Significant progress has also been made to roll out the
12 Forever GI Bill, the biggest expansion of that benefit in
13 over a decade. But the American Legion has some serious GI
14 Bill concerns that need legislative attention, one of which
15 is immediate, the other to help prevent the problem in the
16 future.

17 We call on Congress to pass the Protect the GI Bill Act
18 to reinstate benefits for student whose for-profit schools
19 went out of business before they finished their degree
20 programs. These veterans were often aggressively recruited
21 by for-profit schools and are stuck with no degree and no GI
22 Bill benefits to seek an education elsewhere.

23 Once that is accomplished, we further ask Congress to
24 pass the Veterans Education and Taxpayer Spending Act to
25 close what is known as the 90/10 loophole, which now counts

1 VA and DoD education funding as, and I quote, "private
2 dollars." They are not private dollars. They are
3 government dollars, just like any other federal student aid.
4 This loophole has led to aggressive and even deceptive
5 recruitment by for-profit schools, which in the worst cases
6 have left veterans without degrees and drained of their GI
7 Bill benefits.

8 If history has taught us anything, the Forever GI Bill
9 will not, by any means, be the final GI Bill. The American
10 Legion will always be looking to improve it.

11 On January 1, 2020, VBA began reviewing Blue Water Navy
12 Act claims. We are thankful that this bipartisan
13 legislation was finally signed into last law year on behalf
14 of tens of thousands of Vietnam War veterans suffering from
15 diseases related to their offshore exposure to Agent Orange.
16 Disability benefits for those veterans were wrongly
17 suspended many years ago, and many of them have died from
18 their service-connected conditions, since then, so this
19 implementation is long overdue.

20 More recently, the National Academy of Medicine has
21 recommended that four new conditions be added to the list as
22 presumptively caused by Agent Orange exposure--bladder
23 cancer, hyperthyroidism, hypertension, and Parkinson's-like
24 symptoms. Science backs up the argument that these
25 conditions need to be added now, but to our knowledge no

1 action has been taken. We call on Congress to give those
2 disabled veterans the care and recognition they so rightly
3 earned--implementation, oversight, improvement.

4 We have, in military terms, a target-rich environment.
5 The American Legion is firing on those targets at the
6 community, state, and national level. One example of the
7 Legion's commitment to veterans and military personnel came
8 a little over a year ago when our organization raised and
9 delivered over \$1 million in cash grants--not loans--to
10 junior enlisted Coast Guard families whose paychecks were
11 delayed by the government shutdown. In addition to the
12 grants, local posts across the country collected food,
13 diapers, toiletries, and fulfilled other needs for these
14 Coast Guard families with children at home.

15 To prevent this from ever happening again, we ask that
16 you urge your colleagues, and appropriate committees, to
17 pass the Pay Our Coast Guard Act. That measure will exempt
18 members of the Coast Guard, just like any other branch of
19 service, from pay disruption in the event of a shutdown.

20 Passage of the Legion Act last summer gave long-awaited
21 recognition to more than 1,600 Americans who have died or
22 were wounded in service outside previously designated war
23 areas. It is fact that our nation has been in a perpetual
24 state of armed conflict since December 7, 1941. We owe all
25 who have served since then the same level of respect as

1 others who swore with their lives to protect our nation.

2 We are confident that the VBA will continue to improve
3 the VA claims and appeals processes. Like Dr. Paul
4 Lawrence, Under Secretary for Benefits at VA, we want 2020
5 to be--VBA's hashtag campaign says "the best year ever."

6 We stand against privatizing the VA health care system,
7 but we continue to stand for its improvement. That kind of
8 oversight and advocacy, we believe, can and will make the VA
9 the best care anywhere.

10 We intend to work hard, arm's length with Congress and
11 the administration, to improve treatment of PTSD, build a
12 better care environment for women veterans, help the
13 homeless get on their feet, demand that VA claims are
14 resolved faster and accurately, protect student veterans
15 from GI Bill abuses, and continue assisting in the difficult
16 transition from military service to civilian life.

17 Nearly all of our marching orders can be found in one
18 form or another throughout the history of the American
19 Legion's relationship with Congress. Many of our shared
20 accomplishments can be credited to a generation of veterans
21 whose war ended 75 years ago this year, the men and women
22 who turned their GI Bill benefits into a half-century of
23 American prosperity and fought to make the VA what it is
24 today.

25 In 2017, the American Legion National Convention passed

1 a resolution to exempt from means testing all living World
2 War II veterans not already enrolled in the Veterans
3 Administration. This is not unprecedented. A similar
4 measure was passed in 1996, for the last living veterans of
5 the Spanish-American War and World War I. About 75 percent
6 of surviving World War II veterans are already enrolled in
7 the Veterans Administration, so this does not amount to a
8 large number. It would be a small gesture of gratitude for
9 these men and women to whom the world owes so much.

10 As we renew our vows to those who served our nation so
11 effectively and bravely today, let's remember those who came
12 before us and grant them access into the system of respect
13 and care they helped invent.

14 Thank you, God bless America's veterans, and God bless
15 America.

16 [Applause.]

17 [The prepared statement of Mr. Oxford follows:]

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1 Chairman Takano. [Presiding.] Well, thank you,
2 Commander Oxford, for your testimony. I am going to
3 recognize myself for five minutes to begin the questioning.
4 Actually three minutes, three minutes.

5 Commander, I will begin with this question. I am very
6 pleased you made comment about the abuse of for-profit
7 colleges. The Department recently announced plans to halt
8 new GI Bill enrollment at institutions that engaged in
9 predatory practices.

10 In light of this decision, what are the next steps that
11 you think Congress should take to protect student veterans?

12 Mr. Oxford. I would like to turn that question over to
13 Chairman Seehafer for his idea.

14 Mr. Seehafer. Thank you very much, sir, for the
15 question. You know, as the family members behind me, we
16 always say that we are boots on the ground, and obviously
17 preparing for your question and these things that come in
18 front of us, I wanted to share with you something that I
19 know you are concerned about, as well as ourselves.

20 This is really, I would say, hot off the press. Last
21 year, we had a young Legionnaire, also on part of our staff,
22 that attended the Army's Advanced Leadership Course, right,
23 and one of his battle buddies was pursuing a doctorate in
24 national security from a particular university. And it was
25 inspiring to him to see him stay up late, you know, those

1 nights, extra, studying away, being in those barracks and
2 working on his dissertation.

