

1 JOINT HEARING TO RECEIVE THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATIONS
2 FROM AMVETS, PVA, VVA, IAVA, SVA, AXPOW, WWP

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4 THURSDAY, MARCH 7, 2019

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 2:00 p.m.,
11 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny
12 Isakson and Hon. Mark Takano, Chairmen of the Committees,
13 presiding.

14 Senators Present: Isakson, Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds,
15 Blackburn, Tester, Blumenthal, Manchin and Sinema.

16 Representatives Present: Takano, Brownley, Lamb,
17 Levin, Brindisi, Cisneros, Lee, Underwood, Pappas, Allred,
18 Roe, Bilirakis, Bost, Barr, and Meuser.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TAKANO

20 Chairman Takano. Good afternoon and welcome to the
21 House and Senate Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative
22 Presentations of the Americans Prisoners of War, American
23 Veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America,
24 Paralyzed Veterans of America, Student Veterans of America,
25 Vietnam Veterans of America, and Wounded Warrior Project.

1 I am honored to be here with Senator Tester and Ranking
2 Member Roe and all members of the House and Senate
3 Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

4 I would like to thank your witnesses for being here
5 today and to thank them for the work they do on behalf of
6 veterans in this country. This group represents many
7 generations of veterans and interests, but they, and we, are
8 united in the common goal of improving outcomes, creating
9 opportunities, and ensuring that veterans receive the care
10 and benefits they have earned.

11 I am grateful for the opportunity to hear from this
12 group of engaged organizations. I also want to thank
13 veterans joining us here today and those that are watching
14 us from home.

15 I would also like to specifically recognize
16 organization members from my home state of California.
17 Would all the Californians please stand if you are in the
18 room.

19 All right. Thank you very much.

20 [Applause.]

21 Chairman Takano. Welcome, and welcome to all of you,
22 no matter what of the 50 states, which state of the 50
23 states you are from or our territories.

24 Last night, the week--last week the House Veterans'
25 Affairs Committee had the opportunity to hear from Senator

1 Wilkie--Secretary Wilkie about the current state of VA and
2 the vision for the future of VA.

3 The Committee has called this vision VA 2030. VA 2030
4 means we are engaged in an effort to establish the best
5 possible VA and to determine the tools and resources it
6 needs to serve all veterans, no matter the generation or the
7 conflict in which they served. This also means
8 strengthening and improving VA for generations of veterans
9 to come.

10 Today I look forward to hearing from this diverse group
11 of veterans' organizations about the challenges you foresee
12 and the priorities you have for VA now and in the future. I
13 know we share many of these priorities. I will speak to a
14 few of the Committee's key priorities now but I look forward
15 to an engaging discussion today and throughout the 116th
16 Congress about your concerns.

17 Addressing veteran suicide is a critical priority for
18 the Committee. Last week, Secretary Wilkie pledged to spend
19 every last dollar available to tackle this issue. This
20 week, the President issued a new Executive order creating a
21 task force to address veteran suicide, and I certainly
22 welcome an aggressive and sustained approach, but I am
23 concerned about half-measures. If we keep starting new
24 programs and not fully implementing them we will never see
25 real and lasting results. I think it is important to work

1 with the veteran community and assess what is working now
2 and how to expand it.

3 We must use innovative ways to conduct outreach and
4 engage with individuals so that no veteran believes that he
5 or she is alone. We are ready and willing to help.

6 Another top priority is providing health care and
7 disability benefits to Blue Water Navy veterans exposed to
8 Agent Orange. It is long past time for Congress to pass
9 H.R. 299. Last week, at the Committee's hearing, I asked
10 Secretary Wilkie to tell me whether the administration will
11 appeal the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit's
12 decision to extend these benefits to Blue Water Navy
13 veterans. I also asked him to inform me if Blue Water Navy
14 veterans are eligible for disability benefits after Court's
15 decision, will be able to receive health care at VA medical
16 facilities.

17 I am waiting for a response from the Secretary, but
18 veterans should not be made to wait. Congress must act now.

19 The House Veterans' Affairs Committee is committed to
20 addressing the specific challenges faced by our women
21 veterans, and we have formed a task force dedicated to
22 developing and promoting policies that support women
23 veterans and their health care needs, as well as ensuring
24 their successful transition out of service. We want to
25 ensure that veteran status is a supportive place for our

1 women service members and that they have the full ability to
2 access their beneficiaries and opportunities.

3 Economic opportunity, whether that is education,
4 career, owning a small business or home ownership is
5 something this Committee wants to promote and strengthen.
6 This can be done in small and big ways. We need to close
7 the 90/10 loophole. We need to ensure that VA has efficient
8 and functional systems in place to process benefits and
9 ensure that veterans do not experience delays in receiving
10 them. VA needs to improve and innovate its technology in
11 many areas, but we will be paying particular attention to GI
12 Bill implementation.

13 And while I touched on just a few of the issue areas
14 that are important to you and your membership, I am
15 committed to helping advance your priorities in the coming
16 year.

17 I look forward to hearing your testimony today and
18 thank you for your tireless advocacy for the veteran
19 community.

20 I will now move to recognize my minority Ranking Member
21 of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee. Let me just say
22 that as a Member of the House I want to take note of the
23 passing of one of what we know is the last Member of
24 Congress who served in the World War II era, Ralph Hall, of
25 Texas. He has passed away. And I know that Ranking Member

1 Roe will say more in his honor.

2 So Ranking Member Roe, I now recognize you for your
3 opening statement and your tribute to Representative Ralph
4 Hall.

5 OPENING STATEMENT OF DR. ROE

6 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ralph, if
7 anybody--and many of you may have known Ralph, but he was a
8 friend to everyone. He served in the House both as a
9 Democrat and a Republican, and served as a lieutenant in the
10 Navy in World War II, and John Dingle, who just passed, were
11 the last two surviving members of the greatest generation to
12 serve in this great body, and Ralph was the oldest person,
13 at 91, to vote in the U.S. House. So my prayers and well
14 wishes go to Ralph's family and to the people in Texas. We
15 have lost a great American.

16 I want to thank everyone, first of all, in this entire
17 room for being here. I understand there are 50 student
18 veterans here. I was talking to someone from Georgia just a
19 minute ago and welcome to you all and everyone else who has
20 come long distances to testify today.

21 I want to go over, and I want to thank all of the
22 auxiliary members. I do not think we thank them enough for
23 what they do for us, as veterans, when we are deployed, and
24 taking care of things at home. They also have a mission,
25 and, by the way, we cannot do ours without them. While we

1 are out doing fun stuff--flying airplanes and on submarines
2 and all that fun stuff--they are doing the mundane stuff
3 like making sure your kid gets to school. So thank you all
4 very, very much for the spouses who are here.

5 Any Tennesseans in the crowd? As able, hold your hand
6 up or stand. Thank you for being here. I appreciate you
7 coming from the great state of Tennessee. There would not
8 be a state of Texas without Tennessee. I will add that.

9 [Laughter.]

10 Dr. Roe. So I want to go over, very quickly, just what
11 we did, because, really, we came to hear you all. In the
12 115th Congress we took an opportunity to do, I think, some
13 great pieces of legislation. The first major piece of
14 legislation we passed was the Accountability and
15 Whistleblower Protection Bill. The VA has almost 270,000
16 employees. Most of those are great folks that do a great
17 job. But some are not and should not be working with
18 veterans in the VA, and it gives the VA the tools to remove
19 those folks.

20 Number two, the most common thing anybody at this dais
21 here is I guarantee you when we go home were appeals.
22 Veterans would come up and say, my appeal has been in for 7
23 or 8 or 10 years, or who knows how long, and it is not
24 getting adjudicated. And we recognized that and passed a
25 bill that was run through the RAMP program. It is now live

1 for the last couple of weeks.

2 I saw a veteran in Nashville just walked into the
3 regional office there, a Marine, eight years in the Marine
4 Reserve. Seven years he had had his claim out there, and in
5 90 days it was adjudicated. So I have seen this and heard
6 it over and over. It is not going to be perfect but that is
7 something I think that will really help.

8 Thirdly, a bill that I take great pride in, fully paid
9 for, is the Forever GI Bill. I used the GI Bill myself when
10 I got out of the Army in 1974. I used it in 1975 and 1976.
11 It sunsetted at 10 years. You could no longer use it. I
12 got \$300 a month for two years. I very much appreciate my
13 country investing that in me. I had a young family and it
14 helped me a great deal. Now, this particular benefit can be
15 used the rest of your life, because technology is changing
16 so rapidly that people have to retrain.

17 The second thing that bothered me, if you did not serve
18 a requisite amount of time and you were injured and got a
19 Purple Heart, you might not be eligible for the full
20 benefit. If you shed blood for this country now, you get
21 the full GI Bill benefit going forward, the rest of your
22 life.

23 We also passed, I think, a transformative bill called
24 the VA Mission Act. That bill can transform how our VA
25 looks, as the Chairman mentioned, in 2030, or how it looks

1 in 2040 or 2050. We have to be thinking that far
2 downstream. It applies about how we get health care, the
3 caregiver part, and the asset review. And the Congress has
4 fully funded the Choice program each time, I think to the
5 tune, in the last Congress, two years, \$6 billion was added.

6 We also have the electronic health record. We have
7 stood up a committee, which the Chairman is going to
8 continue, to just look after the implementation of the
9 electronic health record. I said this jokingly but not so
10 much so. I have told the Secretary, if we do not get this
11 right I want to go in the Witness Protection Program,
12 because it will be that big of a problem for you getting
13 your benefits, contracting everything that the VA does.

14 And then I want to finish on two other things very much
15 near and dear to my heart. I am Vietnam-era veteran. I
16 served in Korea, Camp Casey--many of you probably have
17 served in the same spot--Camp Bradley, other places in South
18 Korea.

19 We have our fellow Vietnam veterans that served in the
20 Blue Water Navy off the coast of Vietnam. They need to be
21 treated exactly the same as other veterans who put their
22 boots on the ground, and I absolutely want to see that get
23 done this year, the Blue Water Navy Bill. I agree with the
24 Chairman 100 percent. We passed it 382 to 0. We probably
25 could not get that kind of vote if we asked if the sun came

1 up in the east. So that shows you how bipartisan it was.

