

1 JOINT HEARING ON THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION FROM  
2 FRA, JWV, AFSA, BVA, MOPH, NASDVA, MOAA, TREA, GSW

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4 WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 2018

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

10 The Committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:02 a.m.,  
11 in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny  
12 Isakson and Hon. David P. Roe, Chairmen of the Committees,  
13 presiding.

14 Senators Present: Senators Isakson, Boozman, Heller,  
15 Cassidy, Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Tester, and Brown.

16 Members Present: Representatives Roe, Coffman,  
17 Wenstrup, Poliquin, Arrington, Walz, Takano, Kuster, and  
18 O'Rourke.

19 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN ROE

20 Mr. Poliquin. [Presiding.] Good morning. Thank you  
21 all for being here today. It is a great privilege for me to  
22 be here with you and Chairman Isakson and the rest of the  
23 members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

24 Last week, the veteran community lost three employees  
25 who were dedicated to helping veterans during difficult

1 times. Among those lost were Jennifer Gonzalez, a VA  
2 psychologist who worked at the Pathway Home; Christine  
3 Loeber, the Pathway Home executive director; and Jennifer  
4 Golick, the Pathway Home clinical director. These women  
5 were devoted to helping veterans transition to civilian  
6 life, especially those struggling with PTSD.

7 I am grateful--and all of us are--for the selfless work  
8 they did to assist veterans, and I am deeply saddened by  
9 their loss.

10 I share the sentiments expressed by Secretary Shulkin  
11 and appreciate the work he is doing to provide mental health  
12 and grieve support to those affected by the tragedy at  
13 Yountville.

14 If you are able to stand, please do so and join me in a  
15 moment of silence for these three employees who lost their  
16 lives serving veterans.

17 [Moment of silence.]

18 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you very much.

19 I want to welcome our witnesses here today, starting  
20 with Mr. William Starkey, National President of the Fleet  
21 Reserve Association; Mr. Paul Warner, National Commander of  
22 the Jewish War Veterans; Jeff Ledoux, International  
23 President of the Air Force Sergeants Association; Mr. Paul  
24 Mimms, National President of Blinded Veterans Association;  
25 Mr. Neil Van Ess, National Commander of the Military Order

1 of the Purple Heart; Mr. Verdie Bowen, President of the  
2 National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs;  
3 Ms. Rene Campus, Senior Director of Government Relations of  
4 the Military Officers Association of America; Mr. John  
5 Adams, National President of The Retired Enlisted  
6 Association; and last but not least, Mrs. Cyndie Gibson, a  
7 member of the Government Relations Committee of the Gold  
8 Star Wives of America.

9 I would also like to welcome and extend my gratitude to  
10 your organizations' auxiliaries, those members who commit  
11 countless hours to improving the lives of our Nation's  
12 heroes and their families.

13 If there are any folks from the State of Maine here,  
14 the great State of Maine that I recognize, here is your  
15 chance to stand up and be recognized.

16 Seeing hundreds in the audience, we will now move on.

17 [Laughter.]

18 Mr. Poliquin. You know, Tim, we are a small State but  
19 a great State. Sometimes it is just hard, Mr. Chairman, to  
20 find us. That is all.

21 It is an honor to be here this morning for those of us  
22 who sit on the Veterans' Affairs Committees. Throughout  
23 each of these joint hearings, we have had the opportunity to  
24 reflect on our Committee's legislative accomplishments so  
25 far, and with your support so far in Congress, this

1 Congress, we have enacted several laws that will pave the  
2 way for a better VA and will improve the lives of American  
3 veterans and their families.

4 Some of the most noteworthy victories are the Harry W.  
5 Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act, also known as the  
6 Forever GI Bill, in the VA Accountability and Whistleblower  
7 Protection Act, and the Veterans Appeals Improvement and  
8 Modernization Act.

9 The Colmery Act improves and extends education benefits  
10 granted to veterans, their surviving spouses, and their  
11 dependents. This act upholds our responsibility to invest  
12 in our veterans' futures and provides beneficiaries with  
13 more flexibility to decide when to use their educational  
14 benefits.

15 Another notable achievement by this Committee in the VA  
16 is the VA Accountability Act. That increases protections  
17 for whistleblowers and provides the Secretary with the tools  
18 he needs to hold employees accountable.

19 I am also pleased that we were able to pass the  
20 Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act.  
21 Unfortunately, there are still over 400,000 appeals pending  
22 in the VA. So we still have a lot of work to do to ensure  
23 that these appeals are adjudicated timely and accurately.

24 During a hearing on appeals reform the House Committee  
25 held in January, the Deputy Secretary committed to improving

1 the appeals process for veterans in reducing the backlog,  
2 and I appreciate that commitment very much, but there is  
3 always more we can do for our veterans. And we need to help  
4 ensure that we are effectively doing our jobs.

5       That being said, I want to acknowledge the essential  
6 role your organizations play in assisting us with this  
7 oversight. You provide us valuable insight into what  
8 veterans and survivors experience when they assess the VA.

9       I am also excited to hear about your organizations'  
10 priorities and your recommendations to improve services and  
11 benefits, for benefits and survivors.

12       Now, with your input, we will meet our congressional  
13 obligation to, first, help Secretary Shulkin fulfill our  
14 Nation's promise to our veterans and their families, and we  
15 need to challenge the Secretary when the Department misses  
16 its mark. And we need your input to make sure that happen,  
17 and we also want to applaud the Department when it succeeds  
18 in its effort to provide veterans with the benefits and  
19 services that they deserve and they have earned.

20       Today, I am particularly interested in your suggestions  
21 for consolidating and strengthening the VA care in the  
22 community. The Committee is focused on preserving the VA's  
23 role as the coordinator of care, while increasing veterans'  
24 access to timely and quality health care.

25       I would like to add that this is in no way an effort to

1 replace the VA. It is an effort to augment the VA to make  
2 sure we get the best health care to our veterans, especially  
3 those that live in rural areas.

4 We will also continue our work on improving both the  
5 quality and the equity of the VA Caregiver Program. Last  
6 week, our Committee held a productive roundtable discussion  
7 on caregivers, and I look forward to continuing that  
8 conversation with you today.

9 Another priority for the Committee is investing in a  
10 stronger VA. Our focus will be to establish an asset and  
11 infrastructure review process to help the Department  
12 modernize and realign its facilities. We must ensure that  
13 the VA health care system will meet the present and future  
14 needs of all of our veterans.

15 And lastly, but certainly not least, is modernizing the  
16 VA's IT system. I appreciate the Department's effort to  
17 bring all of its IT into the 21st century, and we must  
18 ensure that that succeeds.

19 One component that we are all very interested in and we  
20 will keep a close eye on is the VA's implementation of a  
21 modern commercial electronic health-sharing record system.