3 And so a little over a month after they graduated, this
4 university abruptly closed its doors, back in March of last
5 year. And it was painful enough to think that, you know,
6 all the time and effort that his friend was putting into
7 getting his doctorate, but worse, was that he lost most of
8 his GI Bill pursuing something that fell apart due to no
9 fault of his own.

10 So we are definitely looking to change that. And
11 again, we understand, being transparent on this, of course,
12 another university stepped in. But still, the pain and all
13 the things that this veteran went through--and it is not
14 just one. There are numerous. And so we would like that
15 changed, and recommend that.

16 And, of course, there are--we do not want to punish
17 other universities that are doing things right, obviously.
18 And so we encourage, again, oversight. We encourage,
19 obviously, improvement on this statement here.

20 So again, I hope that answers your question then.

21 Chairman Takano. Thank you very much. Have you done
22 specific policy proposal like closing the 90/10 loophole,
23 you know, making sure that we have borrowers' defense in
24 place for our veterans as well who get put into debt.

25 Mr. Oxford. Mr. Chairman, if I might, I would

1 recommend and endorse the closing of the 90/10 loophole and
2 pass the Protect the GI Bill Act.

3 Chairman Takano. Wonderful. Thank you for that. I am
4 glad the Legion has taken that position.

5 My time is up. Actually, I am over. I am going to
6 recognize ranking Member Dr. Roe for his three minutes.

7 Dr. Roe. Thank you very much, and Commander, I am a
8 dues-paying member, Post 24, Johnson City, Tennessee, I
9 might add, and my dues are paid up.

10 [Laughter.]

11 Dr. Roe. A couple of things, Commander, on PTSD, that
12 when I helped write the MISSION Act it makes this a little
13 more difficult. I am veteran and I saw veteran patients
14 outside the VA. And some were for PTSD, others for other
15 things. There are doctors inside the VA that never served,
16 so we have got to find the best way, I think, to treat these
17 veterans. And a lot of times it may be outside the VA. I
18 have run across veterans who will not go to the VA. So we
19 have got to reach out to them, I think. And I think you
20 guys are the ones--and ladies and gentlemen--are the ones
21 that are critical to doing that.

22 The VA cannot be everywhere. I mean, there are two
23 million members of the American Legion, and that is a huge
24 organization that can reach out and touch people, and we
25 need to get them into care. Because I agree with you. To

1 me it is the most heart-breaking thing in the world--20 men
2 and women a day committing suicide. That is 6,000 people a
3 year, that is totally preventable. So how do we do that?
4 We want to work with you and work together doing that.

5 Another thing you did not mention in your statement was
6 that I have asked DoD and VA, mainly DoD, to identify how
7 many bases in Thailand got sprayed, and you were not
8 mentioning it but we have got to work on that. There are a
9 lot of people that are not included in Agent Orange, and we
10 have had a hard time reconciling how many bases. So if you
11 would help us with that and nudge DoD a little bit to help
12 us get that information so we can do what is right there, I
13 would appreciate that. We need your help on that,
14 Commander.

15 Mr. Oxford. Thank you, sir. Our staff will be happy
16 to work on that Agent Orange issue in Thailand. Melissa, if
17 you will work with Dr. Roe's staff on that issue.

18 When we think about the mental health issues, and you
19 specifically mentioned veteran suicide, there is no veteran-
20 -and that is a tragic loss that is preventable--but no
21 veteran should die by his own hands. That is an atrocity.
22 But when we think about the 20 veterans a day who are
23 committing suicide, only 6 of those are enrolled with the
24 Veterans Administration. We need to do our part, and we
25 will be doing that to help the VA do their part.

1 But I think I agree with you, the fact that veterans'
2 treatment at the VA for PTSD and TBI is the only way to go.
3 That is the best source of help for VA as far as mental
4 health goes.

5 I think you mentioned the fact that we are all
6 veterans, we are all stubborn, and the willingness to move
7 over to the VA for that kind of help is a critical part, and
8 that is where we can come in. We all have the ability to
9 make those people understand the VA is the best source of
10 help available. And as we do that, we need to make sure the
11 VA is equipped with their necessary resources. We need to
12 make sure the VA is hiring qualified, professional,
13 competent mental health professionals, and we need to
14 increase our DoD funding of VA's suicide prevention program.
15 If we do that and pass the Commander John Scott Hannon
16 Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act, I think that
17 will have an impact.

18 From our side, the American Legion has instituted a
19 program called the Buddy Check program. That buddy check is
20 to reach out from the Legion side to all Legionnaires to
21 check and say, "Hey, how are you doing? Are you okay? Can
22 we help? Do you need anything? Can we help you with
23 anything?"

24 So as far as reaching out, the American Legion is doing
25 that, but we need to continue to emphasize to society that

1 it is okay to ask for help. Asking for help is not--it used
2 to be a blog on our record but it not anymore. It is
3 important. It is critical. We need to make sure very
4 veteran realizes help is out there. Let us help you.

5 [Applause.]

6 Dr. Roe. Commander, thank you for your service in the
7 Marine Corps and in the United States Army, and I yield
8 back.

9 Thank you, Dr. Roe. Senator Tester, you are recognized
10 for three minutes.

11 Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to
12 thank you, Commander Oxford, for your statement today, and I
13 want to thank you for your answer to the question that
14 Congressman Roe put forward. Just as a little update, you
15 probably already know this, the Commander John Scott Hannon
16 bill passed out of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee by
17 a unanimous 17-0. And we got everybody from Blackburn to
18 Bernie to vote for that bad boy.

19 [Laughter.]

20 Senator Tester. So now all we have got to do is get
21 Senator McConnell to take it up on the floor, and it will be
22 off, and then Chairman Takano can work his magic on the
23 House side of things, if you do not already have it passed
24 over there. I do not know.

25 But I just want to thank you, and I appreciate your

1 comments on the VA MISSION Act. I appreciate your comments
2 on gender disparity within the VA. The fastest-growing
3 population of VA is women. We have got to figure out how to
4 do this right, and VA is not doing it right yet. I want to
5 thank you for your comments on Agent Orange and that
6 exposure, and the Colmery GI Bill.

7 You know, we got a lot of good work done last Congress,
8 but we really do depend on VSOs like the American Legion,
9 with your members, to really tell us how things are working
10 and take our lead from your direction.

11 And there are a lot of issues out there, from
12 presumptives to Blue Water to the caregivers program, and it
13 makes me want to ask your membership, how many folks served
14 in Vietnam? Raise your hand.