2 We need to finish the job. And so I think we will.

3 The last two things before I yield back, very near and
4 dear to all of our hearts. Yesterday we had a roundtable on
5 veteran suicide. We were spending \$2 billion in 2003. We
6 are spending \$8 billion today on mental health and those
7 issues. We have not moved the needle at all. It is still
8 the same number. We need to do something different. It is
9 not working as well as it should. So I strongly encourage
10 us to do that.

11 And then lastly, which I think the VA has done a really
12 good job with but the job is not finished, which are our
13 homeless veterans. Ten percent of all homeless veterans in
14 the United States live in one county. That is Los Angeles
15 County in California. And it is a problem that we should
16 solve and can solve in a country as wealthy as we are.

17 I appreciate the privilege of serving here on this
18 Committee. I have been on it the whole time I have been in
19 the U.S. House. I will stay on it as long as I am in the
20 House, and I appreciate your service to our great country.
21 You are what help make it great.

22 With that I yield back.

23 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Ranking Member Roe. I now
24 will recognize--

25 [Applause.]

1 Chairman Takano. You can go ahead. Go ahead and clap.

2 [Applause.]

3 Chairman Takano. I especially want you to clap for
4 what he said about him staying on the Committee as long as
5 he is in the House, because we need that continuity here.
6 So I am going to hold you to that, Ranking Member Roe.

7 I want to now introduce--recognize Chairman Isakson for
8 his opening statement.

9 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

10 Chairman Isakson. You all clapped because he did a
11 great job. I can clap because he finally finished.

12 [Laughter.]

13 Chairman Isakson. And there is nothing left for me to
14 say.

15 I always want to say "Chairman" because you were
16 Chairman the last two years. I am not exalting you. I am
17 just remembering him in those days. You are the Chairman
18 now.

19 Chairman Takano. Okay. I forgive you.

20 Chairman Isakson. And I am the Chairman to the three
21 of us up here. We will fight that out later.

22 I just wanted to--I came to hear you. You did not come
23 to listen to me, except for me to say a couple of things.

24 We appreciate you so much. We have had a great week
25 hearing from veterans, and it has made a lot of difference

1 for us. This is a period of implementation, the next two
2 years, as far as I am concerned, in the Senate, and I think
3 everybody else feels the same way.

4 We have done some transitional and transformative
5 bills, the Mission Act and things like that, that are
6 phenomenal, but if we do not get them done, get them
7 implemented, and get them working, and have you calling us
8 saying the VA is better, then we have not done our job. So
9 I pledge to you I am going to do everything I can to see to
10 it we take the dreams that have been put to paper in laws
11 over the last two years and make them realities in the
12 Veterans Administration. If we can do that we will have
13 earned our pay.

14 But you all have done a yeoman's job serving for your
15 country and representing your country, and we want to do a
16 yeoman's job of making sure that you get everything you paid
17 for when you offered to risk your life for the United
18 States.

19 So God bless all of you. Thank you for being a veteran
20 and thank you for being here today.

21 [Applause.]

22 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Chairman Isakson. I now--

23 Chairman Isakson. I am going to pull rank. The lady
24 wants me to yield to her for one second. Can I do that?

25 Chairman Takano. Sure.

1 Senator Blackburn. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is an
2 honor to serve with Chairman Isakson and the way he leads
3 the Senate Veterans' Committee. And one of the things that
4 we are doing, we have all enjoyed, as Dr. Roe said, it has
5 been such a pleasure to hear from each of you this week as
6 you have come to our offices and you have talked with us.

7 I just want to highlight one of the things that I am
8 introducing today, and it will come through our Senate
9 Veterans' Committee, the Congressional Gold Star Family
10 Fellowship Program. This will be an act that will allow
11 these Gold Star families to come in and participate in
12 fellowship programs with us, here in Congress. And we are
13 so honored to be able to do this.

14 I met Jane Horton, whose husband lost his life in
15 Afghanistan in 2011, and we had a great conversation. I do
16 not know if she is in the room today, but we had a great
17 conversation about the importance of this, and opening this
18 door and opportunity for our Gold Star families.

19 So we are looking forward to doing this and making
20 these opportunities available, and with that I yield back.

21 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Blackburn.

22 I now would like to recognize the Ranking Member of the
23 Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator Tester, for his
24 opening statement.

25 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

1 Senator Tester. Yeah, thank you, Chairman Takano, and
2 good afternoon to all of you.

3 A couple of things. First of all, John Rowan, it is
4 good to see you here. I do not know if it was two years or
5 four years ago, you just were coming off of heart surgery.
6 You have never looked better than you do today. So thank
7 you for being here.

8 We have also--if there any folks from Montana please
9 stand. I know there is at least one. There we go.

10 [Applause.]

11 Senator Tester. Thanks. Is that you, Jeremiah? Yep.
12 He is part of the Montana State University Chapter of
13 Student Veterans of America. Good to have you here.

14 Look, as I have said throughout these VSO hearings, and
15 I think this is the fourth one, the fifth one with the VSOs,
16 we take our directions from you. You are representing the
17 folks on the ground, the veterans across this country,
18 whether it is in urban areas, whether it is in rural areas.
19 You know the challenges that are out there. We need to
20 listen to you, just like the VA needs to listen to you,
21 whether it is on Agent Orange, whether it is on burn pits,
22 whether it is on our treatment for women veterans, whether
23 it is on mental health care.

24 And in that regard I have got a mental health bill,
25 along with Senator Moran, that we are going to be bringing

1 out. I want to get all your input on it. If there are
2 things in it we need it make it better I want you to tell us
3 about it. If there are things in it that do not make any
4 sense, I want you to tell us about it, because, quite
5 frankly, we are losing too many Americans and we are losing
6 too many veterans to suicide in this country.

7 We have also got a bill with Senator Boozman on women's
8 health care. I talked to the Chairman this morning,
9 Chairman Isakson, about that bill, and hopefully we will be
10 able to get it across the finish line in this Congress.

11 In the meantime, we do have a lot of oversight to do,
12 and that is where you guys and gals come in, talking about
13 how the Mission Act is working, how the appeals process is
14 working, how the accountability bill is working. Look, we
15 had a hell of a Congress last year, the last two years, and
16 we got a lot of stuff done. Now we have got to make sure it
17 is working and working to your best interest.

18 With that, God bless you all and thank you all for
19 being here.

20 [Applause.]

21 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Senator Tester.

22 Before I begin and introduce our panel today I would
23 like to pay a very tribute to a great American who has been
24 seated at the table for many years, Mr. Charles Susino, Sr.
25 Mr. Susino passed away last year at the age of 94, on July

1 12, 2018. We looked forward to hearing his presentation
2 each year on behalf of the American Ex-Prisoners of War,
3 where he would advocate not only for ex-prisoners of war but
4 for every veteran. He was truly a man of action and a great
5 advocate.

6 Mr. Susino served as a staff sergeant in the Army Air
7 Force in World War II. He spent 14 months in German prison
8 camps after his B-52 bomber was shot down by enemy fire. At
9 one point he was forced to march for 86 days where he and
10 several of his crew successfully escaped. After returning
11 home he went on to be a spokesman for veterans and their
12 families who he believed did not have a voice.

13 Please join me in a moment of silence as we pay a
14 special tribute and thank Mr. Charles Susino, Sr., for his
15 service to all mankind and a job well done.

16 [Moment of silence.]

17 Chairman Takano. He will definitely be missed, but his
18 legacy lives on through his son, Mr. Charles Susino, Jr.,
19 who is here today. The world is a better place because Mr.
20 Charles Susino--because of the role Mr. Charles Susino
21 played and his presence here will definitely be missed.

22 Now I would like to introduce our witnesses today and
23 allow each of them five minutes to give their opening
24 statement.

25 First we have Mr. Regis William Riley, National

1 Commander, American Veterans. Commander Riley, you are
2 recognized for five minutes to present your opening
3 statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF REGIS WILLIAM RILEY, NATIONAL
2 COMMANDER, AMERICAN VETERANS

3 Mr. Riley. Thank you, Chairman Isakson, Chairman
4 Takano, and honorable members of the House and Senate
5 Committees on Veterans' Affairs. I appreciate the
6 opportunity to present you with the 2019 legislative
7 priorities and policy recommendations of AMVETS. I am
8 Commander Riley and I reside in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,
9 along with my wife, Dee, who is an ardent advocate for
10 veterans and is a past AMVETS National Ladies Auxiliary
11 President, and our son, Cory.

12 For 75 years, AMVETS has been a leading voice in
13 veterans' advocacy work. AMVETS is the most inclusive
14 congressionally chartered veteran service organization. Our
15 membership is open to both active-duty military and
16 honorably discharged veterans.

17 In the past year, AMVETS has doubled down in the
18 efforts to work for veterans in a way that is second to
19 none. We have assembled a world-class team of veteran
20 advocates with significant expertise in health care,
21 benefits administration, and policy work on Capitol Hill.

22 The three most pressing issues AMVETS plans to address
23 this Congress are mental care crisis and suicide epidemic,
24 the critical needs of women veterans, and providing timely
25 access to high-quality health care.

1 Our nation's veterans could not be sending a clearer
2 message that VA mental health care is not working for them
3 than killing themselves in VA parking lots. According to
4 the Washington Post, in a just a year leading up to November
5 2018, 19 veterans committed suicide in VA campuses. A
6 Marine Colonel, Jim Turner, killed himself in a Bay Pines VA
7 Medical Center parking lot just weeks before Christmas.
8 Dressed in his uniform blues and bearing his medals, he left
9 us with this message, and I quote: "I bet if you looked at
10 the 22 suicides a day you will see VA screwed up in 90
11 percent."

12 And on a personal note, just three days ago an AMVETS
13 commander of a post in Annville, PA, at the age of 35,
14 committed suicide right in front of his AMVET post.

15 In the last year, more than 6,000 veterans died as a
16 result of suicide--Marine Corps, Navy, and SOCOM suicides
17 are at a 10-year high. Despite record numbers of veterans
18 killing themselves on VA campuses and record expenditures by
19 VA to address mental health, VA continues to insinuate that
20 veterans killing themselves have not participated in VA
21 care.

22 Let me be clear. What we are doing is not working. To
23 start fixing this problem you have to own the problem. The
24 accountability starts here today.

25 We are pleased that President Trump recently signed an

1 Executive order to address this. However, the devil is
2 still in the details.

3 AMVETS is asking Congress to work with us and end the
4 status quo. As such, we are requesting the creation of a
5 bicameral roundtable or task force that meets every other
6 month, and quarterly congressional hearings on the effort to
7 get to the root of its cause and to right the ship.