22 As you can see, we have got a lot of work to do, and  
23 again, I thank you for all the work that you do in helping  
24 us bring this home to us and come down here to Washington  
25 and make sure you advocate for your veterans who are also

1 our veterans.

2 I look forward to receiving your testimony, and so with  
3 that, I yield to Chairman Isakson for his opening remarks.

4 OPENING STATEMENT BY CHAIRMAN ISAKSON

5 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Congressman Poliquin for  
6 filling in today for Chairman Roe, who does such a fantastic  
7 job for the House, but in your own right, we did not have  
8 the chance to know each other very well until I had the  
9 privilege of sitting by you a couple days ago at the VSO  
10 hearing. I know how good a State Maine is. I know how  
11 lucky they are to have you, and we are lucky to have you  
12 here at this hearing today, as we are lucky to have these  
13 organizations, who speak out for our veterans.

14 I am not going to name you all individually because you  
15 have been named individually. I want to talk about you  
16 together for a second.

17 Every time we have called on you in the last 3 years  
18 since I have been Chairman in the Senate, you have come.  
19 You have testified. You have given us input. You have  
20 helped us to make decisions that have been critical for the  
21 VA.

22 I am very proud of what the House and Senate Committees  
23 have done in the last 18 to 36 months to improve our VA and  
24 make it better and better and better. We still have a ways  
25 to go. We still have unfinished business, but that is why

1 we have a Congress. That is why we meet every year, and we  
2 will continue to be committed to doing that.

3 But I am so proud that we were able to finally deal  
4 with appeals. You got a process that already appears to be  
5 working in expediting decisions. More and more veterans are  
6 opting to participate in it who already have a claim  
7 pending. That is a good sign. The results look good. We  
8 hope that continues. I hope to hear some more on that  
9 today.

10 Accountability is working. People recognize they will  
11 be held accountable. We have given the Secretary and the  
12 other leaders in the VA the tools to make the VA a more  
13 accountable organization, and the attitude of the employees  
14 is showing more and more every year that they want to be  
15 more accountable in services.

16 In terms of care in the community and everything we  
17 work on to improve, I want to underscore a couple things  
18 that were said by Congressman Poliquin.

19 We have no intention of privatizing any part of VA. We  
20 have every intention of maximizing the VA's capability of  
21 providing service to all of you and seeing to it that the  
22 service you receive is the highest quality with the best  
23 results. We are going to measure quality and results to  
24 make our decisions, not try and make square pegs fit in  
25 round holes or do something we should not have done.



1 I am very proud of our veterans, very proud of what  
2 they have done for us, very proud of what they do for us in  
3 coming to testify on these issues.

4 We will have a budget hearing next week. That is an  
5 important time when the Secretary will come talk about the  
6 priorities for the VA in the upcoming budget year, and we  
7 will be there to give them the support they need at the VA  
8 to see to it they have the tools to do the job for each and  
9 every one of you.

10 But on behalf of us and the Congress, thank you for  
11 your service to the country. Thank you for being willing to  
12 serve veterans in your organization. Thank you for being  
13 here today.

14 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

15 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Chairman Isakson, and I  
16 appreciate it.

17 I now yield to Ranking Member Tim Walz for his opening  
18 statement.

19 OPENING STATEMENT BY MR. WALZ

20 Mr. Walz. I thank the gentleman, and I want to thank  
21 the gentleman for his eloquent and heartfelt words of  
22 condolences to our dedicated employees who lost their lives,  
23 and the tragedy is so many families ruined in that. And  
24 thinking of a young 32-year-old psychologist serving  
25 veterans in the most crisis points in their life and then to

1 lose her life in that, I am grateful for the gentleman.

2       And I think it reminds all of us, when the VA falls  
3 short, all of us, we will be the VA's harshest critics, but  
4 we need to be their staunchest supporters in time of this  
5 and trying to get psychologists into the VA like Ms.  
6 Gonzalez is critically important. So I appreciate the  
7 gentleman's very heartfelt words. It makes a big  
8 difference.

9       Well, welcome to all of you. I do not know if there is  
10 any Minnesotans here. I am sure they are outside enjoying  
11 the spring-like weather. Oh, yeah. There they go. So they  
12 are the ones not wearing coats that are here.

13       [Laughter.]

14       Mr. Walz. Welcome. Thank you for making the trip  
15 here, and as I always say, this room is filled with the  
16 conscience of America, and if you wonder what difference, it  
17 makes all the difference in the world.

18       Thank you to all of you and your organizations. You  
19 literally represent millions of our Nation's veterans, their  
20 spouses, and their families. I always feel like when this  
21 group is up here that I have to go down the line and make  
22 sure my dues are paid to all of the organizations that I  
23 belong to.

24       But I think you know, as your members paid their dues  
25 long ago, and some of them, like Ms. Gibson's organization,

1 pays the ultimate dues to wear that gold jacket. And for  
2 all of us, that means the responsibility we have up here is  
3 even greater, but I am grateful for your advocacy.

4 The ideas you bring here, as Mr. Poliquin and Chairman  
5 Isakson said, they take very seriously, and through the  
6 leadership of this Committee, those things have been enacted  
7 into law. The goal is to improve the lives of our Nation's  
8 veterans and to keep our commitments to them.

9 I would like to mention today--and Mr. Poliquin is  
10 right--last week, discussions on the Caregivers Program,  
11 which helps our veterans make sure that we get these things  
12 right and make sure we keep folks in their homes when we  
13 can. That is the ultimate goal.

14 Caregiver Program is only available to post-9/11  
15 veterans. I hope we hear some of your thoughts on that, and  
16 I think all of us know we wanted to get a foot in the door  
17 on that. But I have to be honest with you. It is very  
18 difficult for me to talk to caregivers from other eras and  
19 explain to them why they are not getting that benefit, and  
20 there simply is not a reason for that.

21 We know we have got a lot of work to do, and I just  
22 want to lay it out there. Again, there is not differences  
23 amongst where we are trying to get.

24 The Blue Water Navy piece, I have authored that piece  
25 of legislation, so that I have been here. But I do have to

1 be clear. I do not think we should have to make the hellish  
2 decision of asking one group of veterans to pay for another  
3 group of veterans when I can tell you I can walk down the  
4 street in southern Minnesota and ask my neighbors, who did  
5 not serve, if they would like to help a little more. And  
6 the answer is yes.

7       So I know that one becomes a little bit fraught with  
8 peril when we are up here, but it is not because I question  
9 anyone's commitment to getting this right. We owe it to  
10 these folks who put themselves in harm's way. They were  
11 injured by their exposures to dioxin and Agent Orange, and  
12 just like their fellow brothers and sisters in arms who were  
13 boots on the ground or in the rivers, we need to get this  
14 right. And it is my commitment to try and find a workable  
15 solution to that.