15 [Show of hands.]

16 Senator Tester. Yeah, and raise your hand if you are
17 under the age of 60 and served in Vietnam.

18 [Laughter.]

19 Senator Tester. Exactly. No hands went up. And so
20 the question becomes, when it comes to Blue Water Navy,
21 which is a Vietnam issue, and when it comes to caregiver,
22 which is everybody's issue but we just open it up for the
23 Vietnam vet. When it comes to presumptives, we have got to
24 do a better job. I mean, the fact of the matter is,
25 Commander, you know, the VA is trying to outlive you and, by

1 God, they are getting her done. And we should not do this.

2 The Blue Water Navy was a struggle. We finally got it
3 done. Caregivers is a struggle. And, by the way, Blue
4 Water is not where it needs to be, and the caregiver
5 situation, we have got a computer program that is not doing
6 what it needs to do. This is 21st century, and you guys are
7 getting older, and we need to step up.

8 And I would just say one thing, and I am going to ask
9 you a question, I promise. But the presumptives issue is
10 really important, and the science is there. And I will tell
11 you that a previous Secretary of the VA was getting ready to
12 declare these presumptives as being eligible for coverage.
13 That was several years ago, and now we are still here.

14 So could you just talk, very briefly, because I talked
15 too long, could you talk very briefly, Commander Oxford, or
16 whoever you want to send this to, what would it mean to your
17 members if these conditions are added? And the reason I say
18 that is because I just dropped a bill in to make sure those
19 presumptives are included in the Care program.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Oxford. Sir, we support that bill and we would
22 just specifically call on the VA to approve those four new
23 presumptives--bladder cancer, hypertension, hyperthyroidism,
24 and Parkinson-like symptoms. Those are symptoms that we
25 face every day. So I just want to thank you for that bill.

1 Senator Tester. Thank you for your leadership.

2 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Tester. I now
3 call on Mr. Bost for three minutes.

4 Mr. Bost. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Commander,
5 thank you. Thank you for your service. Thank you for being
6 here. Semper fi. And not to be outdone by the Ranking
7 Member, I also am very much up on my dues at the Paul Stout,
8 in Murphysburo, Illinois.

9 But let me also say hi to all the members out there
10 from Illinois. If you want to just stand up, raise your
11 hand, we would like to recognize you. Thank you for being
12 here.

13 [Applause.]

14 Mr. Bost. So it was brought up about the Blue Water
15 Navy, and, you know, we have done a lot of things these last
16 couple of years to improve in a lot of areas, but getting
17 that done, I want to thank the members at this dais that
18 were involved with that, and how long and how hard they
19 worked on that. You know, I have been there five years, six
20 years, and we finally got that done.

21 But it is only as good as, the law itself, unless it is
22 implemented correctly, so I need to find out what are you
23 hearing on the ground about how quick they are reaching out
24 to this long-overdue ability for these veterans, that were
25 on the ships off Vietnam, there in the South China Sea, how

1 are they being reached out and how fast is that going?

2 Mr. Oxford. Sir, can I pass that over to Chairman
3 Bozella?

4 Mr. Bost. You bet.

5 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Senator Bost, that
6 is a very important question, because since the Blue Water
7 Navy bill was passed last year, we have been asking veterans
8 in all of our communities to file a claim now, even though
9 VA was not going to start adjudicating those claims until
10 January 1, 2020. So we are collecting that information.

11 The second thing we asked was that VA health care, VA
12 hospitals would begin allowing those veterans, whether they
13 were eligible or not, to get in their hospitals, pending the
14 fact that they have a claim on Blue Water Navy presumptives,
15 and so that we could get these people seen. Now some
16 hospitals were doing that and some were not. And those that
17 were, we have people that are actually being seen.

18 So the anticipation is high and veterans are waiting
19 now for the claims to be adjudicated. They are waiting for
20 this.

21 Mr. Bost. Okay. Good. Any suggestions you have at
22 all for speeding the process up, that we could give to the
23 Secretary.

24 Mr. Nuntavong. Congressman, I think that the claims
25 process needs to be done appropriately. We do not want to

1 rush things and have things overlooked. So we ask that they
2 be done accurately.

3 Mr. Bost. On a positive note, there was a guy that I
4 have known and have worked with, and was in the trucking
5 business for years, and I can remember when he had one
6 truck, and he was a Vietnam veteran. Not knowing this, his
7 son talked to me just the other day and said they reached
8 out to him. He did not reach out to them. He had tried to
9 claim several years ago and they called him up and he was
10 getting treated, and he has had all the problems you can
11 imagine from Agent Orange.

12 But thank you all for being here today. My time has
13 expired.

14 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mt. Bost. I now recognize
15 Mr. Pappas for three minutes.

16 Mr. Pappas. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.
17 Commander, thank you for your testimony, and I want to thank
18 the leadership of the Legion and the Auxiliary as well as
19 the members who are here who have been communicating the
20 message very powerfully to us on the Hill, about your
21 priorities. We stand with you and want to continue to work
22 with you all.

23 If there are folks here from my state of New Hampshire
24 I would love to see you stand up and take your applause. If
25 not--oh, here we go.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Pappas. Thank you for your service. I like to say
3 we support our vets as good as anywhere else in this
4 country, if not better, and the support that exists across
5 our state is really evident when you are out there.

6 One of the things that I have been focused on, in our
7 Oversight Investigation Subcommittee is VA provider
8 payments, and I was appreciative that you mentioned that.
9 If we are going to see MISSION Act succeed and really see
10 community care as a force multiplier for VA we have got to
11 make sure we have adequate networks and make sure these
12 bills are paid. But we also have to stand firm against
13 privatization, and so I am glad that you mentioned that as
14 well.

15 One of the other things our subcommittee has dealt
16 with, in a legislative hearing yesterday, is the issue of
17 benefit overpayments, which places an undue burden on our
18 veterans. These are vets who do everything right and are
19 not expecting to be overpaid, and then are, you know, hit
20 with a letter and a bill and have their credit scores
21 dinged.

22 So I know the Legion has worked directly with some of
23 these vets, and congressional offices have as well. Could
24 you speak to the burden that these overpayments place on our
25 veterans?

1 Mr. Oxford. Yes, sir. I would be happy to do that.
2 We have visited many VA hospitals across the country. We
3 continue to believe the VA is the best care anywhere. We
4 continue to hear issues like lack of payments and those
5 kinds of issues that delay payments to providers.