8 Addressing the many challenges facing our female
9 veterans is a top priority for AMVETS. The House task force
10 that was recently created to address issues specific to
11 women veterans represents a step in the right direction.
12 AMVETS are looking forward to working with Congresswoman
13 Brownley and other task force members in finding solutions
14 to the problems faced by our women heroes.

15 In the coming weeks, AMVETS will be working with
16 Members of Congress to introduce legislation that creates a
17 holistic approach to research, hopefully a thorough
18 understanding of the problems encountered by our women in
19 uniform.

20 The VA has pledged to serve our veterans' health care
21 needs, but the challenges veterans must overcome to obtain
22 this care depends on factors specific to their situation.
23 As such, we are currently working on legislation that will
24 help us reach out to veterans in our rural areas who are
25 served by the VA but have not utilized VA care for an

1 extended period of time. Even though these veterans are not
2 there and out of sight they should not be out of mind.

3 Additionally, AMVETS opposes the so-called access
4 standards the VA recently released. By simply changing the
5 word "or" to "and," the VA has made it so veterans would
6 still need to travel unreasonable distances or wait months
7 to see a medical professional. Such access would undermine
8 the intent of Congress in passing the act.

9 And lastly, we are now several months into developing
10 AMVETS Switch for Freedom program, a first-of-its-kind
11 nationwide program in which our members and posts are
12 receiving counseling support and special access to products
13 and incentives to switch from smoking to vaping.

14 According to a November 2018 American Cancer Society
15 statement, researchers found that e-cigarette use is likely
16 to be significantly less harmful than smoking regular
17 cigarettes, and as such, one of the clearest health gains we
18 can have for our veterans is to immediately get them off of
19 smoking combustible cigarettes by way of vaping, using
20 patches, or whatever method works best for them. We need VA
21 to take this issue more seriously.

22 Chairmen Isakson and Takano and members of the
23 Committees, I would like to thank you once again for the
24 opportunity to present the issues concerning AMVETS, our
25 active duty personnel, and veterans from all around the

1 country.

2 Thank you.

3 [The prepared statement of Mr. Riley follows:]

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1 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Riley.

2 I would now like to--next we have Mr. David Zurfluh,
3 National President, Paralyzed Veterans of America. Mr.
4 Zurfluh, you are recognized for five minutes to present your
5 opening statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF DAVID ZURFLUH, NATIONAL PRESIDENT,
2 PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

3 Mr. Zurfluh. Chairman Isakson, Chairman Takano, and
4 members of the Committees, I appreciate the opportunity to
5 speak with you this afternoon on behalf of the tens of
6 thousands of veterans with spinal cord injuries and
7 disorders who depend on the VA Spinal Cord Injury System of
8 Care.

9 The past two days advocates from our 33 chapters have
10 been on Capitol Hill to educate Members of Congress about
11 the issues of concern for paralyzed veterans. Although all
12 priorities outlined in our written testimony are important
13 to our members, I would like to devote my time today to the
14 implementation of the VA Mission Act. The law's provisions
15 address some of the most critical issues facing not only our
16 members but all veterans with catastrophic disabilities who
17 depend on VA for their health care.

18 Accessing an appropriate system of health care,
19 services and caregiver support is important to ensuring
20 long-term health and well-being of veterans with spinal cord
21 injuries and disorders. We strongly support the VA's Spinal
22 Cord Injury System of Care because it provides us with the
23 care we need as paralyzed veterans.

24 At times, PVA members, including me, need access to
25 care in the community. However, that care must be

1 coordinated and provided with the same quality and physical
2 access as available to veterans in the VA. I have
3 personally experienced community-provided care through the
4 Choice program that failed to meet my needs as a paralyzed
5 veteran.

6 I injured my hip in a fall and was unable to walk, even
7 with the aid of a cane. I contacted VA and was referred to
8 a community provider under the Choice program. During that
9 appointment, however, I spent a lot of time educating the
10 medical professionals about my spinal cord injury versus
11 discussing my immediate health need. I was not able to be
12 appropriately examined during the visit because I was unable
13 to transfer from my wheelchair to the exam table. This is
14 not an experience that I would have received at my VA
15 medical center.

16 The spinal cord injury unit that I use for my care
17 receives a yearly review from PVA's team of doctors, nurses,
18 and architects. We evaluate the level of care provided,
19 staffing needs of the unit, and the physical access
20 available to veterans with catastrophic disabilities.

21 We know that there will be challenges in the delivery
22 of community care to veterans. Some of the challenges might
23 be based on the quality of care or the experience of the
24 providers in working with veterans who have catastrophic
25 disabilities. Other challenges may be more basic and yet

1 prevent access to care, such as inaccessible exam tables and
2 diagnostic equipment.

3 As VA implements the veterans' Community Care Program
4 we need Congress to provide strong oversight to ensure that
5 the care all eligible veterans receive through this program
6 is the quality deserving of those who have sacrificed their
7 bodies for this nation. We also need Congress to assure
8 that the VA has the financial and personnel resources to not
9 only fully implement the new community program but to also
10 ensure that the VA system of care is strengthened.

11 Some challenges faced by the VA Spinal Cord Injury
12 System of Care include lengthy hiring processes and nurse
13 staffing shortages. We expect VA to continue to work to
14 address these concerns and for Congress to provide the
15 needed authorities and funding to ensure that paralyzed
16 veterans are able to rely on the VA for their care for
17 decades to come.

18 We also look to Congress to provide the resources and
19 oversight necessary to ensure the expansion of access to the
20 VA's comprehensive caregiver program for pre-9/11 veterans
21 with service-connected injuries. The VA Mission Act's
22 expansion of the caregiver program was a result of years of
23 advocacy by PVA and other veteran service organizations. We
24 thank you for rectifying the inequity that left many
25 veterans who have depended for decades on their caregivers

1 to help them stay healthy and independent, unable to access
2 this program.

3 Now we call on you to hold VA accountable for ensuring
4 that expansion is not delayed. Veterans with spinal cord
5 injuries from all wars and eras need access to these
6 benefits. In many cases, their lives and continued
7 independence rely on this expansion success.

8 In the last year, Congress has given VA the ability to
9 change the course of VA health care. We call on Congress to
10 hold the VA accountable to implement the VA Mission Act in
11 the manner intended by those who supported it and those who
12 will live with its results.

13 PVA does not fear community care. Instead, we seek to
14 ensure that if care is provided in the community that it is
15 appropriate and meets the needs of veterans seeking it,
16 including those with catastrophic injuries.

17 Ladies and gentlemen, PVA's members are unstoppable.
18 We thrive every day in the face of adversity and
19 limitations. We need each one of you to ensure that
20 paralyzed veterans have the health care, support, and
21 opportunities that are essential to live lives that are full
22 of meaning and purpose.

23 On behalf of Paralyzed Veterans of America, I think you
24 for your time and will answer any questions you may have.

25 [The prepared statement of Mr. Zurfluh follows:]

1 Chairman Takano. Thank you for your testimony, Mr.
2 Zurfluh.

3 Next we have Mr. John Rowan, the National President and
4 CEO of Vietnam Veterans of America. Mr. Rowan, you are
5 recognized for five minutes to present your opening
6 statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF JOHN ROWAN, NATIONAL PRESIDENT AND
2 CEO, VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

3 Mr. Rowan. Thank you, Chairman Isakson, Chairman
4 Takano, Ranking Members Tester, Dr. Roe. It is a pleasure
5 to see you all again. Two years ago they gave me a new
6 aortic valve and I showed up three weeks later. This is my
7 14th time being here in front of you folks, and I really
8 appreciate the ability to talk to everybody, and I
9 appreciate all the Members of Congress and the Senate who
10 showed up today. That is often not the case sometimes when
11 you have too many other things going on.

12 But I wanted to--first of all, we have formal testimony
13 that I would to hopefully have placed on the record, beyond
14 when I get a chance to speak today. I would also like to do
15 a shout-out to my colleagues, the Korean Vietnam veterans
16 who join me today, who are sitting in the back there.
17 People do not know but during the Vietnam War over 350,000
18 Korean military served in Vietnam alongside the Americans,
19 and we just want to acknowledge them today.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Rowan. And despite all the years that have passed
22 since the Vietnam War ended, the issue of the POW/MIAs is
23 still our highest priority, and it came home the other day
24 when the DPAA finally acknowledged that they had recovered
25 three Air America crew from Laos, a very difficult place to

1 deal with. One of them happened to originally come from one
2 of my neighborhoods in Queens, New York. So after all these
3 years later we are still resolving cases, and we are proud
4 of the work we have done to help accomplish that.

5 The biggest issue, however, facing Vietnam veterans,
6 and, frankly, all the veterans now, and even civilians, is
7 the whole toxic exposure issue. It started with us in
8 Vietnam with the Agent Orange illnesses but it has gone on
9 many years afterwards. Frankly, those of us who walked off
10 the battlefield in one piece thought, ah, we are safe.

11 Wrong. I am the classic example. I am an 100 percent
12 disabled, primarily from diabetes and neuropathy and my
13 heart replacement, all related to diabetes and neuropathy
14 and all the rest of it, but all related to Agent Orange.

15 Unfortunately, the folks in the Persian Gulf were
16 exposed to all sorts of stuff that we still have not figured
17 out, and the folks that went to Iraq and Afghanistan,
18 unfortunately, and there is no EPA in either one of those
19 countries, so the burn pits that they used over there have
20 really set us back tremendously for those veterans. They
21 are only now starting to understand, because they are now
22 reaching ages--many of us in the Vietnam era did not get
23 affected or did not see the effects of Agent Orange until we
24 were 40 or 50 or 60, or even today at 70.

25 So we are very concerned about the continuation of

1 these toxic exposures and also how they have rolled over
2 into the private sector. The base issue is extremely
3 important. Camp Lejeune is just the tip of the iceberg.
4 The Air Force bases, there are 147 Air Force bases that have
5 a Superfund site. Think about that. How did that happen?
6 Because of all of the toxic stuff that the Air Force used,
7 never mind jet fuel which is obvious, but all the wonderful
8 things to clean planes, de-ice them, and all the rest of it.
9 Where does it go? It goes in the ground, and unfortunately
10 it may even affect the towns that they are sited in.

11 So we are concerned about that. We are concerned about
12 toxic substances in our food and elsewhere, that the private
13 sector is now dealing with. I still do not understand where
14 all these autistic kids came from, but I have my questions.