16       Again, I thank you for your advocacy. I would be  
17 remiss if I did not say this because I think all of us know.  
18 We woke up this morning, and we do not know by the end of  
19 today who our VA Secretary will be.

20       I certainly do not expect, but would have appreciated  
21 some consultation since we have worked on these issues for  
22 decades. I do not know if anyone at this table gets talked  
23 about how that works, but there is a commitment for us in  
24 stability in the VA, in culture in the VA, in leadership in  
25 the VA, and again, it is your VA. It is our VA, and we have

1 got to get this right.

2       So, as we go forward today, I do think it is critically  
3 important. This Committee, Mr. Poliquin has been here for  
4 many years; of course, the leadership of Senators Isakson  
5 and Tester, Chairman Roe, and all the Members who are up  
6 here. This Committee has a well-earned reputation of  
7 bipartisanship and a single-minded focus on care for  
8 veterans.

9       We are a part of these decisions. We need to be, and  
10 it is a reason that Congress' Article I of the Constitution  
11 that these are the things, because you can come and sit here  
12 and hold us accountable. It is harder to do that down the  
13 street on Pennsylvania Avenue than it is here.

14       So I would ask my colleagues here for us to have  
15 ownership in this, us to continue to be the point, us to  
16 continue to be the place where if accountability is needed  
17 to be held, make it in this room.

18       So thank you all for being here. I look forward to  
19 your testimony.

20       Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Ranking Member Walz.

21       I now yield to Ranking Member Tester for his opening  
22 remarks.

23                   OPENING STATEMENT BY SENATOR TESTER

24       Senator Tester. Thank you very much. I appreciate the  
25 recognition, and I want to thank you all for being here

1 today.

2 I have said many, many times in this Committee, in  
3 fact, maybe every time I have been in the Committee with a  
4 joint group of VSOs, that we need to take our cues from you,  
5 and I believe that. And I strongly believe that.

6 The dysfunction of this administration has now bled  
7 over to the VA, and I am very, very, very concerned.

8 Ranking Member Walz talked about this Committee has  
9 worked well together. I can tell you that Johnny Isakson  
10 and I have worked hard together, and we work for you. We  
11 have taken our direction from you every step of the way, and  
12 there has not been any Democrats or Republicans. It has  
13 been about veterans, 100 percent of the time.

14 Unfortunately, the dysfunction is hindering our ability  
15 to do our job as Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and I  
16 will not speak for the House. They can speak for  
17 themselves.

18 We have a Caring for Our Veterans Act that Johnny and I  
19 worked on. We were hoping to get it out by Veterans Day.  
20 It is still not out yet.

21 We need to move that bill, the final piece of a puzzle  
22 of a lot of legislation that you guys have advocated for  
23 that we have been able to do from accountability to taking  
24 care of the backlog to now redoing the community care piece  
25 of this program.

1           So this dysfunctioning administration has hindered our  
2 ability to move forward, and I think it is jeopardizing the  
3 ability of the VA to serve you, our Nation's veterans.

4           So I would just say this is very disturbing to me  
5 because we send young men and women off to war, and they  
6 come back changed. Some of those changes, you can see; some  
7 of them, you cannot. But we have an obligation as a people  
8 to this country, and we have an obligation to the next  
9 generation of fighting men and women that take care of you  
10 if we have changed you.

11           So I believe the President really needs to decide  
12 whether he is going to empower Secretary Shulkin to actually  
13 do his job or whether he is going to side with political  
14 interests, something these Committees have never done,  
15 political interests like the Koch brothers, who by the way I  
16 do not believe understand what our Nation's veterans are  
17 going through.

18           We need to know who is calling the shots. I am going  
19 to tell you what, the stakes are high. They have never been  
20 higher. We have been at war for far too long. We have got  
21 Vietnam vets that are getting older and older and need more  
22 and more health services. We need to know as policymakers  
23 in the legislative branch who to hold accountable. It is  
24 important. It is important as we move forward. It is  
25 important for this country.

1 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Mr. Tester, for your  
3 testimony--for your opening remarks.

4 I would like now to welcome Mr. Starkey. You are now  
5 recognized for 5 minutes to present the testimony of the  
6 Fleet Reserve Association. Put your microphone on. Yes,  
7 sir. Thank you.

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1           STATEMENT OF WILLIAM STARKEY, NATIONAL PRESIDENT,  
2           FLEET RESERVE ASSOCIATION

3           Mr. Starkey. Chairman Roe, Chairman Isakson, and  
4 Ranking Members, and members of the Committee, good morning.  
5 My name is William Starkey. I am the National President of  
6 the Fleet Reserve Association, a retired Navy master chief  
7 with 24 years of total service in the active duty and the  
8 reserves.

9           I am honored to represent the oldest sea service  
10 organization. We have been around for over 93 years. Since  
11 we are an enlisted sea service organization, we are troubled  
12 by the lack of progress on the Agent Orange, Blue Water Navy  
13 issue.

14          We want to thank Chairman Roe for scheduling the House  
15 Committee vote in November 2017. Unfortunately, it did not  
16 occur when the Committee members could not agree if the bill  
17 should be paid for by rounding down the veterans' benefits  
18 to the nearest dollar. Therefore, I appreciate Chairman  
19 Roe's commitment to the Blue Water veterans and his firm  
20 statement last week: "Let us get this issue off the table."

21          Past VA policy from 1991 to 2001 allowed servicemembers  
22 to file claims if they received the Vietnam Service Medal or  
23 the Vietnam Campaign Medal. However, in 2001, VA  
24 implemented a boots-on-the-ground restriction to qualify for  
25 an Agent Orange presumption.

1 FRA is grateful to the 14 Senators who sent a letter to  
2 the VA in 2016 requesting that the VA reconsider its ban on  
3 presumption for anyone who did not serve on the ground of  
4 the Republic of Vietnam because it is too restrictive.

5 The letter references the recent Gray v. McDonald  
6 decision by Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. They  
7 found that VA's exclusion of Da Nag Harbor from the  
8 definition of "inland waterways" to be arbitrary and  
9 capricious. FRA is disappointed but not surprised that the  
10 VA issued a court-ordered clarified definition of "inland  
11 waterways" for the purposes of determining presumption for  
12 coverage, which still excludes the Blue Water Vietnam  
13 veterans.

14 For the VA to state with such confidence that the  
15 toxin, Agent Orange, could not cross inland waterways and  
16 harbors into open seas are to reject the very laws of  
17 nature, as if some imaginary line was drawn across the mouth  
18 of any river or bay had the ability to stop the currents  
19 from flowing.