6 I would like to ask Chairman Nuntavong about your
7 question.

8 Mr. Nuntavong. Congressman, the overpayment issue, a
9 lot of our members may be reservists or National Guard, and
10 they go on orders, and they are receiving VA benefits as
11 well as their Guard and Reserve pay. VA needs to advertise
12 more about letting them know that they are being put on
13 active duty, and stopping the process before they become
14 indebted. We have out in all the debt management centers,
15 Legion folks that assist veterans at no cost, to help them
16 facilitate and navigate through this. But it is a difficult
17 problem.

18 Mr. Bozella. Mr. Representative, a very important
19 issue with that, that we are tracking through our System
20 Worth Saving program, is that these payments that were a
21 huge problem under the previous Choice Act, we thought were
22 going to go away. Well, they are still a problem with the
23 new care in the community act. And the veterans are getting
24 collection notices as they are waiting for these payments to
25 be processed, and then there is also an issue with the

1 transference of records that may or may not be taking place
2 on time.

3 So it is a critical issue as well as a financial issue,
4 so we are very concerned about that.

5 Mr. Pappas. Thank you very much for your comments, and
6 best wishes in the organization's second 100 years, and I
7 yield back, Mr. Chairman.

8 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Pappas. I now call on
9 Senator Tillis for three minutes.

10 Senator Tillis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thanks again
11 for being here, Commander Oxford, and your lovely wife
12 Frances. I know we talked about--I asked you where you were
13 going to be next, and I do not think I could keep track of
14 the number of places that you are traveling across the
15 country. So thank you for that service and personal
16 sacrifice.

17 I want to, first off, we went through the legislative
18 priorities with the delegation from North Carolina
19 yesterday, and we met in my office before the hearing, and I
20 agree with and want to help all of the legislative
21 priorities that the American Legion has put forth. I think
22 we have got to make progress on women's health, we have got
23 to make progress on preventing suicide, and that progress
24 absolutely is rooted in reaching out to veterans who are not
25 connected to the VA.

1 In fact, I left my meeting with you and went to meet
2 with the League of Municipalities, and I have done it with
3 the Association of County Commissioners in North Carolina.
4 I said, "Create a place where veterans can convene, so that
5 we can find these other men and women who need service, and
6 we can provide--and potentially--and will save lives."

7 The other thing I would like to really encourage all of
8 the members of the American Legion is to make sure that you
9 expect every Member of Congress to help you clear casework,
10 instead of doing what you all do--you are stubborn and you
11 see a task and you want to complete it--recognize many of us
12 got elected so we could help veterans. If we are helping
13 them, you are able to free your resources up to find the
14 next one. So count me in, and I think every Member of
15 Congress want to have their staff down in the state and here
16 in Washington, helping clear casework.

17 Now I want to talk about the toxic exposures. I chair
18 the Personnel Subcommittee on Senate Armed Services and I
19 have been a member of the Veterans Committee since I have
20 been here, and I will continue to be as long as I am in
21 service. I think one of the things we need to do is get
22 ahead of the next Agent Orange.

23 We still need to do right by those who were exposed to
24 Agent Orange, but I think there is a whole area of
25 information that we did not capture when men and women were

1 serving that we have got to go back and figure out how to
2 capture it in the VA, which will provide a better case and I
3 think a faster track to presumptions, that age-old problem
4 that we have when we are trying to get care to the veterans
5 who deserve it.

6 So we are working, in my capacity on Personnel
7 Subcommittee. We will have a hearing on what more
8 information we can capture and the underlying health record,
9 when the man or woman is serving, and make sure that that
10 gets transferred to the new health record so that we can
11 even potentially predict a problem before the veteran does.
12 We do not want to stop until we are at that level where we
13 are calling them up and think that you need care, and we may
14 be aware, just based on the data, we may be aware of a
15 problem that we can get ahead of. That is the best standard
16 of care that we should work towards, and I will continue to
17 work towards as long as I am in the Senate.

18 [Applause.]

19 Senator Tillis. And the last thing I will leave you
20 with is on May 9th, in North Carolina, we are hosting, in
21 cooperation with the Library of Congress, a history project,
22 where we are kind of connecting the dots on history but we
23 are also making it a veteran's fair. We expect several
24 hundred veterans to be there. We will get in touch with you
25 all to make sure that you have good representation. I will

1 have all of my caseworkers there, along with caseworkers
2 from other congressional offices to live up to what I am
3 telling you. We want to clear the caseload for you so you
4 can go after the next crunch.

5 Thank you all for your service in the past, your
6 continued service, and God bless every one of you.

7 [Applause.]

8 Mr. Oxford. Thank you, Senator Tillis.

9 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Tillis. I
10 appreciate your role on the Senate Armed Services Committee
11 on the Personnel and Readiness Subcommittee. You are very
12 strategically located. I hope that we can cooperate in a
13 bicameral way, because I associate myself completely with
14 your remarks about toxic exposure and your background in IT
15 and how we can do that systematically. Given today's
16 technology, I agree with you. We should be able to
17 anticipate problems before they arise, and not repeat the
18 four-year delay that Vietnam veterans have experienced. So
19 I fully appreciate your remarks.

20 Let me now call on Mr. Lamb for three minutes.

21 Mr. Oxford. Mr. Chairman, may I address that burn pit
22 issue?

23 Chairman Takano. Go ahead, sir.

24 Mr. Oxford. I think we have got to realize we have had
25 millions of folks deployed in the global war on terror, and

1 currently the DoD is working on maps of those burn pit
2 locations. As we perceive and recognize that many people
3 were exposed to those airborne toxins, we have got to lay
4 the foundation for future claims, just like the Senator
5 said. We need to presume exposure, because all of those
6 folks were exposed to those toxins, and then just review the
7 presumptive process as we go through that, and ensure
8 veterans who need and deserve care get it.

9 Chairman Takano. Well, thank you for that, Commander,
10 and I understand the VSOs have formed a working consortium
11 on the issue of toxic exposure and that you are all working
12 on a comprehensive bill. I want you to know that on the
13 House side that we are working aggressively to have
14 roundtables, to broaden our understanding. I am asking that
15 we come up with a master plan on how to address toxic
16 exposures of all the generations of veterans out there.

17 It is going to be a big bill and we need to build--I
18 mean, by bill, I mean it is going to be a big price tag on
19 all this. But we owe this to our veterans, and we need to
20 address this in a comprehensive way.