15 Fixing the VA. We will continue to work with everybody
16 in this room to try to make the VA a better place. We are,
17 however, concerned about this somehow more reliance on the
18 private sector. The truth of the matter is I am not so sure
19 the private sector is ready for us. The gentleman to my
20 right here, David's talk about what happens with spinal cord
21 injury veterans is not alone.

22 Also, there are no doctors. There are no primary care
23 doctors in this country, period. I have private health
24 care, besides using the VA, which I prefer, quite frankly.
25 I retired in the city of New York. I have a really nice

1 health care plan. I have a Medicare Advantage plan. It
2 does me really well. The problem is I have not seen a
3 doctor in two years. All I get is nurse practitioners.
4 They are very nice people, and they are very smart people,
5 but they are not doctors.

6 And I think that we are really--and I live in the city
7 of New York, which has more health care per square inch than
8 anywhere in the United States. So we are very concerned
9 about the effect of this Choice program on our veterans as
10 we go forward, and really afraid of the ability to pay for
11 it. Where is the money going to come when the private
12 sector's doctors charge three times what a VA doctor costs--
13 if you can find one in the private sector who is willing to
14 treat you.

15 So I thank you for allowing us to come before you again
16 this year. I am really am proud to see the new Chair.
17 Chairman Takano is now my fifth Chair in the House Veterans'
18 Affairs Committee that I have had the pleasure of working
19 with, and it is always a pleasure to see Senator Isakson.

20 Thank you.

21 [Applause.]

22 [The prepared statement of Mr. Rowan follows:]

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1 Chairman Takano. Thank you, John Rowan, for your
2 testimony. I now recognize Jeremy Butler, Chief Executive
3 Officer, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. Mr.
4 Butler, you are recognized for five minutes to make your
5 opening statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF JEREMY BUTLER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE
2 OFFICER, IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS OF AMERICA

3 Mr. Butler. Thank you. Chairman Isakson, Chairman
4 Takano, Ranking Member Tester, Ranking Member Roe, and
5 distinguished members of the Committees, on behalf of IAVA's
6 more than 425,000 members I would like to thank you for the
7 opportunity to introduce myself and testify before you
8 today.

9 But first I would like to recognize the many IAVA
10 members from around the country who have flown in to storm
11 the Hill with us this week and who are here with us today.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Butler. Those who remain standing represent the
14 two million women who have served and who continue to serve
15 and who deserve the equal recognition and support of the
16 government and the public. Thank you all for being with us
17 today.

18 [Applause.]

19 Mr. Butler. After three years on staff at IAVA, last
20 month I took over as CEO of the organization, following the
21 transition of our founder, Paul Rieckhoff, to our Board of
22 Directors. IAVA was founded 15 years ago and was built on
23 his vision and leadership. I am humbled to take the helm of
24 this incredible organization.

25 I joined the Navy in 1999, and served on active duty

1 for six years, to include deploying in 2003, on the United
2 States Gary in support of the invasion of Iraq. I
3 transitioned out of active duty in 2006, and into the
4 Reserves where I continue to serve today.

5 My path to the military was shaped by my parents. They
6 met as Peace Corps volunteers in 1962, inspired by President
7 Kennedy's call for young Americans to serve their country
8 and the cause of freedom. Before joining the Peace Corps,
9 however, my father also served in the Army, and despite the
10 difficulties of being a black man in the 1950s Army, I know
11 that he cherished his military service as much as he
12 cherished his time in the Peace Corps. For both my parents,
13 their service taught them that serving in support of others
14 was far more noble than serving yourself.

15 My father did not live to see me join the Navy but I
16 think he would have been proud of me being in the military
17 but also especially proud to see me begin working with IAVA.
18 "You do not wait to do what is right," he would tell me.
19 "You do it as soon as you know that it is right."

20 IAVA members have spent 15 years fighting for what is
21 right for veterans. This year, IAVA will continue its focus
22 on the six priorities that our members see as most pressing.
23 The Big Six, as we call them, contain the challenges and
24 opportunities that IAVA members care about most, and that we
25 see as areas where we can uniquely make an impact.

1 The first is to continue our campaign to combat suicide
2 among troops and veterans. In our 2019 member survey, 65
3 percent of IAVA members reported that they knew a post-9/11
4 veteran who attempted suicide. Fifty-nine percent knew a
5 post-9/11 veteran that died by suicide, and over 75 percent
6 of our members reported believing that the nation is not
7 doing enough to combat military and veteran suicide.

8 This crisis is real and IAVA is on the front lines.
9 Last year, our Rapid Response Referral Program connected 39
10 veterans to the Veterans Crisis Line, which means that about
11 every week and a half our small staff of social workers
12 supported a veteran that was either currently suicidal or at
13 risk of suicide, with life-saving connections to help. That
14 trend, unfortunately, continues this year.

15 The second of our priorities is to modernize government
16 to support the post-9/11 generation. IAVA will continue to
17 monitor the implementation of the Mission Act. We have
18 always stated that implementation will require strong
19 congressional oversight in order to ensure that it does not
20 turn into an expansion of privatization at the VA. Eighty-
21 one percent of our members rated VA care at average or above
22 average in our last survey. Veterans tell us that they like
23 the care that they receive at the VA. Our job is to ensure
24 that they have easy access to the foundational services that
25 the VA can uniquely provide for our community.

1 The third priority is to drive support for injuries
2 from burn pits and toxic exposures. Eighty-two percent of
3 our members were exposed to burn pits during their
4 deployments, and over 84 percent of those exposed believe
5 they already have, or may have health symptoms because of
6 that exposure.

7 Burn pits are quickly becoming the Agent Orange of the
8 post-9/11 era of veterans. It is well past time that
9 comprehensive action is taken to address the very real
10 concerns that those exposures have severely impacted the
11 long-term health of our veterans. IAVA calls on Congress to
12 pass the Burn Pits Accountability Act which requires the
13 Department of Defense to record and report exposures.

14 Our fourth priority is to continue to defend and expand
15 veterans' education opportunities. Since its inception, the
16 post-9/11 GI Bill has faced threats of funding cuts and
17 abuse, which is why IAVA continues to make the defense of
18 this benefit a top priority. In 2017, IAVA worked with VSO
19 partners to pass the Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance
20 Act, but in light of the technical issues it has impacted
21 housing payments for tens of thousands of service-connected
22 students. IAVA continues to be a watchdog and asks for your
23 vigilant oversight to ensure that the VA fixes its IT
24 problems without delay.

25 Our fifth priority is to galvanize support for women

1 veterans. They are the fastest-growing population in both
2 the military and veteran communities and IAVA will continue
3 our public awareness campaign, #SheWhoBorneTheBattle, to
4 bring a greater cultural understanding of the increasing
5 contributions of women servicemembers. We will push for
6 passage of the Deborah Sampson Act and will continue to
7 press the Secretary of the VA through legislative and
8 administrative action to change the outdated motto of the VA
9 to be inclusive of all who have worn the uniform.

10 Finally, we will establish support for veterans who
11 want to utilize medical cannabis. Over 80 percent of IAVA
12 members support legalization for medical use, yet our
13 national policies are outdated, research is lacking, and
14 stigma persists. IAVA will continue our fight on behalf of
15 veterans who can benefit from medicinal cannabis and we
16 remain committed to the passage of the bipartisan VA
17 Medicinal Cannabis Research Act.

18 We applaud Senators Tester and Sullivan and
19 Representatives Correa and Higgins for their reintroduction
20 of this legislation and look forward to working with them on
21 its passage.

22 IAVA's "Big Six," the policy priorities that I
23 presented today, represent those that our members feel are
24 the most pressing for our community.

25 Members of both Committees, thank you again for the

1 opportunity to testify before you today and share IAVA's
2 views on these issues. I look forward to answering your
3 questions that you may have.

4 [Applause.]

5 [The prepared statement of Mr. Butler follows:]

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1 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Butler.

2 Mr. Jared Lyon, National President and CEO, Student

3 Veterans of America. Mr. Lyon, you are recognized for five

4 minutes to present your opening statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF JARED LYON, NATIONAL PRESIDENT AND
2 CEO, STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

3 Mr. Lyon. Thank you, Chairmen Isakson and Takano,
4 Ranking Members Tester and Roe, and members of the
5 Committee. Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of
6 America to present our policy priorities for 2019.

7 I am here as the National President and CEO of the
8 largest chapter-based student organization in the country.
9 With over 1,500 chapters and 754,000 student veterans across
10 the nation, we place student veterans at the top of our
11 organizational pyramid.

12 Today I am honored to be joined by student veterans,
13 alumni, chapter advisors, and supporters. If you are here
14 with Student Veterans of America today please stand or raise
15 your hand.

16 [Applause.]

17 Mr. Lyon. The motto of our organization is
18 "Yesterday's Warriors, Today's Scholars, and Tomorrow's
19 Leaders." These folks here with me today are a snapshot of
20 who we are, and they are the epitome of our ethos.

21 We are also joined by nine VFW and SVA legislative
22 fellows. I, myself, have just returned from meeting
23 servicemembers in Japan, and I can confirm that our force is
24 ready and will make fine student veterans in the future.

25 Representing the current generation of student veterans

1 is our former chapter president, at the University of Nevada
2 Las Vegas Rebel Vets, a United States Air Force veteran and
3 spouse, who recently moved to the Boston area for her
4 husband's career. She is a current transfer hopeful at
5 Boston College as a biology major on the premedicine track,
6 and she is the 2019 National Student Veteran of the Year,
7 Alexandria Sawin. Alex, please stand so we can recognize
8 your service.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Lyon. I would finally like to highlight a student
11 veterans who has graduated but could not join us today,
12 Sergeant Kyle White, U.S. Army retired. Many of you know
13 Kyle as a Medal of Honor recipient for his actions in
14 Afghanistan in 2007. Kyle had not yet received the Medal of
15 Honor when he became a student veteran at the University of
16 North Carolina Charlotte to pursue a bachelor's in business
17 administration with a focus in finance. Kyle is a strong
18 advocate for student veterans and an SVA alumnus.

19 These amazing stories are not unique. In 2017, SVA
20 released the National Veteran Education Success Tracker,
21 NVEST for short, in partnership with the VA, studying the
22 first 854,000 veterans to use the post-9/11 GI Bill. The
23 NVEST research illustrates the high performance of student
24 veterans on campus. Today's student veterans have a higher
25 grade point average, a higher success rate, and a propensity

1 to obtain degrees in high-demand fields, and the data make
2 one fact abundantly clear--student veterans are worth
3 America's continued investment.