20 FRA supports the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act  
21 that clarifies presumption for filing disability claims at  
22 the VA for ailments associated with the exposure to the  
23 Agent Orange herbicide during the Vietnam War. It would  
24 reverse current policy so the Blue Water veterans, who only  
25 served on ships off this coast and have health problems

1 commonly associated with exposure to the herbicides will be  
2 eligible for the service-related VA medical and disability  
3 benefits.

4 The FRA thanks Senator Gillibrand and Representative  
5 Valadao for sponsoring the House bill. We also want to  
6 thank the 326 House cosponsors and the 45 Senate cosponsors.

7 It is important to note that the VA Secretary could  
8 with the stroke of a pen fix this problem.

9 The Vietnam conflict was a very unpopular war, but  
10 those veterans who served did so with honor, courage, and  
11 commitment. Many of these veterans are currently senior  
12 citizens and can still benefit from the presumption category  
13 between 2001 and today. These Vietnam veterans may never or  
14 will never because they have already died due to Agent  
15 Orange-related ailments.

16 FRA appreciates the efforts of both Committees to  
17 improve the VA Choice Program. FRA believes that the Choice  
18 Program has merit but will require significant oversight by  
19 these Committees to ensure its effectiveness. VA must  
20 ensure that non-VA care coordination teams are adequately  
21 staffed and funded to be capable of handling the workload.  
22 FRA sees this program as a permanent part of the VA.

23 Much more needs to be done. That includes expanding  
24 the VA Caregiver Program to include all catastrophically  
25 disabled veterans. Currently, the program only applies to

1 veterans disabled after September 11, 2001.

2 FRA supports Senate bill 2193. That improves the VA  
3 Choice Program and expands the Caregiver Program.

4 Progress has been made with the disability claims  
5 backlog. While the backlog may be down, the backlog at the  
6 appeals level has spiked. FRA has supported the Express  
7 Appeals Act.

8 Last year, as a first step in fixing the appeals  
9 process that is woefully too long, we hope that this new law  
10 will reduce the wait times on appeals. Someone once said,  
11 "Justice delayed is justice denied." That is also true for  
12 disability.

13 Chairmen Roe and Isakson, we thank you again for your  
14 leadership and direction on behalf of veterans.

15 [The prepared statement of Mr. Starkey follows:]

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1 Chairman Isakson. Thank you very much.

2 And excuse me for interrupting the flow of speakers,  
3 but Senator Sullivan has got to preside over the Senate in  
4 just a second, and there is a special introduction he wanted  
5 to make, so Senator Sullivan.

6 Senator Sullivan. Thank you, Chairman Isakson, and I  
7 want to thank all the witnesses here for your tremendous  
8 service.

9 You, as Senator Tester mentioned earlier, represent  
10 what is great about our Nation, and in particular, I wanted  
11 to take the opportunity today, Mr. Chairman and all my  
12 colleagues from the House and Senate, to introduce a fellow  
13 Alaskan who is one of the witnesses.

14 We do not have the opportunity for many veterans in my  
15 State to make the almost 5,000-mile trip, so I think he wins  
16 the award for furthest travel from Alaska to Washington,  
17 D.C., to attend these hearings. So it is an honor to be  
18 able to personally introduce Alaskan and 23-year Air Force  
19 veteran, Verdie Bowen.

20 Verdie, do you want to wave there, so just to make sure  
21 everybody knows who you are?

22 Verdie is the 70th president of the National  
23 Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, so  
24 representing all 50 States here as the president of State  
25 Directors, and the first Alaskan to hold this very important

1 position since it was chartered in 1946. He has served as  
2 the State of Alaska's Director of Veterans Affairs since  
3 2009, has a distinguished career in the Air Force, and is  
4 currently responsible for the development and establishment  
5 of policies, strategic plans that directly affect all  
6 veterans, active duty, reserve components, dependents, and  
7 survivors living in our State. And in Alaska, that is over  
8 230,000 people, which does not sound a lot if you are from a  
9 big State, but that is over 31 percent of the population of  
10 Alaska, one-third of all Alaskans, which is we think  
11 amazing.

12 In this capacity, Verdie has provided critical  
13 testimony previously to the Senate Veterans Affairs  
14 Committee on rural health and has worked closely with my  
15 staff here in D.C. and many on this Committee.

16 Though I do not have enough time, Mr. Chairman, to  
17 articulate how invaluable Verdie's many contributions to our  
18 veterans are, I will just say he truly embodies what all of  
19 you embody, which is service, sacrifice, and commitment to  
20 our veterans in our country. I know his testimony is going  
21 to be important today, and I am excited to introduce the  
22 president of the National Association of State Directors of  
23 Veterans Affairs and a great Alaskan veteran himself, Verdie  
24 Bowen.

25 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1           Mr. Poliquin. Thank you very much, Senator Sullivan,  
2 and thank you, Mr. Bowen. We will get right down the line  
3 to you very shortly, I am sure.

4           Now I would like to recognize Dr. Warner, for you to  
5 present your testimony of the Jewish War Veterans. Thank  
6 you.

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1           STATEMENT OF PAUL D. WARNER, PhD, NATIONAL  
2           COMMANDER, JEWISH WAR VETERANS

3           Mr. Warner. Chairman Isakson, Chairman Roe, and  
4 members of the Senate and House Committees on Veterans'  
5 Affairs and my fellow veterans and friends, I am Paul  
6 Warner, the National Commander of the Jewish War Veterans of  
7 the United States.

8           Testimony has been presented in detail in regard to the  
9 Blue Water veterans. There was a study conducted by the  
10 University of Queensland, which found that Australian ships'  
11 distillation systems, which were identical to the systems  
12 used by the U.S. Navy ships during the Vietnam War, enriched  
13 the toxin dioxin and Agent Orange. The contaminated water  
14 was used for cooking, cleaning, showering, laundry,  
15 drinking, and exposing U.S. Navy personnel to high levels of  
16 these toxic chemicals.

17           It is quite clear that those who serves in the waters  
18 off Vietnam are deserving of VA benefits. Thousands of  
19 older veterans who served in the territorial waters of  
20 Vietnam are now suffering from higher rates of disease and  
21 other chronic health conditions, which can be attributed to  
22 exposure to Agent Orange. Congress must provide the  
23 necessary funding.

24           My next items is the PAWS Act, Puppies Assisting  
25 Wounded Servicemembers. Substance use disorders, mental



1 health issues, including PTSD, depression, and the mood  
2 disorders are a significant problem among our military  
3 veterans and have been associated with increased risk of  
4 suicide.

5       Since 2001, the proportion of veterans with mental  
6 health or substance abuse disorders has significantly  
7 increased. According to the RAND Corporation studies, the  
8 suicide rate is higher for veterans than for nonveterans in  
9 every single State by at least one and a half times,  
10 suggesting unique problems faced by veterans.