21 Mr. Oxford. Thank you, sir. I would just like to add,
22 we support Senators Manchin and Sullivan's Senate 2950, so
23 that might be the bill that you are talking about.

24 Chairman Takano. Wonderful. Wonderful. Well, I now
25 call on Senator--Congressman Lamb for three minutes.

1 Congressman Lamb.

2 Mr. Lamb. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you all for
3 being here. I want to especially thank Paul Kennedy and
4 Carl Curtis, my constituents from western Pennsylvania. I
5 think Paul is still here. They had a great visit to my
6 office yesterday. Both are a huge presence in the lives of
7 veterans in western Pennsylvania and do a great job keeping
8 me and my staff informed as to what is going on. So I
9 really appreciate their work.

10 I think that yesterday they really emphasized the role
11 that the Legion plays in sitting down with veterans,
12 especially newer members of the Legion, to just kind of talk
13 about their experiences and do a lot of that one-on-one,
14 guard-your-buddy type of intervention that is so important
15 if we are ever going to get ahead of the problem of mental
16 health and suicide and drug abuse that we still see among
17 our veterans.

18 So I just want to thank all of you and let you know
19 that we do see the role that you are playing and we want to
20 help you play it even more.

21 The good news, and something you can go home and tell
22 your members, if they are asking what happened in
23 Washington, D.C. this week, yesterday the House of
24 Representatives passed the Freed Veterans Act, which was a
25 bill designed to make it automatic that 100 percent disabled

1 veterans have their student loans forgiven, which is a great
2 thing.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Lamb. Absolutely, and it was a--the most important
5 thing about how this came to be was that we had a lot of
6 cooperation from both Republicans and Democrats and
7 cooperation between the House of Representatives and the
8 White House on this same policy, which is very rare down
9 here but it does happen.

10 And now, you know, we found out 100 percent disabled
11 veterans have actually been eligible for this relief for
12 quite some time but they weren't taking advantage of it
13 because there was all this paperwork and they had to apply.
14 It was like 20 percent of people were taking advantage of
15 something, and 25,000 of these veterans were in default on
16 their student loans, so they were at real risk to their
17 credit.

18 So now it is going to be the job of the government to
19 make sure they get this relief without having to actually
20 apply for it. It will be automatic. So that was a big
21 victory, and to any Senators that we have remaining here,
22 and Senate staffers, you will be seeing that bill coming
23 over from us pretty soon here, so I just hope you will give
24 it a good look and maybe we can move it forward.

25 I wanted to revisit quickly what Senator Tester was

1 talking about with the four presumptive conditions. So he
2 had folks in here raise their hand just if they had served
3 in Vietnam. I would like you to raise your hand if you know
4 anyone with one of those four conditions--hypertension,
5 Parkinson-like syndrome, thyroid cancer, and I am blanking
6 on the fourth.

7 Ms. Bryant. Bladder cancer.

8 Mr. Lamb. Bladder cancer. Thank you, Melissa. She is
9 always on the ball--related to Agent Orange.

10 [Show of hands.]

11 Mr. Lamb. Yeah, so pretty much just as many hands as
12 we had for Vietnam service, if not more. This is such a
13 burden on the folks who are suffering from these conditions
14 that is unfair, and the numbers are extremely high. So
15 please continue to work with us in advocating to those in
16 the administration that they should add these.

17 Just so you know, the VA is requesting a budget
18 increase this year from Congress, a \$22 billion budget
19 increase, which is more--more money than it would cost to
20 treat people with these four conditions as presumptive. So
21 it is not a question of there being no money, or, you know,
22 a total scarcity. It is just a question of which veterans
23 you are going to treat for what. So the money is there. We
24 just have to enact it into law and make sure these veterans
25 get the treatment they deserve.

1 So those are my only points. I am already out of time,
2 and you all have answered any questions I had already, so
3 thank you for coming and sharing everything with us.

4 Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

5 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Representative Lamb, for
6 your advocacy on those four conditions.

7 I now call on Congressman Cisneros for three minutes.

8 Mr. Cisneros. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Commander
9 Oxford and everybody else, thank you for being here this
10 morning.

11 I am a member of Post 277 in Placentia, California,
12 and--well, thank you--but rather than paying my dues I
13 actually became a lifetime member this year.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Cisneros. Just take it out of the equation there,
16 and that way I do not have to worry about it anymore.

17 You know, this past weekend I was also in Brea, which
18 is in my district. Brea, California, Post 181, celebrated
19 their 100th anniversary this year. It was a great
20 celebration, to get over there and kind of celebrate the
21 achievements of that post and how long it has been serving
22 veterans in the 39th District there of California.

23 Commander, I want to bring up a subject about women
24 veterans. They are the largest-growing demographic, you
25 know, not only in the military but also become our largest

1 demographic in the veterans. I would just really like your
2 opinion on really what can we do to kind of get rid of some
3 of these barriers and make sure that we are taking care of
4 our women veterans going into the future.

5 Mr. Oxford. Thank you, sir, for that question. As you
6 mentioned, over 2 million female veterans. That is the
7 fastest-growing population of people who participate in the
8 Veterans Administration.

9 First of all, we have got to recognize the contribution
10 that women have made to the military services, that they
11 continue to make, and to this country. We need to make sure
12 the VA is responsive to the specific gender requirements.
13 That includes diagnostic and treatment. And then we would
14 also ask you to think about passing the Deborah Sampson Act.
15 That should embrace those things we just talked about.

16 But we have got to recognize the contribution of female
17 veterans, most of all.

18 Mr. Cisneros. Thank you for that. You know, it is--I
19 was down at the VA in Long Beach not that long ago, and
20 really kind of talking to them, and really how they are
21 trying to, you know, ramp up the care of the female veterans
22 that are there. But they still do not have an OB-GYN on
23 staff. And so there is still a lot of ground that we need
24 to make up and make sure that we are taking care of our
25 women veterans.

1 So with that I just want to thank you all for your
2 service and for being here today, and I yield back, Mr.
3 Chairman.

4 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Cisneros. Maybe you
5 could consider some supplemental dues besides the lifetime.

6 [Laughter.]

7 Mr. Cisneros. I was forgetting to pay my dues every
8 year so I thought I would just get right at it and take it
9 out of the question, and I just became a lifetime member.

10 Chairman Takano. Okay. You are at a place in life
11 where you can do more, but whatever.

12 [Laughter.]