4 With that proven success, we are committed to being an
5 organization that advocates under a concept we call being
6 left of bang. United States Marine Corps has programs
7 dedicated to this concept. The concept is about being aware
8 and taking actions ahead of when potential violence may
9 occur, the bang of a gun or explosion. To be the right of
10 bang is to be reactive, but being left of bang provides the
11 opportunity to be proactive.

12 Student Veterans of America is an organization
13 dedicated being left of bang, dedicated to proactive
14 solutions that empower, employ, and equip veterans with the
15 tools needed to succeed on campus, thrive in their careers,
16 and live their best lives in the civilian world.

17 Our policy priorities for this year are truly left of
18 bang, with a focus on being proactive, collaborative, and
19 innovative. Our number one legislative priority will be to
20 provide voice to our nation's student veterans as a
21 significant component of the reauthorization of the Higher
22 Education Act, first, incorporating VA and DoD education
23 resources as federal funds and applying the rule to all
24 institutions of higher learning. The 90/10 loophole has
25 been abused long enough, and this important change is a

1 major check on the quality of institutions.

2 Second, simplifying the processes such as FAFSA and
3 student loan repayment options, with the caveat that
4 simplification must not come at the expense of access to
5 resources for students.

6 Third, maintaining key student protections such as
7 borrowers' defense to repayment and gainful employment.

8 Fourth, establishing greater oversight on nonprofit
9 conversions.

10 And finally, creating efficiencies through greater
11 government collaboration and automatic application of
12 benefits aimed at reducing student debt.

13 VA's education benefits only impact a fraction of the
14 legislation and regulation that touch the educational
15 opportunities, choices, and protections that impact today's
16 student veterans. In 2017, the 115th Congress unanimously
17 passed the Forever GI Bill, establishing education as a
18 right of service, no longer as an otherwise short-sighted
19 cost of war.

20 Our second priority for the year is continued oversight
21 of implementation of this new law. Last semester, we were
22 significant GI Bill late payments, due to the VA's inability
23 to effectively implement severe provisions of Forever GI
24 Bill, causing extreme hardship for thousands of student
25 veterans. We appreciate the leadership of Congress in

1 swiftly addressing the frustrations felt across the country
2 and applaud VA's eventual decision to reset housing
3 allowance calculations in response to the blunder.

4 A crisis of this proportion was preventable and must
5 not happen again. The application of the law should not
6 inadvertently impact student veterans. The GI Bill is an
7 earned benefit. Veterans have every right to expect prompt
8 and accurate payments.

9 The balance of our priorities in nuanced detail are in
10 our written testimony. SVA is a solutions-oriented
11 organization and we remain committed to be a partner with
12 you and your staffs and look forward to working together to
13 empower student veterans to, through, and beyond higher
14 education to create America's next generation of leaders.

15 Thank you all for the time.

16 [Applause.]

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

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1 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Lyon, for your
2 testimony.

3 Mr. Charles Anthony Susino, Jr., National Director,
4 Legislative Office, American Ex-Prisoners of War. Mr.
5 Susino, you are recognized for five minutes to present your
6 opening statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF CHARLES ANTHONY SUSINO, NATIONAL
2 DIRECTOR, LEGISLATIVE OFFICE, AMERICAN EX-
3 PRISONERS OF WAR

4 Mr. Susino. Thank you, sir. Chairmen and Members of
5 the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and guests,
6 my name is Charles A. Susino, National Director of the
7 American Ex-Prisoners of War. I thank you for the
8 opportunity to express our views. You knew my father,
9 Charles Susino, Jr., National Commander of our organization
10 for many years. It was his voice that urged you to do the
11 right thing on behalf of all veterans.

12 I will attempt to channel that voice today. This past
13 July my family and I, and the veteran community as a whole,
14 lost the strongest advocate on behalf of those who spoke
15 directly to you. He professed it is about deserving
16 veterans receiving what they earned.

17 Mr. Chairman, thank you for the kind words earlier
18 about my dad. Thank you all for the moment of silence. If
19 my dad could whisper in my ear right now he would say,
20 "Charlie, it is not about me. There is a lot of work to get
21 done. Let us get cracking."

22 At 94, that is the word he said. In preparation, when
23 he was still alive, he says, "You know, sometimes I think we
24 are too nice. We have got to make sure everybody is focused
25 on getting things done." That was his words, just shy of

1 95. So I am going to leave you with that and we are going
2 to continue.

3 We are grateful for your efforts over the past year and
4 look forward to the productive 116th Congress. If you
5 disagree with us, either today in testimony or as we work
6 with our fellow veterans, please express your objection and
7 we will respect your position. Otherwise, we ask for your
8 unwavering advocacy on our behalf.

9 We draw your attention to several bills which we
10 believe have special merit and request your proactive
11 support. The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, H.R.
12 299, we heard a lot about. I will not be repetitious except
13 to say stop the debate and establish the presumptive for
14 these veterans. As it has been said several times before,
15 we do not need any further proof.

16 The previous bill, S 1990, DIC Improvement Act, must be
17 reintroduced. Its purpose was to amend Title 38, to
18 increase the amounts payable by the VA for DIC compensation
19 and to modify the requirements for DIC for survivors of
20 veterans rated totally disabled at the time of death. For
21 many, DIC is the only source of income and critical to their
22 quality of life.

23 We must reintroduce the National POW/MIA Flag Act to
24 amend Title 36, to require the POW/MIA flag to be raised on
25 days that the flag of the United States is displayed on

1 certain federal property. There can be no objection to the
2 special honor and public awareness for those that did not
3 come home.

4 Full Military Honors Bill has been reintroduced in this
5 session and needs to quickly be passed. The bill would
6 provide full military honors for the funeral of an eligible
7 veteran who (1) is first interred or inurned in Arlington
8 National Cemetery on or after the enactment of the bill; (2)
9 was awarded the Medal of Honor or the Prisoner-of-War medal;
10 or (3) is not currently entitled to full military honors
11 because of such veteran's grade.

12 Bill number four, Gold Star Families Remembrance Day,
13 again mentioned earlier. Appreciate that very much. March
14 2, 2019 marked the 90th year to honor and recognize the
15 sacrifices made by the veteran and their families who gave
16 their lives to defend freedom.

17 Earlier, many of you, in your opening remarks, talked
18 about focusing on implementation. Thank you for doing that.
19 I really want to accent that area. It is very demanding
20 work to develop and get VA bills through Congress. The
21 veteran's health benefit experience can only improve if the
22 implementation is within a high-performing modern
23 organization with a strong culture of accountability to all
24 levels of employees. It is worth pausing and thinking about
25 that and see if those words would describe our VA.

1 We believe continued shortcomings hamper and prevent
2 the veteran from receiving what they deserve. For example,
3 a computer system which allows you to schedule a physician
4 appointment but is challenged to cancel or reschedule
5 imposes unreasonable restrictions on the VA treating
6 physician--Dr. Roe, I ask you to comment on this later--with
7 respect to many medications which cannot be prescribed, or
8 precludes physicians from prescribing multiple medications,
9 which is a standard protocol for that treatment in the
10 private sector.

11 The public does not wait weeks to see their primary
12 physician for routine illnesses. The veteran often still
13 has to.

14 We must approach the implementation with the same
15 energy and focus as bill passage. It is maybe not quite as,
16 excuse the term, glamorous. Do your own calendar tests.
17 Please do your own calendar tests. Look back several
18 months, then look forward several months, and look at the
19 time spent on oversight of the VA operations. Your
20 leadership is needed and very much appreciated. And when
21 you do that, again, it is not on activity. It is on
22 results.

23 Last item, in 1986, Congress and the President mandated
24 VA health care for veterans with service-connected
25 disabilities as well as special groups of veterans. The

1 special groups included veterans of World War I, 58 years
2 after the end of the war. World War II ended 73 years ago.
3 We have asked, for almost a decade, to revisit the special
4 groups with an update to include veterans of World War II,
5 Korea, Vietnam, Cold War, and our conflicts in the Middle
6 East. We have requested for many years with no movement.

7 The political landscape is always changing. Maybe this
8 President may see it appropriate and fair treatment for
9 those that have kept our country free.

10 Thank you very much.

11 [Applause.]

12 [The prepared statement of Mr. Susino follows:]

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1 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Susino, and, of
2 course, we are sorry for your loss, and again we thank your
3 father for his many years of service.

4 I now turn to Ms. Rene Bardorf, Senior Vice President
5 for Government and Community Relations, Wounded Warrior
6 Project. Ms. Bardorf, you are recognized for five minutes
7 to present your opening statement.

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1 STATEMENT OF RENE BARDORF, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
2 FOR GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS, WOUNDED
3 WARRIOR PROJECT

4 Ms. Bardorf. Thank you, Chairmen Isakson and Takano,
5 Ranking Members Tester and Roe, and members of the
6 Committee. Thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project to
7 testify at today's hearing. I am honored to represent an
8 organization that serves over 150,000 wounded, ill, and
9 injured servicemembers, veterans, and their families with
10 lifesaving programs and services.

11 We delivered nearly \$200 million in free programs in
12 2018 alone, and since 2003 more than \$1.3 billion in
13 programs. More than 7 million citizens from across your
14 states and districts have supported us as we deliver these
15 important programs at no cost to veterans, and we are
16 grateful for your support.

17 As one of the nation's largest nonprofits we have
18 developed unprecedented reach to increase the public's
19 awareness of the challenges our veterans face. We augment
20 programs that assist DoD and VA with outreach and care for
21 veterans. We also invest in other organizations, many of
22 whom are here today with us. Since 2012, we have granted
23 over \$80 million to 158 organizations that complement our
24 direct programs and services.

25 That said, we must caution that nonprofits like ours

1 are limited by resources provided by the public which may
2 not be sustainable long-term. Our largest ally in meeting
3 these needs is the government.

4 Today I would like to highlight three general topics--
5 mental health, Mission Act implementation, and DoD-VA
6 collaboration. I will also provide three specific actions
7 you may consider to make a difference immediately.

8 First, as you address the mental health and suicide
9 prevention we urge you to embrace a comprehensive approach
10 anchored in evidence-based treatments. This foundation
11 should support private and nonprofit sector partnerships
12 that keep VA at the center of care and strengthen holistic
13 approaches to wellness.