11       H.R. 2327 directs the Department of Veterans Affairs to  
12 carry out a 5-year pilot program under which it provides  
13 grants to eligible nonprofit organizations to provide  
14 service dogs to veterans who suffer from post-traumatic  
15 stress disorder if they are completing other evidence-based  
16 treatment.

17       Jewish War Veterans of the U.S. calls upon Congress to  
18 pass 2327, the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers Act  
19 of 2017, also known as the PAWS Act.

20       The Jewish War Veterans gives out support to the  
21 Caregiver Act, which disabled veterans depend on the quality  
22 of care that family caregivers provide. Whether the veteran  
23 was disabled recently or pre-9/11, the need for quality care  
24 is the same. Caregivers provide the best quality-of-life  
25 outcomes our veterans deserve.

1           Additionally, caregivers' support for all veterans  
2 would provide better care outcomes at a lower cost than  
3 being cared for at home--let me get back to it--better cared  
4 than those house and cared for in the VA or private care  
5 facilities.

6           Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee has embraced a plan  
7 to provide caregiver benefits when the VA certifies it has  
8 modernized its information technology sufficiently to  
9 support a bigger program. This could take a year more,  
10 considering the lack of funding for the VA. Jewish War  
11 Veterans feels that the Caregivers Act should be implemented  
12 immediately.

13           My last area is about preserving our VA health care  
14 system. According to the RAND Corporation study published  
15 in the Journal of General Internal Medicine in 2016, which  
16 compared VA and non-VA quality of care, the VA health care  
17 system provides generally better or equal care for traumatic  
18 brain injury, PTSD, and other traumatic and serious medical  
19 conditions.

20           The VA has a special expertise in treating these types  
21 of illnesses and injuries because they see them regularly,  
22 and VA physicians have specialized training in these  
23 critical areas, which are not normally seen in other health  
24 care systems.

25           In addition to receiving better specialized care for

1 critical illnesses and injuries, several studies support the  
2 cost benefit of the VA system versus a private system of  
3 veteran health care.

4 J WV is opposed to H.R. 4457 and any bill which would  
5 dismantle the VA health care system, charge veterans for  
6 service-connected health care, and/or to reduce to the VA to  
7 insurance programs for veterans.

8 Jewish War Veterans of the USA reminds us that the  
9 reason the VA health care system exists is to serve  
10 America's veterans rather than a for-profit corporation with  
11 highly paid employees, shareholders, and profit and loss  
12 statements that must show sizeable earnings to satisfy  
13 nonveterans at the annual stockholders meetings.

14 Chairman Isakson, Chairman Roe, our great Nation must  
15 care for its veterans. Our country must therefore pay the  
16 costs involved. Jewish War Veterans believes that the  
17 veterans' benefits are earned through service and sacrifices  
18 in the defense of the Nation and are not an entitlement,  
19 social welfare program. J WV opposes deficit-driven  
20 political decisions that would lump earned veterans'  
21 benefits with unrelated civilian entitlement programs.

22 Thank you.

23 [The prepared statement of Mr. Warner follows:]

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1 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Dr. Warner, very much.

2 Mr. Ledoux, you may begin your testimony on behalf of

3 the Air Force Sergeants Association.

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1           STATEMENT OF JEFF LEDOUX, INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT,  
2           AIR FORCE SERGEANTS ASSOCIATION

3           Mr. Ledoux. Thank you.

4           Chairman Isakson, Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Tester,  
5 Ranking Member Walz, members of both the House and Senate  
6 Committees, on behalf of the 100,000 members of the Air  
7 Force Sergeants Association, I as president thank you for  
8 this opportunity to offer our legislative priorities for the  
9 second session of the 115th Congress.

10          It is an honor to represent all airmen. Many of our  
11 airmen served without regard to the personal hardships and  
12 dangers that they face, and today, I hope it serves as a  
13 reminder of what they ask in return for their dedicated  
14 service.

15          I would like to begin by saying thank you. In a true  
16 display of patriotic bipartisanship, last year this Congress  
17 voted unanimously to pass the Harry W. Colmery Veterans  
18 Educational Assistance Act of 2017, which most people refer  
19 to as the Forever GI Bill. This landmark legislation  
20 addressed many inequities of a benefit intended to recognize  
21 and reward the sacrifices military servicemembers and their  
22 families have voluntarily shouldered over the many years at  
23 war.

24          The Forever GI Bill addressed five longstanding goals  
25 of the Air Force Sergeants Association, which are included

1 in my written statement.

2 Millions will benefit from this legislation, and words  
3 cannot adequately express our members' appreciation for its  
4 passage. While everyone on these two Committees played a  
5 role in getting it passed, I understand we would not be  
6 here, where we are today, if not for the very close and  
7 deliberate collaboration of Chairmen Roe and Isakson and  
8 Ranking Members Walz and Tester to push this endeavor across  
9 the finish line.

10 Through your leadership, these Committees serve as a  
11 sterling example of what compromise, coupled with a little  
12 pragmatism, can accomplish in Congress.

13 Thanks to the oversight efforts of these Committees,  
14 tremendous progress has been made by VA to reduce the number  
15 of pending claims, and with last year's passage of the  
16 Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017,  
17 the number of appeal cases is declining as well.

18 While the results are improving in both categories, we  
19 hope you will not stop there and will continue to support VA  
20 efforts that further streamline the claims and adjudication  
21 process.

22 Also, I am pleased to tell you that we recently joined  
23 forces with the Disabled American Veterans, the Maryland  
24 Chapter 36, and officially established a Veteran Claims  
25 Service Center office at our headquarters in Suitland,

1 Maryland. As you know, their personnel had been providing  
2 high-quality assistance to veterans for many years, and the  
3 four service offices we now have working out of our building  
4 stand ready to serve the thousands of veterans in Prince  
5 George's County as well as other areas.

6       Regarding ongoing VA health care reform efforts and the  
7 Veterans Choice Program, our members who use Choice are  
8 satisfied with the program, but they are concerned that  
9 Congress may take it away as part of the overall reform  
10 effort.

11       Last year, both Committees developed and approved  
12 comprehensive plans to revamp VA health care and consolidate  
13 the Department's many community care programs, including  
14 Choice.

15       We appreciate all the collaborative efforts and work  
16 that went into both bills but feel Chairman Isakson's Caring  
17 for Our Veterans Act, Senate Bill 2193, to be a more  
18 comprehensive and promising approach for meeting the needs  
19 of veterans who use VA health care.

20       Senate Bill 2193 would establish a permanent  
21 streamlined veterans community care program to provide  
22 veterans with access to health care and services in their  
23 own communities. It consolidates multiple community care  
24 programs into one, eliminates confusion over when and how  
25 veterans can access community care doctors, and assures VA

1 remains the coordinator of care for veterans regardless of  
2 where the care is delivered.