13 Chairman Takano. Senator Boozman, you are recognized
14 for three minutes.

15 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank
16 all of you all for being here. Where are my Arkansas folks?
17 Very good. Thank you all so much.

18 [Applause.]

19 Senator Boozman. We appreciate you all and appreciate
20 the great work that is going on in Arkansas, as all over the
21 country. You know, you look out and you see so many of you
22 here. That is a great statement in and of itself. The
23 Committee works together in a very bipartisan way.

24 I have had the opportunity to serve on the House
25 Veterans' Affairs Committee and now the Senate, and that

1 really has been the hallmark of both of those Committees and
2 is carrying on now. We can work hard, we can do our thing,
3 but if you do not have the grassroots, if you do not have
4 you all, pushing hard, it just does not work.

5 The other thing is we know who does all the work. A
6 special thanks to the Auxiliary and all that you do.

7 So I would really like you to comment on a couple of
8 things. Recently, in the Senate, and again, a companion
9 bill in the House, Senators Tester and Moran, the John Scott
10 Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act. We
11 appreciate the fact that you all are supporting that. That
12 is good legislation, getting us moving forward.

13 One of the things that we were able to include is
14 having some metrics. Right now we are measuring VA suicide
15 by the amount of money that we are spending. We have
16 greatly increased that but we are not reducing the amount of
17 suicide. And then access. Again, you know, greater access
18 now but suicides not coming down. So we need the ability to
19 actually measure what these programs are doing, get rid of
20 the ones that are not working, you know, and then increase
21 the others.

22 So can you, or some of your folks, talk to us a little
23 bit about how we can reach those veterans that are not part
24 of the VA system? You know, about 20 are committing suicide
25 and only 6 or so of those are actually in the system. What

1 do we do to get to those that are not in the system?

2 Mr. Oxford. If I might address that, sir. The
3 American Legion Buddy Check program that we have is the best
4 way that I know of to do that. We have got Legionnaires
5 reaching out to other Legionnaires, just to say, "Hey, how
6 are you doing? Do you need anything? Can we help? Is
7 there something we can do to help?"

8 We also need to education--and this is a public
9 education process, I think--to identify the veterans that
10 are not involved with the Veterans Administration, and get
11 them to enroll. That is the biggest thing we can do. You
12 mentioned 20 a day--6 are enrolled but those other 14, that
13 has got to be a public society issue, as we reach out to
14 those veterans and say, "It is okay to ask for help. We
15 need you to let us help you."

16 We also have our System Worth Saving. You mentioned
17 metrics. Our System Worth Saving reviews, are constantly
18 visiting VA hospitals to review those kind of metrics that
19 you are discussing. The System Worth Saving site review is
20 not an inspection. What we want to do is identify the good
21 things that are happening and maybe identify some things
22 that are not going so well, and provide that information
23 back to Congress and the Veterans Administration. So the
24 metrics, we have, we are using, so just continue to provide
25 that information.

1 Senator Boozman. Very good, and then I will close with
2 thanking you for your support of the Deborah Sampson issue.
3 That was expounded on earlier. But again, I would just
4 second that as to how important that is, which we all know.

5 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 Mr. Oxford. Thank you, sir.

7 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Boozman. I
8 recognize Senator Sinema for three minutes.

9 Senator Sinema. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good
10 morning. Thank you to our witnesses for being here, and for
11 all our veterans who have joined us today, especially those
12 from Arizona.

13 Commander Oxford, it was a pleasure working with the
14 American Legion to pass the Legion Act, and I am so excited
15 to be working with you again to establish a pilot site for
16 Project Atlas in Arizona. This program is an innovative
17 partnership between the VA, Philips Healthcare Systems, and
18 the American Legion, and it is bringing remote telehealth
19 exam rooms that connect veterans with the VA to regions
20 where those connections are hard to establish.

21 Arizona's rural veterans will be greatly served by this
22 partnership, and thank you for your leadership with this
23 effort.

24 I share the American Legion's position that we must
25 continue to improve access to care for military sexual

1 assault survivors. Research has shown that peer support
2 specialists are a significant factor for veterans seeking
3 help with experiences such as military sexual trauma. Can
4 you speak about the VA's peer support specialists and their
5 impact on veterans seeking treatment for MST?

6 Mr. Oxford. I would like to ask Director Bryant to
7 address that question.

8 Senator Sinema. Thank you.

9 Ms. Bryant. Thank you, Senator. We recognize that
10 peer-to-peer support is critical in navigating the VA,
11 especially for survivors of military sexual trauma or
12 assault. There is the potential of revictimization,
13 retraumatization as you are retelling and recounting your
14 stories repeatedly throughout that process. It is necessary
15 for medical documentation, but we know that it can also be
16 extremely painful to the veteran, and not just to women but
17 to me as well, because men are also survivors of MST.

18 So those peers that help you navigate the system are
19 vital in going forth and having your service connection
20 annotated in a way that is safe both the veteran, and they
21 are in an inclusive environment where they are safe to share
22 their experiences and then also receive the desperate care
23 that they need.

24 Senator Sinema. Thank you. And Ms. Bryant, a follow-
25 up question. What are some other steps that we in Congress

1 can take to make military sexual trauma care more available
2 to survivors throughout the military?

3 Ms. Bryant. To make it more available to those
4 throughout the military is, one, expanding what are doing in
5 our community partnerships. We want to ensure that the
6 provisions that are under the House version of the Deborah
7 Sampson Act, that those possibly can get reconciled with the
8 Senate version that is going forward, and thank you again to
9 Senator Boozman for your support with the Deborah Sampson
10 Act.

11 But there is a lot that we can continue to do to have
12 our arms wrapped around those women and male survivors of
13 military sexual trauma. And we look forward to working with
14 you and your staff on this further.

15 Senator Sinema. Thank you so much. Commander Oxford,
16 a skilled VA workforce is crucial to the delivery of care
17 and services to veterans. Since fiscal year 2011, the VA
18 Office of the Inspector General has listed human resources
19 management in the top 10 nonclinical occupational shortage
20 areas across the Veterans Health Administration. How do you
21 think that this shortage impacts VA's ability to provide
22 timely and quality care to our veterans?

23 Mr. Oxford. As we tour the country, and we have been
24 to several veterans hospitals, VA hospitals, we have seen
25 several staff shortages because of lack of the ability to

1 find and hire qualified professionals. In addition to that,
2 I would like to ask Chairman Bozella to address the issue.