14 Our own Warrior Care Network is a prime example of how
15 this is working. The partnership units us with VA and for
16 renowned medical centers such as Boston's General Hospital,
17 to help redefine how we treat moderate to severe PTSD. The
18 network delivers specialized clinical services through
19 innovative two- and three-week intensive outpatient
20 programs, anchored in evidence-based treatment and supported
21 by alternative therapies. VA personnel are onsite providing
22 bidirectional referrals and assistance.

23 Veterans are completing this program at a rate of 94
24 percent, where traditional programs show completion rates of
25 only 40 to 50 percent.

1 Second, as you oversee the implementation of Mission
2 Act, please ensure that a streamlined process exists to
3 enroll providers. Our private-sector providers, some of the
4 world's most renowned, have shared that enrollment is
5 difficult and has discouraged participation. And
6 reimbursements must be paid on time.

7 As the caregiver program transforms and expands, your
8 oversight of eligibility, revocations, and appeals is
9 critically important. We act that VSOs continue to be
10 involved in these discussions.

11 Our third recommendation for you is to closely monitor
12 initiatives requiring DoD collaboration with VA. We support
13 the Department's goals of increasing efficiencies,
14 eliminating redundancies, and improving health care
15 outcomes, especially as they pursue integrated purchase care
16 initiatives and joint sharing of facilities and services.

17 As I mentioned earlier, here are the three specific
18 actions you can take.

19 First, we ask you to support legislation allowing
20 veterans to renew their specially adapted housing grant
21 every 10 years. Veterans' lives change and it is
22 unreasonable for us to expect them to remain in their first
23 adapted home for the rest of their lives.

24 Second, we urge you to reintroduce and support the FAIR
25 Heroes Act. This legislation aims to end an unattended

1 consequence that leaves severely injured veterans paying
2 annual premiums that are five times larger--or higher,
3 excuse me--than healthy military retirees.

4 Finally, we ask you to hold hearing and commission two
5 studies, one for the long-term impacts of TBI. If the DoD
6 estimates are correct and research is showing increased
7 early onset dementia, Parkinson's, and evidence of CTE
8 postmortem, we will soon have a substantial public health
9 crisis. That study must also address the needs of TBI
10 patients and caregivers who now remain in their homes but
11 will need options for their care as their caregivers age.

12 The second study is on toxic exposures. We should take
13 a comprehensive look at research, data, and personal
14 accounts to better identify, track, and care for individuals
15 who have been exposed to potential harm through not just
16 burn pits but other equally harmful substances and toxins.
17 We must understand the scope of these problems today in
18 order to prepare for the impacts on our veterans and the
19 health care system tomorrow.

20 Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering
21 any questions you may have.

22 [Applause.]

23 [The prepared statement of Ms. Bardorf follows:]

24

25

1 Chairman Takano. Thank you for your testimony, ms.
2 Bardorf. I am going to skip my--I will skip to the end of
3 the questioning period. I want to recognize Mr. Cisneros
4 for three minutes for questioning.

5 Mr. Cisneros. Good afternoon, everyone. I want to
6 thank you all for your service to our country and for the
7 dedication that you have to the veterans that have served
8 along with you. I especially want to thank our veterans
9 from California who are visiting and I want to just
10 recognize Jamal Williams and Jose Reynoso, who I had a
11 chance to meet earlier today. They stopped by my office. I
12 was not there but I got a chance to meet them here before
13 this hearing. So thank you again to all of you for being
14 here today.

15 Since I have got limited time I am going to keep it
16 short and I actually--I am a big advocate of education and I
17 am proud to have Cal State Fullerton in my district, where
18 we have a number of veterans serving there. And so I am
19 just going to let you kind of--you already kind of mentioned
20 some things already, but just--the GI Bill, what can we do
21 to improve the GI Bill that is going to make it better for
22 our student veterans that are out there serving right now?

23 Mr. Lyon. Well, thank you, sir. So Cal State
24 Fullerton, excellent group of student veterans there. And I
25 appreciate the question. If we are looking at the GI Bill

1 very specifically, I think it has been clear, from my
2 colleagues up here, implementation, and Members of Congress
3 agree, is very important. The Forever GI Bill, as it
4 pertains right now, we are facing a couple of potential
5 hurdles. IT modernization is a big challenge. The Forever
6 GI Bill is a fantastic benefit, but if we cannot get to
7 actually processing in the manner of the intent of the law,
8 the payments in a timely fashion, it is going to provide
9 anxiety and stress for those that are currently pursuing
10 their educations.

11 Many of the student veterans in America that are
12 studying right now are in business--science, technology,
13 engineering, and math, and health-related fields. These are
14 high-stress and highly dedicated students. We do not need
15 to add stressors of specifically looking at whether or not I
16 am going to get my GI Bill.

17 An additional part of the GI Bill is a fantastic
18 opportunity to be what is called a VA work-study, while you
19 are using the GI Bill. The difficulty here is that it is
20 still a paper-based process and it is antiquated and
21 lethargic in its ability to pay student veterans in a timely
22 fashion for working while they are supplementing their
23 income as students.

24 If we could also seek to gain parity with the actual VA
25 work-study to the Department of Education's work-study,

1 allowing student veterans to not be limited to only doing
2 veteran work but to actually work in laboratories, and doing
3 research, such that we are gaining not just an education but
4 work experience for our post-civilian success.

5 Mr. Cisneros. All right. Again, I just want to thank
6 you all for your service to our country, and it is a
7 pleasure for all of you to be here today, and I yield back
8 my time, Mr. Chairman.

9 Chairman Takano. The gentleman yields. I now
10 recognize Dr. Roe for three minutes.

11 Dr. Roe. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We are working on
12 the bill to fix that work-study problem.

13 A couple of things, John, that you brought up, and
14 others, and I think it is all tied into getting the IT
15 straight. That was the big problem with the GI Bill--not
16 the GI Bill. Long before computers, they sent me a \$300
17 check every month, and it was not a problem at all. It
18 worked great. And we did not have all these flub-ups and it
19 was embarrassing to see it roll out like that, but it is a
20 great benefit.

21 The other thing the VA has got to do on the Mission
22 Act, and we tried to put a bill together that would help
23 both urban America, where John lives, and rural America,
24 where I live, and that was difficult to do.

25 One of the things the VA, that they did, where we

1 lived, to discourage people from--private physicians, as I
2 was, from participating, was they did not pay them. They
3 did not send the checks out to anybody, and so the doctors
4 had to get out. I think we can get them back, because I
5 think the VA is committed. I think the Secretary is
6 Committed to getting that right. To make sure to have a
7 robust program out there, the VA has got to be able to do
8 that, and the IT is the center of that. It has got to be a
9 cloud-based system where I have access to that information,
10 they have access to my information. So we want to do that.

11 And one of the things near and dear to my heart, from
12 the student veterans, if I could burn the FAFSA form I would
13 start a marshmallow pit with it. With 120 questions--it
14 ought to be about 10 or 12, or 20 at the most. We are
15 working on that also, to try to make that simpler.

16 And, you know, the other part, the oversight, one of
17 the things that we did with the Appeals Modernization that
18 we did not do with Mission, and I wish we had, was we had
19 the VA come in every 90 days and tell us how they were
20 progressing with that bill. And the Secretary, to his
21 credit, has been very good about coming in and updating us
22 on the Mission Act, which is to go wide the 6th of June.

23 The problems is they did not include the VSOs very well
24 in that, and I found that in doing the Mission Act, bringing
25 all the stakeholders around the table, it was a long

1 process, but at the end of the day it was the right process
2 because it got a bill across the finish line, and that is
3 what I would encourage VA to do.

4 One other thing on the GI Bill, as you know, on the
5 STEM aspect, sometimes that training takes a little longer,
6 so we added extra funding, resources so that if someone is
7 in that STEM track could finish their degree on time and
8 without the debt.

9 I just want to finish by--I have learned a lot today.
10 I took a lot of notes, and I appreciate all of you all being
11 here, and we will hopefully get to some of these or many of
12 these things that you all brought up today. And I yield
13 back.

14 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Dr. Roe. I would now like
15 to recognize the Vice Chair of the House Committee,
16 Representative Lamb from Pennsylvania.

17 Mr. Lamb. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Commander Riley, I
18 would like to thank you for the attention you called to the
19 mental health epidemic, and welcome you as my fellow
20 Pittsburgher back down to Washington, D.C.

21 I know one issue that we have had within the VA health
22 system is that we still have VA hospitals with no beds in
23 them for mental health treatment. So on the occasion that
24 some people show up for treatment they are not able to stay
25 overnight or be kept in-patient. I am curious if you have

1 heard this complaint as well and encountered any people who
2 dealt with that situation.

3 Mr. Riley. Thank you. We have encountered various
4 hospitals with empty beds, and the thing is to get those
5 beds filled we need to reach out more to our community,
6 especially our VSOs, and to veterans everywhere. A lot of
7 veterans feel that they are too proud to accept that care,
8 whether they know that they deserved it or not. It is
9 important that we get the message out to all veterans,
10 especially our homeless veterans who need that bed for the
11 health that they have acquired, the bad health they have
12 acquired in their service to our country. And it is
13 important to us, at AMVETS, that our veterans keep getting
14 the proper care in a better and more refined way, because
15 what we have right now is not working. Thank you.

16 Mr. Lamb. Thank you very much, sir. And I want to
17 commend the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who came to my
18 office the other day and talked a little bit about this same
19 problem. And they have had a lot of success in going out
20 into the community and meeting with some younger veterans
21 outside of the VA completely.

22 So CEO Butler, I do not know what your title is, but if
23 you would address that, maybe fill in for the rest of the
24 group that was not able to hear that, it sounded like in
25 Dallas, I believe it was, in particular, they have had some

1 real success kind of holding peer-to-peer counseling type
2 sessions.

3 Mr. Butler. Thank you. I think that is the first time
4 I have been referred to CEO Butler. That was nice. I do
5 not think it will happen again, probably, but it was very
6 nice.

7 No, but you are absolutely right, and I think a lot of
8 us know the statistic, but 14 out of the 20 daily suicides
9 are by veterans that are outside of the VA system. And so it
10 is absolutely vital that we fund, that we support, and that
11 we advocate for programs that are reaching outside to those
12 veterans that are not necessarily in the system, for
13 whatever reason that might be. It might be that they have
14 less than honorable discharges. It might be that they had a
15 frustrating time with the VA system and so they have moved
16 on elsewhere.