3 Under this legislation, a veteran and his or her doctor  
4 will decide where the veteran will receive care, taking into  
5 consideration the veteran's health care needs and the  
6 availability and quality of both VA and community care.

7 In moving forward with the Choice Program, it is  
8 important that Congress provides the VA with the necessary  
9 resources to bolster its IT infrastructure, expand  
10 telehealth access, and recruit top-notch doctors, nurses,  
11 and other health care professionals to administer the new  
12 plan's various programs.

13 Another top priority for us focuses on supporting the  
14 family members who care for severely ill or injured veterans  
15 outside the VA system. The Caregiver Program, established  
16 by Congress 7 years ago, allowed VA to provide additional  
17 support and services to family caregivers of eligible  
18 veterans injured in the line of duty on or after September  
19 11, 2001.

20 AFSA strongly supports the full expansion of the  
21 Caregiver Program to include veterans of all eras and asks  
22 Congress to pass the Military and Veterans Caregiver  
23 Services Improvement Act, which is Senate Bill 591 and House  
24 bill 1472.

25 Continuing top priorities for AFSA is women's health



1 care within VA. The number of women serving in the military  
2 is the highest in history, and women are the fastest group  
3 within the veterans population. Their numbers will continue  
4 to climb since DoD recently opened all military occupational  
5 specialties to women.

6 That said, we believe the time has come for Congress to  
7 approve a comprehensive plan like the bipartisan bill, the  
8 Deborah Sampson Act, which is aimed at improving VA services  
9 for women veterans.

10 The same could be said for any effort targeting VA  
11 suicide prevention and the treatment of veterans exposed to  
12 toxic substances.

13 Mr. Chairman, in closing, we sincerely believe the work  
14 of these Committees is among the most important that would  
15 take place on the Hill this year, and I want to thank you  
16 for this opportunity to express the views to our members.

17 I look forward to your questions.

18 [The prepared statement of Mr. Ledoux follows:]

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1 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Mr. Ledoux, very much.

2 Mr. Mimms, please begin your testimony on behalf of the

3 Blinded Veterans Association. Thank you, sir.

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1           STATEMENT OF PAUL L. MIMMS, VICE PRESIDENT,  
2           BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION

3           Mr. Bowen. Good morning, Chairman Isakson, Chairman  
4 Roe, Ranking Member Tester and Ranking Member Walz, and  
5 greetings to all of you on the Veterans' Affairs Committees.

6           In beginning my testimony on behalf of the Blinded  
7 Veterans Association, I would like to point out that we have  
8 a significant number of issues with Section 504 and 508.

9           The chief among our issues with Section 504 at this  
10 point is dealing with the VA and its communication with  
11 veterans, particularly those veterans that are print-  
12 disabled. If a veteran is trying to correspond regarding a  
13 claim, they need to be able to read the letter, and right  
14 now, there are veterans that are getting letters and they  
15 cannot read them. So they get put into a situation where  
16 their lack of ability to respond is often negative  
17 consequences for them.

18          I point out one veteran who got a letter that said if  
19 he did not comply within a certain amount of time with  
20 information, his benefits would be cut. He did not even  
21 know he got the letter. He could not read it. He did not  
22 respond, and he came very close to losing his home. And he  
23 still has penalties pending for late fees.

24          We want to avoid this, and so we want you to work with  
25 the VA as they improve their infrastructure in IT to be able

1 to develop the capability to transmit information to our  
2 blinded veterans and others that are print-disabled in a  
3 format that they can read so that they can respond.

4       These messages from VA are important to the veterans,  
5 and getting the message back from the veteran is important  
6 to the VA.

7       Early on, I would like to thank you for your passing of  
8 the Beneficiary Travel Bill last year. This has enabled  
9 virtually hundreds of veterans access to rehabilitation  
10 facilities, which they were able to get to and forced all  
11 the other options, which would be that they went to a  
12 nursing home.

13       So we still have another travel issue that is  
14 prominent. The obstacle a lot of blind veterans face and a  
15 lot of other veterans face is the inability to get safe  
16 transportation to their medical appointments. If they are  
17 not able to ambulate beyond the first obstacle they  
18 encounter, it is hard to say that they are really  
19 ambulating, and so we ask that the program to provide  
20 veterans with transportation to their medical appointments  
21 be expanded so that it will include eligibility for blind  
22 veterans to get transportation to their appointments, which  
23 is currently disallowed.

24       On Section 508, the VA is still buying hardware and  
25 software that are not compliant with the conditions set

1 forth in this section of the Rehabilitation Act, and what  
2 that ends up in is equipment that precludes and excludes,  
3 again, members of our veteran community as well as employees  
4 and contractors that are print-disabled, and without equal  
5 access on the part of all of our workforce and being able to  
6 manage the information that we get and that we need to get,  
7 we have a weaker VA than we should have.

8         So I would like to see that and ask you that the  
9 oversight be presented to VA, and that they be encouraged to  
10 include accessibility in the upgrading of their information  
11 technology systems, so that it includes the capability for  
12 service officers and employees as well as veterans to  
13 utilize the new technology they will be bringing forward.

14         As I talk about information systems that veterans use  
15 in conjunction with the VA, one important system for 17  
16 years has been the ScripTalk, which is a talking medicine  
17 bottle reader. VA pioneered this technology 17 years ago.  
18 Since then, the private sector has picked up that same  
19 technology and offers it to almost any citizen that has a  
20 visual impairment and more than three medications that they  
21 need to manage.

22         However, the VA has not adopted the upgraded system  
23 that is now available, which provides five times the  
24 information on the labeling as the old system, the obsolete  
25 system that VA is still using. So, once again, I implore

1 that you support the implementation of the upgraded system  
2 in the most expeditious time frame possible, so that our  
3 blind veterans and others that need ScripTalk can safely  
4 manage their own medications, often self-reliantly.

5       In looking at things to come and things that have  
6 already been here, the Defense Vision Research Program at  
7 DoD has approved 77 grants so far. Most notably among those  
8 in my perspective is that they have actually developed an  
9 adhesive, which will close an eye injury on the battlefield.  
10 The adhesive will hold for 72 hours, which will allow that  
11 veteran to be evacuated to a more comprehensive treatment  
12 facility. What we are talking about is being able to  
13 maintain or recover sight as opposed to working later to try  
14 to regain sight.

15       So I am asking that each of you members of the  
16 Committees support the appropriation of \$20 million for the  
17 DoD Vision Research Program to further such efforts as has  
18 been accomplished in the grants before.

19       And lastly, I would like to say that the Blinded  
20 Veterans Association as well is in support of the extension  
21 of the Caregiver Program, post-9/11 Caregiver Program, and  
22 that it be extended to include eligibility for veterans from  
23 previous conflicts.

24       I thank you for the opportunity to present my  
25 legislative testimony for the Blinded Veterans Association

1 for 2018, 2019, and I welcome your questions.