3 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander. Thank you,
4 Senator. The HR problem of not enough providers is one of
5 the number one issues that we see within VA, but it goes
6 beyond providers, as you suggested. The American Legion is
7 trying to help VA with the onboarding process, for one
8 issue, and onboarding, again, for health care providers as
9 well as non-providers. It could take four to six months for
10 somebody who has applied for a job in the VA to be able to
11 finally accept that position, get on board, and be working
12 at that particular facility.

13 There is another problem with transference of jobs, and
14 again, non-health care providers, it is a difficult process.
15

16 So that is the number one thing we think, outside of
17 recruitment, that people have to work on, is how quickly can
18 we get somebody into that job.

19 Senator Sinema. And Chairman, if I might follow up,
20 what should the VA and Congress do to address that specific
21 issue and other personnel challenges we face?

22 Mr. Bozella. I believe there is a bill--I do not know
23 where it is; it has not reached committee yet on the Senate
24 side--that is looking at that as a pilot study, and I
25 believe it is Senator Gardner who has put that forward.

1 What we understand is that bill may be looked at soon. But
2 that is all I know about the bill at this point. But that
3 is a start. So at least on a pilot you will be able to
4 trial things to see how they are working and maybe if it
5 becomes a well enough practice that could be replicated.

6 Senator Sinema. Thank you. Commander Oxford, as the
7 VA implements the expansion of the caregiver support program
8 under the MISSION Act, what should it to do ensure a more
9 holistic and inclusive support program for our caregivers?

10 Mr. Oxford. Thank you for that question. I think
11 first of all we have got to recognize the caregivers of all
12 of the injured service men and women since the global war on
13 terror, but we also need to recognize the caregivers from
14 other periods, and there are several. But these caregivers
15 have been essential to the readjustment of those injured
16 veterans during their time of need. And as we think about
17 caregivers we have got to realize they are saving us money.
18 If a caregiver is providing those services at home then we
19 do not have to pay somebody else to do it. So it is a
20 savings to us, and we just need to continue the oversight of
21 that issue.

22 Let me turn this over to Director Nuntavong for his
23 comments.

24 Mr. Nuntavong. Senator, thank you for your question.
25 After a year to prepare, VA missed another mark in the

1 MISSION Act deadline, implementing the expansion of these
2 benefits to these caregivers. It is a shame that these
3 individuals do not have access to the financial benefit
4 that, by law, they deserve and they have earned, based on a
5 technicality that VA themselves created with their IT issue.

6 We would like to work with both Committees to draft
7 legislation that will guarantee effective dates for these
8 caregivers so they can be compensated appropriately, just
9 like disability compensation, for these hardworking
10 individuals.

11 Senator Sinema. Thank you. Thank you all for your
12 time being here, and, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

13 Chairman Takano. Thank you to Senator Sinema. I now
14 turn the meeting back over to Chairman Moran.

15 Chairman Moran. [Presiding.] Is there someone who has
16 not been recognized?

17 Chairman Takano. Everyone has been recognized and if
18 we have another Senator coming in, I heard one is en route,
19 but the question is yours, sir.

20 Chairman Moran. Thank you very much.

21 Commander, I, of course, have not had the benefit of
22 hearing what you had to say, and so I would not intend to
23 ask questions that might cause either your testimony or
24 answers to my colleagues' questions to be repeated. But I
25 guess I would want to give you the opportunity in my

1 presence to make any statement or any request that you
2 specifically would like me, or to reiterate to my colleagues
3 what you would like for me and others to know.

4 Mr. Oxford. Yes, sir. Thank you for that opportunity.
5 Before I conclude I would just like to reiterate three
6 important issues. First of all would be Agent Orange. It
7 is time to end the unnecessary delays and give those
8 veterans the care they deserve, and it is imperative the
9 Secretary approves the presumptives that we have talked
10 about, being recommended for bladder cancer, hypertension,
11 Parkinson-like symptoms, and hyperthyroidism.

12 Second of all would be the issue we just discussed,
13 caregivers, continued oversight on the expansion of the VA
14 program, Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers,
15 under the caregiver support program, to ensure those folks
16 are provided the care that they need and deserve.

17 Our World War II veterans, the American Legion has been
18 working with Senator Menendez's office to draft legislation
19 to accomplish this, and we are looking for co-sponsors to
20 ensure a bipartisan bill before introduction. That would
21 end means testing for World War II veterans to receive VA
22 benefits. Congress has already done this for soldiers who
23 served during the Mexican Border War and World War I, and it
24 is only fitting that the Greatest Generation should be
25 exempt from means testing to become enrolled.

1 And the American Legion would urge Congress to pass a
2 bipartisan bill to address this issue immediately.

3 And Senator, if I might, before I leave, I would like
4 to correct a major mistake that I made. I would like to
5 introduce my wife before we go too far along.

6 [Laughter and applause.]

7 Mr. Oxford. Thank you for that opportunity, Senator.

8 Chairman Moran. Commander, I wanted to see how you
9 operated under fire, and I was hoping to deny you that
10 request--

11 [Laughter.]

12 Chairman Moran. --so that I could learn more about the
13 man. We are honored to have your spouse, your wife here
14 with you, and we thank her for her service and support of
15 you and the American Legion.

16 Let me ask a final question and then we will conclude.
17 I want to know how we can--what are the criteria, the
18 metrics that we can use to determine the long-term effect of
19 veterans' interaction with VA? How is the VA doing, not
20 just today but are there measures that would tell us that,
21 in the long run, the VA is on the right path and veterans
22 are getting the care and attention that they deserve and are
23 entitled to?

24 Mr. Oxford. Well, Senator, I am going to take a little
25 personal privilege here. Our System Worth Saving reviews

1 are the best way to do that. We visit VA hospitals
2 regularly, and I think we currently have 18 visits
3 scheduled. And we visit we look for things that are going
4 well, things that are not going well, and provide that
5 information back to you and the VA.

6 So as we move forward, those metrics are out there. We
7 are looking at those kinds of things regularly, and we will
8 continue to do so, and invite you or your staff to
9 participate any time.

10 Chairman Moran. I was waiting to see if you had
11 instructions.

12 Mr. Oxford. Well, I have just got one more piece of
13 instruction. The veterans that we talk to really think the
14 VA is the best care available. We prefer the VA. So if
15 there is a way we can continue to do that, that is the right
16 answer.