17 And so I think that is absolutely key. So it is the
18 outreach, it is partnering together with organizations that
19 have shared missions, and Dallas is a great example, where
20 they have got a number of organizations that work together
21 collaboratively, they share information, share resources to
22 ensure that they are reaching out to and connecting with
23 this vulnerable population.

24 Mr. Lamb. Well, thank you and please continue to let
25 us know how we can help build on those efforts.

1 I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Lamb. I now recognize
3 Representative Bost of Illinois for three minutes.

4 Mr. Bost. Thank you, Chairman, and thank you all.

5 Thank you all for your service and a shout-out to all the
6 Illinois veterans that are here.

7 Let me just start out by saying something, and I do not
8 mean it in any bad way. I mean, it in a most positive way.
9 Jared--Mr. Lyon, in your statement, your mission statement,
10 you finished by saying they are leaders of the future. They
11 are leaders right now. Everybody that has ever worn that
12 uniform is a leader right now.

13 And I am going to tell you with working with the VA
14 Committee here, and we are trying to do--I come from a state
15 that has been really blessed for what they do to veterans.
16 If you leave Illinois and enlist in the military, and you
17 come back to Illinois, you get a waiver for your tuition,
18 and that is above and beyond the GI Bill. That is a
19 wonderful thing that we have done.

20 Illinois is not known for doing a lot of things right
21 here recently, but they did that right, and it is great for
22 our veterans and for providing that education.

23 Now with the new GI Bill--and this is why it is a
24 concern to me--I am one of those lucky Marine veterans. I
25 went in right after they got rid of the old GI Bill and got

1 our right after they got--before they started the new GI
2 Bill, but I was from Illinois so I did receive some benefit
3 of that.

4 What do you see in the implementation of this GI Bill
5 now? How do we make sure that it is being implemented
6 correctly? And I know there have been some problems that we
7 have seen. What suggestions would you have?

8 Mr. Lyon. Yes, and being one of those lucky Marines it
9 is because you are part of the Department of the Navy, I
10 presume.

11 Mr. Bost. Yes, the men's department.

12 [Laughter.]

13 Mr. Lyon. As aptly stated sir. Well done. Well done.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Lyon. So, you know, really, when you start talking
16 about implementation this is a fantastic piece of
17 legislation. It was done collaboratively, passed 405 to
18 nothing in the House, 100 to nothing in the Senate.
19 Everyone agrees it is fantastic. The implementation is
20 really where the devil meets the details.

21 So one of the additional things, if we start looking at
22 it beyond what we have already covered, is I would very much
23 like to call your attention to the STEM Extension Act, so
24 the STEM scholarships that are available. The reason that
25 that was written is because it is the number two most

1 popular major for veterans that are in college right now.

2 It is also vital to national security that we produce
3 engineers, scientists, teachers, and the like. This is a
4 population that has a huge propensity, nationwide GPA of a
5 3.35, in these majors. They are graduating, but we need to
6 attract more student veterans to it. We have the propensity
7 but that is going to be the next delayed payments of the VA
8 if we do not start having the conversation now.

9 So, sir, I would very much encourage you to ask for a
10 briefing from VA. I would also encourage all members to ask
11 for a briefing, to make sure that we avoid some of the
12 pitfalls that we experienced last fall with delayed
13 payments.

14 Mr. Bost. Well let me say that not only this program
15 but the programs, bills we have passed, it is our job to
16 make sure they are implemented correctly, and I know that
17 everybody sitting on this dais will make sure that takes
18 place.

19 Once again, thank you for your service, and, Mr.
20 Chairman, I yield back.

21 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Representative Bost.

22 I now would like to recognize Representative Underwood
23 of Illinois for three minutes.

24 Ms. Underwood. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am so
25 grateful for this opportunity to be here with all of you and

1 to hear about your legislative priorities. You are critical
2 partners in the work that we do on this Committee and we
3 really appreciate your insight to better serve you and your
4 families.

5 In my district I am really proud to represent 36,000
6 veterans, and Mr. Bost gave out a shout-out to all the
7 Illinois folks, but I want to echo those sentiments. Thank
8 you all for being here today and for all the work that you
9 do.

10 In my district, of those 36,000 veterans, we have a
11 little over 2,000 women veterans, and their needs, just like
12 all veterans, are very important. In your written
13 testimony, Mr. Riley, Commander Riley, you highlight the
14 rate at which women veterans commit suicide, which was 180
15 percent higher than women who never served.

16 And so I am wondering if you wanted to expand a little
17 bit on some of the unique challenge women veterans face and
18 what we can do to better understand and address those
19 challenges.

20 Mr. Riley. Thank you, ma'am. Our women veterans and
21 members of the Armed Force are presented with a number of
22 unique challenges. One in five have experienced military
23 sexual trauma. More than 33 percent of women have been
24 subjected to domestic violence. Women veterans face unique
25 challenges in accessing quality health care. More than 30

1 percent of VA CBOCs cannot adequately treat MST.

2 We want the VA to take a look at the issues affecting
3 our women veterans and create comprehensive approach that
4 will help them. In AMVETS we are looking forward, with this
5 Congress here, to work and bring better health care and
6 quality health care to our female veterans.

7 Ms. Underwood. Yes, sir, and we are really excited to
8 work with you to do that.

9 Mr. Riley. Thank you.

10 Ms. Underwood. On the military sexual trauma--and this
11 is open to whoever on the panel wants to answer--we just
12 heard Commander Riley talk about 1 in 5 female veterans
13 experiencing this type of sexual trauma, and we know that 1
14 in 100 male veterans report experiencing military sexual
15 trauma. And so in your opinion, for whoever wants to
16 respond, has the VA provided the necessary resources to
17 ensure that these survivors have access to the care that
18 they need? Yes, Ms. Bardorf.

19 Ms. Bardorf. Hi. Yes. So the answer is no, but the
20 answer is no across the board. So I think yesterday we
21 heard a lot more about military sexual trauma. And so in
22 both DoD and VA there is not enough being done to combat the
23 issue, to change cultural norms, and to treat women who have
24 been sexually assaulted.

25 At Wounded Warrior Project we have a number of programs

1 specifically for women, in order for them to feel more
2 comfortable to talk and destigmatize reporting of sexual
3 trauma. One is a writer's workshop, where we have women
4 come together and write about their experiences and then
5 tell their stories.

6 Another is a Project Odyssey program, where we have
7 women who come together on a weekend retreat and share their
8 stories with one another, so there is peer-to-peer support.

9 And finally, in the Warrior Care Network, we often
10 bring women together at the Boston Massachusetts General
11 Hospital and the other three academic medical centers in the
12 private sector to address real PTSD issues that have been as
13 a result of military sexual trauma.

14 So we are doing the work but we know that we need to do
15 more and we know we need to address child care issues,
16 suicides, homelessness. They are more likely to become
17 divorced and lose custody of their children as a result of
18 their deployments and their mental health needs. So we ask
19 the VA to partner with us in doing something about this.

20 Ms. Underwood. Thank you. I look forward to
21 amplifying that work on the Committee and working with all
22 of you. Thank you for your continued service.

23 Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

24 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Ms. Underwood. I now
25 recognize Representative Bilirakis of Florida for three

1 minutes.

2 Mr. Bilirakis. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate
3 it, and I want to thank everyone for being here today.
4 Thank you for your continuing service. And I want another
5 shout-out for--well, I am not sure. I may be the first one--
6 -all the Florida veterans. Thanks for coming up and bearing
7 this weather.

8 I want to ask--I know I am only going to have three
9 minutes, but Ms. Bardorf and then Mr. Zurfluh--I hope I
10 pronounced that right--both from the Wounded Warrior Project
11 and the PVA, maybe you can elaborate a little bit on some of
12 the changes that you recommend. I know you testified last
13 year with regard to the Specialty Adapted Housing program.
14 And then, you know, one example is we want to make sure our
15 terminally ill patients are prioritized. So if you could
16 elaborate I would appreciate it very much.

17 Ms. Bardorf. Thank you, Congressman, and thank you for
18 asking that question. It is an area we know that the alumni
19 within Wounded Warrior Project, many of whom utilize the
20 Specially Adaptive Housing grants. We had a warrior come
21 and testify last year in the 115th about this issue.

22 What we know about young veterans who were really--we
23 are trying to empower them. We are trying to help them get
24 jobs and be resilient and continue in their lives despite
25 their disability. And we know that young millennials have

1 an average home move of six times in their career.

2 We had a warrior who used his \$80,000 grant in his
3 first home. He was not married. He is a double amputee.
4 Wonderfully, he got married. He had three children. He
5 could not fit in the house he was in anymore and so he moved
6 to Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife and his three
7 beautiful children, and he still works full-time for Wounded
8 Warrior Project. But he needed a larger house and he needed
9 to adapt that house for today and also for tomorrow, when he
10 is likely to be in a wheelchair. But he has no allowance
11 life.

12 So he paid about \$123,000 out of his own pocket, with
13 his compensation through Wounded Warrior Project, to adapt a
14 second home. And we just think it is unreasonable to expect
15 especially this generation of veterans who are young and
16 injured, to have to have that expense when we can renew the
17 grant.

18 Mr. Bilirakis. Yeah. Well, thank you very much and I
19 certainly agree.

20 Mr. Zurfluh, would you like to add something, please?

21 Mr. Zurfluh. I would. Thank you, sir. One of our
22 member population are veterans with ALS. As they try to get
23 adaptive housing we need to try to speed up the priority,
24 due to the illness and the short-term that it takes some
25 folks. So I think it is really, really a priority that we

1 try to speed up the process that they get adaptive housing.
2 There are many members here in the audience that have
3 experienced their members going through that process, and we
4 can probably talk to you more offline.

5 One other thing is for the terminally ill that you
6 talked about. I think the expansion of long-term care
7 center beds would be great for that process. As our aging
8 Vietnam veterans become the greater need for that, I think
9 long-term bed expansion would be great in that arena.

10 Mr. Bilirakis. Well, thank you very much. I yield
11 back, Mr. Chairman.

12 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Bilirakis. I now
13 recognize the gentleman from New Hampshire, Mr. Pappas, for
14 three minutes.