2 Thank you.

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

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1           Mr. Poliquin. Mr. Mimms, we thank you very much for  
2 your helpful testimony. Thank you for that information, and  
3 I leaned over to Chairman Isakson, as so much of this is  
4 common sense, but we really appreciate you bringing that to  
5 our attention. Thank you very much for that, Mr. Mimms.

6           Mr. Mimms. My pleasure. Thank you.

7           Mr. Poliquin. Mr. Van Ess, you are now recognized to  
8 present your testimony on behalf of the Military Order of  
9 the Purple Heart.

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1           STATEMENT OF NEIL VAN ESS, NATIONAL COMMANDER,  
2           MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

3           Mr. Van Ess. Thank you, Chairmen Isakson and Roe,  
4 Ranking Members Tester and Walz, and members of the  
5 Committees. On behalf of the approximately 46,000 members  
6 of the Military Order of the Purple Heart, it is my honor  
7 and my privilege to appear before you to offer our  
8 testimony.

9           I am sure you all are aware of that the Military Order  
10 of the Purple Heart is a unique organization in that all  
11 membership is made up entirely combat veterans who were  
12 wounded in combat. Still, our advocacy affects and extends  
13 to all veterans, servicemembers, their families, and their  
14 survivors.

15          With that, on behalf of the Order, I am pleased to  
16 present the Military Order of Purple Heart legislative  
17 agenda for 2018.

18          Community care. The Military Order of the Purple Heart  
19 strongly believes that the VA has an obligation to provide a  
20 high quality of medical care to every enrolled veteran. In  
21 cases where the VA facilities cannot meet the demands for  
22 care in a timely manner, veterans should have the option to  
23 receive care from community providers.

24          Still any future improvements of the expansion of the  
25 community care must not come at the expense of funding the

1 VA. We believe it would amount to a move towards  
2 privatization to which the Military Order of the Purple  
3 Heart remains firmly and strongly opposed.

4 For this reasons, the Military Order of the Purple  
5 Heart was proud to offer support for S. 2193, the Caring for  
6 Our Veterans Act. This is an important bill. It would  
7 modernize, consolidate VA community care, while also  
8 offering additional funding to and for the VA. Very  
9 importantly, it would also finally expand caregivers'  
10 benefits to all veterans of all eras.

11 Also, we support Title 1 of S. 2184, the Veterans  
12 Community Care and Access Act, which would establish  
13 community care access standards based on the market area  
14 assessments of the VA facilities.

15 While we know that certain differences will be resolved  
16 between various proposals, the Military Order of the Purple  
17 Heart encourages both Committees to continue to work in a  
18 bipartisan, bicameral agreement to provide veterans with a  
19 fully modernized community care program.

20 Individual unemployability. When veterans are unable  
21 to work due to their service-connected disabilities, IU  
22 becomes the safety net for them to be able to financially  
23 support themselves and their families.

24 Last year, the VA proposed eliminating IU eligibility  
25 in the budget for veterans who reach the retirement age for

1 Social Security purpose, a move the Military Order of the  
2 Purple Heart strongly opposed. We believe only you,  
3 Congress, should have the authority to change a benefit as  
4 important as IU. For this reason, we ask your Committees to  
5 pass H.R. 4369. It would permanently codify IU eligibility  
6 standards.

7 Concurrent Receipts. To the Military Order of the  
8 Purple Heart, the fact that so many veterans still have  
9 their retirement pay offset by the VA disability  
10 compensation implies that they would somehow be double  
11 dipping if they were allowed to collect both benefits. We  
12 strongly disagree with this, and we see absolutely no reason  
13 whatsoever why any military retiree should be penalized for  
14 suffering a service-connected disability by having their  
15 retirement pay reduced. We feel this is totally wrong.

16 Accordingly, we call on Congress to correct this  
17 injustice once and for all by passing H.R. 303, H.R. 333,  
18 and S. 66, which would extend full concurrent receipts to  
19 all military retirees.

20 Likewise, eligibility for both the Survivor Benefit  
21 Plan and the VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation would  
22 in no way also be considered as double dipping and should  
23 not be subject to an offset.

24 This unfair practice is commonly known amongst us as  
25 the Widow's Tax. It often creates severe hardship for the

1 surviving spouses by unfairly stripping them of their  
2 portion of the Survivor Benefit Plan, virtually insurance  
3 that benefits their spouses that they paid for while they  
4 were in the service. The Military Order of the Purple Heart  
5 believes this is the time to correct this injustice, which  
6 is well long overdue, and strongly urges Congress to pass  
7 H.R. 846 and S. 339 to eliminate the Survivor Benefit  
8 Plan/VA DIC.

9       Chairmen Isakson and Roe, Ranking Members Tester and  
10 Walz, this concludes mine and our statement. On behalf of  
11 the Military Order of the Purple Heart, I thank you for this  
12 opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to  
13 answering any questions you or other members of the  
14 Committees may have.

15       God bless you.

16       [The prepared statement of Mr. Van Ess follows:]

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1           Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Mr. Van Ess, very much. We  
2 appreciate your testimony.

3           Mr. Bowen, you are next up, and we ask you to please  
4 submit your testimony. You have been introduced in a very  
5 eloquent way by Senator Sullivan, who is no longer in the  
6 room, but we all know who you are, sir.

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1           STATEMENT OF VERDIE BOWEN, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL  
2           ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

3           Mr. Bowen. Thank you, sir.

4           Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the  
5 Committee, I am Verdie Bowen, the president of the National  
6 Association of Directors of Veterans Affairs--we are also  
7 known as NASDVA--and the Alaskan Director of Veterans  
8 Affairs, as my Senator had so eloquently had told everyone.  
9 And plus, that was quite an honor for me to have him come in  
10 and introduce me.

11          I am honored to present the view of my colleagues of  
12 the 50 States, the five Territories, and the District of  
13 Columbia. We are second only to the Federal VA as the  
14 largest provider of services to veterans, and our role  
15 continues to grow collectively.

16          States contribute nearly \$10 billion each year in  
17 support to our Nation's veterans. Even in the face of  
18 constrained State budgets, our focus and our heart is still  
19 to serve our veterans.

20          Our States support veterans with a full spectrum of  
21 benefits and services. While there are many organizations  
22 that serve our Nation's veterans, NASDVA through its member  
23 States and Territories, is a single organization that  
24 represents and serves all America's 20 million veterans and  
25 their families.

1           We have longstanding government-to-government  
2 relationship with the VA. The partnership was first  
3 codified through a formal memorandum of understanding  
4 between the VA and NASDVA in 2012 and was updated and  
5 strengthened in a memorandum of agreement and signed last  
6 month by VA Secretary and myself.

7           The MOA covers the following top priorities: greater  
8 choice, modernization of systems, improving timeliness of  
9 services, efficiently managing resources and suicide  
10 prevention.