17 Chairman Moran. I thank you for that answer, and it
18 corresponds with my view that I learn the most when I am
19 talking to veterans at all stages of their care and
20 treatment, all stages of their life, how they are being
21 cared for. It is an opportunity for us to get the best
22 information, and I thank you for that.

23 And I certainly would make clear to you that while we
24 were--I was fully engaged in this Committee, the Senate
25 Committee, and the Senate passed the MISSION Act, in my view

1 it is nothing to replace the VA. It is fully to augment the
2 VA in providing care and services for those who, in their
3 best interest, need another venue.

4 My views are often reflective of my days as a House
5 member, although still as a Kansan my House days I
6 represented a congressional district as large as the state
7 of Illinois. No VA hospital. So hours and miles are a huge
8 component of the way I look at how do we get services to
9 people in certain circumstances.

10 But despite that bias, in that regard, I want to do
11 everything I can to make certain that veterans are cared for
12 within the VA. Again, we are looking for the best interests
13 and give veterans some options. So I appreciate that
14 opportunity.

15 Finally I would say that I appreciate the role that the
16 American Legion played in the original GI Bill, and I
17 appreciate the role that a Kansan had in its creation and
18 enactment. An American Legion member from Emporia, Kansas,
19 wrote down on a napkin the ideas of a GI Bill, and we had a
20 President named Eisenhower who made it into law, and we take
21 great pride in that history of our state.

22 It may appear that I am stalling, and my stall has been
23 successful.

24 [Laughter.]

25 Chairman Moran. Senator Sullivan has been recognized.

1 Senator Sullivan. Mr. Chairman, thank you for
2 stalling. Sorry. We have a number of hearings going on
3 this morning, but fortunately one of the hearings I was just
4 in, in the Commerce Committee, my colleague sitting next to
5 me was Senator Moran, who happens to be the Chairman of this
6 wonderful Committee in the Senate. So when he left I said,
7 "Hey, can you tap dance a little bit for me until I can get
8 there?" So thank you, Mr. Chairman, for that stalling.

9 I want to first do--you know, I learned that this
10 hearing is so popular that there has to be tickets for is.
11 It is like a rock concert or something. So I want to do a
12 shout-out. I know that there are more Alaskans here, but do
13 we have at least two of my fellow Alaskans in the audience
14 here? How about a thank you, a round of applause.

15 [Applause.]

16 Senator Sullivan. They usually get the award for the
17 furthest travel, and we like to acknowledge our state as
18 having more vets per capita than any state in the country,
19 so I want to thank them for that.

20 Well, I want to thank our leadership here, and I do
21 want to mention it is great to see our Commander is a fellow
22 U.S. Marine, so Commander, thank you, sir.

23 I also want to just express my appreciation to the
24 American Legion for having officially endorsed the
25 legislation that Senator Manchin and I have introduced, S.

1 2950. That is the Veterans Burn Pit Exposure Recognition
2 Act. And Commander, perhaps you can say a word on that.

3 The whole point of this legislation, having been
4 through, for our incredible Vietnam vets, the Agent Orange,
5 the Blue Water Navy, all of these issues where, let's face
6 it, Congress was playing catch-up for way too many years,
7 decades. Our veterans were waiting, waiting, waiting. Many
8 died before there was direct action. What we are trying to
9 do with this burn pit legislation is get in front of an
10 issue that we know is going to impact the next generation of
11 our veterans.

12 So that is the goal, and I am very honored, Commander,
13 and the rest of the leadership here, that you are supporting
14 the legislation. It is getting a lot of momentum, Mr.
15 Chairman, we are hopefully going to move it out of the
16 Committee in the Senate and House and get it passed into law
17 here soon.

18 But sir, can you comment on that?

19 Mr. Oxford. Yes, sir. I would be happy to. Sir, if
20 you need a ticket, let me know and I will get you a ticket.

21 [Laughter.]

22 Mr. Oxford. And I would also like to say semper fi,
23 always and forever.

24 But we do support S. 2950, sir, so just look forward to
25 working with you on that as we move forward.

1 But when we think about burn pits, we are facing
2 similar questions as we did with Agent Orange. We have got
3 to assume that the millions of people deployed to the global
4 war on terror are facing those kinds of airborne toxins that
5 we saw with Agent Orange, and it is primarily because of
6 burn pits.

7 The DoD has started the process of drawing maps and
8 establishing locations of those burn pits, so we will have a
9 way to assume those presumptives. And that is what we have
10 got to do is presume the exposure to those airborne toxins
11 and then just review the process to make sure those veterans
12 who need and deserve care get it.

13 Senator Sullivan. Great. And, Mr. Chairman, if I may,
14 one final thing on that. What we have been trying to do on
15 this is work with, of course, the VSOs, right, all of you,
16 but also with the VA. So we want to make sure this is
17 collaborative with everybody--our veterans, first and
18 foremost, the Congress, in a bipartisan way--and the VA.
19 And that is the goal here and we are hopeful that we can
20 move that soon.

21 So thanks again for all of your great service, every
22 member here, and it is an honor to serve all of you.

23 Chairman Moran. Senator Sullivan, thank you. Thank
24 you for your extraordinary effort to get here and to be able
25 to spend time with the American Legion.

1 Commander Oxford, I would give you a final opportunity
2 if there is anything else you forgot to say today, to do so.

3 Mr. Oxford. Thank you for that opportunity, sir. It
4 is just a privilege and a pleasure to be able to sit before
5 you and represent the 1.8 million Legionnaires from across
6 the country. It is just an honor to be here, and thank you
7 for the opportunity. We so much appreciate our
8 opportunities to work together, and continue to offer
9 American Legion help, and anything else we can do to help
10 you do your job because you are helping us do our job so
11 much.

12 Chairman Moran. Commander, thank you for that. Thank
13 you for your presence here today. Thanks for your
14 leadership team and all the members of the American Legion
15 and the Auxiliary who are present with us. I know many
16 traveled long distances for the purpose of making their case
17 to Members of Congress, and we welcome that.

18 I also would thank you, as Congressman Roe did, for the
19 expertise and the team that you have here on a daily basis
20 that work with our Committees to provide us with information
21 and input and to see that we do our jobs better. I am
22 grateful for their help.

23 I would now ask unanimous consent that members have
24 five legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and
25 include any extraneous material.

1 With that, without objection, so ordered, and the
2 hearing is now adjourned.

3 [Applause.]

4 [Whereupon, at 11:25 a.m. the Committees were
5 adjourned.]

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