15 Mr. Pappas. Thank you, Mr. Chair and Ranking Member
16 Roe. Thank you to the panel, and I want to thank all the
17 veterans' advocates for what you are helping us do, which is
18 identify priorities of how we can best make good on the
19 promise to our nation's veterans. So thank you to all those
20 in this room who served. It is inspiring to be in a roomful
21 of heroes, and I really look forward to working with all of
22 you to make sure that we get it right over the next couple
23 of years.

24 I wanted to touch on something that Mr. Susino alluded
25 to. Thank you very much for the work that you do, and it

1 was nice to hear a little bit about your father's dedication
2 and what his life mission was. But I was proud, earlier
3 today, to introduce a bill, it is H.R. 1569, and it is the
4 National POW/MIA Flag Act, and I am cosponsoring that with
5 General Bergman. And this bill is going to require that the
6 POW/MIA flag be displayed on all days that the flag of the
7 United States is displayed on certain federal properties.

8 And I am just wondering if you could comment a little
9 bit on what that flag represents and the work that we need
10 to continue to do to look out for those servicemembers who
11 are unaccounted for.

12 Mr. Susino. Thank you very much. Different than so
13 many in this room, I am not a veteran. My dad was a veteran
14 POW and I was not a veteran. So I look through the eyes of
15 a non-veteran. I listen with the ears of a non-veteran.
16 And I thought about that question earlier when I look at the
17 various bills we look to support.

18 And all Americans have a general understanding when
19 they look at the American flag, and it is one about the
20 country. It is one about patriotism. And nothing draws
21 them, necessarily, to those that have guarded its freedom or
22 did not come home. And that is universally understood with
23 the POW/MIA flag.

24 So, for me, literally as a layperson, that is where I
25 get excited about that bill. Again, I represent an

1 organization, a service organization of veterans, but again,
2 my view is--if my view is similar to those that are non-
3 veterans, it immediately draws the public awareness and
4 their attention to the veterans, and particularly those that
5 did not come home. So I think that simply is why it is so
6 important, where those in this room think of it always and
7 have a different and a broader meaning of the flag. Many do
8 not.

9 Mr. Pappas. Thank you. I appreciate those comments.

10 Ms. Bardorf, I had the opportunity to meet with the
11 owner of a small business in my district this week, and he
12 develops form-fitting sockets for veteran prosthetics. And
13 he mentioned the barriers that he has in working, from his
14 company's perspective, with the VA, but also the preference
15 that many veterans have to not seek prosthetic care at the
16 VA.

17 So I am wondering if you can comment a little bit about
18 that and about how we can improve the VA's response to allow
19 our veterans to achieve greater mobility.

20 Ms. Bardorf. I would be happy to. We have over 1,800
21 amputees from this post-9/11 generation. One of them is
22 sitting right behind me. His name is Jose Ramos, and he is
23 an upper extremity amputee who I have known since the day he
24 arrived at Bethesda in 2004, after the Battle of Fallujah,
25 and he was hit with a rocket-propelled grenade.

1 He received unbelievable care, he will tell you, from
2 Water Reed Bethesda--at the time it was just Naval Hospital
3 Bethesda--in the prosthetics lab there. He created a bond
4 with the staff there. They are used to the activity levels
5 of this generation. They provide whatever they need and
6 they do it very quickly. If you want a running leg they
7 will give you a running leg. If you want a robotic arm you
8 will get a robotic arm. If you want a swimming leg they
9 will do that. They move really quickly and they have
10 wonderful relationships. And so this generation feels
11 comfortable moving back to them.

12 The VA does not work as quickly. It also is not as
13 quick to provide alternative types of prosthetics. They do
14 not move as quickly. They do not necessarily use the
15 private sector in the same way.

16 So we really would ask for there to be across-the-board
17 consistency so this generation of veterans will use both and
18 feel comfortable to use both DoD and VA.

19 Mr. Pappas. Thank you very much, and thank to Mr.
20 Ramos, as well, for your service.

21 I yield back.

22 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Pappas. I now
23 recognize Representative Levin for three minutes.

24 Mr. Levin. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am so grateful
25 for the opportunity to be here today and to hear from all of

1 you. I am equally grateful to be the new Chair of the House
2 Veterans' Affairs Committee on Economic Opportunity, and it
3 is a responsibility that I take extremely seriously.

4 I am so grateful for your input. I am going to need
5 all of you as partners throughout the next couple of years
6 as we work on these issues together.

7 I have a great district in Orange and San Diego
8 Counties, and right in the middle is Marine Corps Base Camp
9 Pendleton. It is an amazing place. I am so honored to
10 serve there. And we have probably one of the largest
11 veteran populations in the United States.

12 There are a ton of people who are doing great, who are
13 contributing positively to all aspects of our local
14 community. There are others who are facing difficult
15 transition. When they make that transition into the
16 workforce, a whole variety of issues that we face,
17 everything from the GI Bill and how they are able to best
18 leverage it, vocational rehabilitation, then also issues
19 around housing. It is an incredibly high-cost area.
20 Homelessness is a pervasive and daunting challenge. There
21 are roughly 1,300 homeless veterans, it is estimated, in the
22 greater San Diego region.

23 So sort of a lightning round question, because there
24 are seven of you and only about a minute and a half. But I
25 am curious if each of you could just tell me what is your

1 most important priority as it pertains to economic
2 opportunity? So it could be the GI Bill, homeless housing,
3 vocational rehabilitation, and the like. I am just curious
4 what your top priority would be.

5 Yes, sir.

6 Mr. Rowan. Yeah, it would be very simple. Get the
7 cities and states to set aside veteran-owned business
8 programs, letting them get an edge. We see that in some
9 states, we have seen it in some cities, but it is not
10 pervasive. We do see it in the Federal Government but not
11 in the locals, and, unfortunately, not in New York City.

12 Mr. Levin. Yes, sir.

13 Mr. Butler. Yeah, I would say it is kind of a couple
14 of things. We talked a lot about the GI Bill but one of the
15 things that was not touched on is in the past there have
16 been attempts to make tweaks to the GI Bill that it would
17 actually take away a little bit of the funding. There was
18 the move to take the transferability away for anyone who
19 served longer than 16 years. These are things that also
20 are, we feel demoralizing the force and taking away earned
21 benefits. Because the GI Bill, as it was well stated by
22 Jared, you know, it is one of the most incredible benefits
23 that we have.

24 So making sure the GI Bill not only is funded forever
25 but also that there are no cuts to it would be one thing,

1 and the other is underemployment. I think there are a lot
2 of veterans out there who are not achieving their full value
3 of employment because a lot of the civilian community just
4 does not understand the ability of today's veterans to do a
5 wide variety of tasks.

6 Mr. Levin. I appreciate that. I am out of time so I
7 will yield back to the Chairman. Thank you all very much.
8 I am honored to be here with you.

9 Chairman Takano. Thank you, Mr. Levin. I recognize
10 myself for three minutes.

11 Mr. Lyon, I am so pleased to see Student Veterans of
12 America represented today and representing the latest
13 generation of heroes in our country. I see that 90/10, the
14 loophole is a priority for you. Can you explain why that is
15 such an important priority?

16 Mr. Lyon. One hundred percent sir. Thank you very
17 much for the question and thank you again for joining us at
18 our national conference and speaking in front of 2,300
19 student veterans in January.

20 So the 90/10 loophole is something that we have been
21 having a conversation about far exceeding any of our efforts
22 in the veteran space. Ironically, it goes all the way back
23 to the original Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, when
24 we implemented it to ensure that folks did not take
25 advantage of veterans' benefits.

1 But the simple notion that if a student is attending
2 higher education a school should have the opportunity to
3 have people paying out of pocket and not 100 percent of the
4 federal funds going to tuition.

5 In closing the 90/10 loophole, the best thing that we
6 could do is have GI Bill and DoD tuition assistance dollars
7 recognized as federal dollars, and to not just have it
8 implemented on tax status, so for just proprietary
9 institutions, but let us just go ahead and have it blanketly
10 applied to all institutions of higher learning. If we do
11 this we effectively close the 90/10 loophole, we avoid the
12 predatory practices, and we make sure that benefits are used
13 to the best first way for students.

14 Chairman Takano. Mr. Lyon, I was not aware that DoD is
15 also exempted.

16 Mr. Lyon. Yes, sir.

17 Chairman Takano. That is incredible. I have got some
18 more questions but that is a new fact I learned today.

19 You know, real quickly, greater oversight of nonprofit
20 conversations. Explain that. What are nonprofit
21 conversions?

22 Mr. Lyon. Yeah. So when we start looking at
23 proprietary institutions of higher learning that will
24 perhaps purchase a maybe failing or struggling not-for-
25 profit institution of higher learning, and by de facto

1 creating themselves the opportunity to have that not-for-
2 profit status. It is really a sheep in wolf's clothing, if
3 you will.

4 So if you have the opportunity to have better oversight
5 on that and provide provisions that make that more
6 difficult, or at least be more transparent when it occurs,
7 it better aids in student protections.

8 Chairman Takano. So we are talking about a not-for-
9 profit institution that is actually acquired by--

10 Mr. Lyon. Yes, sir.

11 Chairman Takano. --a for-profit institution, and they
12 are able to take advantage of its nonprofit status. That is
13 a--I have heard of it but this is--do you know the extent to
14 which this is happening?

15 Mr. Lyon. The extent to which it is happening is
16 difficult to measure because proprietary institutions of
17 higher learning have far better resources than money to
18 spend on not having that be known as well.

19 Chairman Takano. Real quickly, are you aware of
20 veterans who have been harmed by such conversions?

21 Mr. Lyon. Yes, sir.

22 Chairman Takano. Well, I am running out of time. I
23 will be curious to know more about this.

24 Mr. Lyon. I would be happy to.

25 Chairman Takano. Great.

1 Well, that concludes--I yield back to me the time that
2 I did not use.

3 [Laughter.]

4 Chairman Takano. Let me catch up here.

5 I want to thank everyone for their testimony today and
6 I look forward to working with you and all your
7 organizations and your priorities for your members in the
8 future.

9 Did I not recognize you earlier? I recognized you
10 earlier. Yes. I know I did.

11 I look forward to working with you in the future, and I
12 wanted to say that all members will have five legislative
13 days to revise and extend their remarks and include
14 extraneous material.

15 Again, thank you for your presentations, and this
16 hearing is now adjourned.

17 [Applause.]

18 [Whereupon, at 3:35 p.m., the Committees were
19 adjourned.]

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