11           Our written testimony covers a wide range of items that  
12 are important to our veterans. Due to the time limitations,  
13 I will extenuate only a few.

14           First, NASDVA is asking, at a minimum, the VA receive  
15 the funding requested by the President. The budget will  
16 provide needed resources to deliver services to our  
17 veterans.

18           Second, an item of interest for the States is that we  
19 urge VA and Congress to intervene with the U.S. Census to  
20 include a question about military service in the 2020 Census  
21 in order to fully account for living veterans. This impacts  
22 programs that are based upon veteran population in each  
23 State.

24           Third, we recommend a version of permanent choice as  
25 reflected in the new CARE legislation under construction.

1 This option of care for veterans need to be fully funded.  
2 The clock is ticking as Choice nears exhaustion. Also, it  
3 is important that when implemented that the VA has  
4 sufficient time to promulgate the new CARE program  
5 regulations.

6 Fourth, NASDVA and the VA and other partners are  
7 working hard to address the looming silver tsunami of aging  
8 veterans that is just around the corner for us. With the  
9 number of veterans 65 and older rising to more than 4.5  
10 million, we will soon have a crisis that we do not have a  
11 plan properly for today.

12 State veterans homes provide for over half of the VA's  
13 authorized long-term care. With the projected increase in  
14 need for this care, State grant construction funding needs  
15 to increase to at least \$300 million. The current backlog  
16 in homes construction across our Nation is over \$700  
17 million.

18 NASDVA requests that the VA expedite the completion of  
19 publishing of domiciliary care and adult day care health  
20 care rules. They have been pending in the VA for just over  
21 10 years.

22 We recommend that the VA begin an evaluation process to  
23 implement an assisted living level of care. This addition  
24 would provide three levels of care--assisted living,  
25 domiciliary, and skilled care--which will comprehensively



1 serve our veterans today and into the future.

2 Fifth, NASDVA recognizes that women now make up nearly  
3 20 percent of our armed forces. There is a disproportionate  
4 and nonstandard availability to access gender-specific  
5 health care. The decision-making and planning for new  
6 services must be data-driven and veteran-centric to ensure  
7 all veterans, regardless of gender, receive the care they  
8 have earned.

9 Sixth, we know that Tribal veterans are the most  
10 underserved veteran population in the Nation today. We are  
11 encouraged with the most recent changes in the accreditation  
12 for Tribal veteran representatives on each reservation. We  
13 also believe that VA should place outreach specialists on  
14 the reservations as well. Overall, more needs to be done to  
15 reach each person who has served, no matter where they live.

16 Finally, we are heartened that your respective  
17 Committees and the VA are committed to preserving the VA's  
18 health care system, implementing the CARE program, and  
19 continuing the emphasis on accountability and suicide  
20 prevention.

21 Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the House and  
22 Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, thank you for the  
23 important work you are doing to keep our Nation's promise to  
24 our veterans.

25 I welcome your questions and comments on behalf of

1 those we serve. May God bless those who are in harm's way  
2 today, and may God bless America.

3 Thank you.

4 [The prepared statement of Mr. Bowen follows:]

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1 Mr. Poliquin. Thank you, Mr. Bowen, very much.

2 Ms. Campos, you now may begin your testimony on behalf  
3 of the Military Officers Association of America.

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1           STATEMENT OF RENE CAMPOS, SENIOR DIRECTOR FOR  
2           GOVERNMENT RELATIONS, MILITARY OFFICERS  
3           ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

4           Ms. Campos. Chairman Isakson, Congressman Poliquin,  
5 Ranking Member Walz, and members of the Committee, at this  
6 time, I would like to ask our MOAA representatives in the  
7 audience to just stand and join me in thanking the  
8 Committees for this opportunity to present our legislative  
9 priorities and appreciation for your unfailing commitment to  
10 putting veterans first.

11           [Applause.]

12           Ms. Campos. Thank you.

13           So today, I am going to focus on four areas: health  
14 care reform, caregiver support, women veterans, and toxic  
15 exposure.

16           In health care, MOAA and VSO partners have worked  
17 diligently with VA and congressional leaders to protect,  
18 strengthen, and reform VHA, including replacing choice and  
19 consolidating community care.

20           MOAA believes that collectively, we have never been  
21 closer to reconciling the differences between the various  
22 community care bills, and so we urge the Committee to strike  
23 a bipartisan, bicameral agreement on legislation to enact  
24 community care and ensure full funding of VHA, including  
25 preserving foundational services.

1 For caregiver support, VA has done has done a stellar  
2 job over the years implementing and fine-tuning the  
3 comprehensive program, but the need is great among all  
4 veterans.

5 Let me share with you the challenges one MOAA veteran  
6 wants you to know. Peter is an 81-year-old blind, 100  
7 percent-disabled veteran. He regularly calls me and says,  
8 "Rene, any progress on the caregiver legislation?" You see,  
9 Peter recognizes the toll caregiving is taking on his wife.  
10 He says, "She has been my caregiver for over 20 years. The  
11 burden is wearing on her, but VA told me they do not have  
12 the support services to help her. Please share this with  
13 whoever will listen and let them know we need VA's help."

14 MOAA is confident VA can expand caregiver support to  
15 veterans or all eras with the commitment from Congress and  
16 all stakeholders to find a solution.

17 Then as the roles of women veterans in the military  
18 continue to change, VA and DoD must be prepared to address  
19 not only their current health needs, but also the evolving  
20 health issues that are going to be associated with women in  
21 combat.

22 The United Health Foundation and MOAA released a report  
23 called "The Health of Women Who Served," and I want to  
24 acknowledge Representative Brownley for being at our launch  
25 last year. Thank you.

1           The report provides a baseline portrait of the health  
2 of women who have served in the armed forces compared to  
3 their civilian counterparts. Women who served showed  
4 tremendous resilience. More than 56 percent reported good  
5 or excellent health, compared to about half of their  
6 civilian peers.

7           Notable, though, the women who served reported higher  
8 rates of cancer, mental illness, COPD, and depression.  
9 Also, those reporting having suicidal thoughts in the last  
10 year was twice the rate of civilian peers. VA has made  
11 great advances in reducing gender care and clinical and  
12 expanding services, but barriers still linger as GAO reports  
13 in recent high-risk studies.

14           And VA and DoD must do more to improve transition  
15 assistance. Still far too many women are either unaware or  
16 have difficulty in accessing services and benefits.

17           MOAA appreciates these Committees' longstanding  
18 commitment to women veterans, and we urge enactment of the  
19 Deborah Sampson Act and ongoing congressional oversight  
20 hearings to ensure that VA invests in women's health and  
21 benefit programs and complies with policies and standards.

22           Finally, military members have suffered a lot and  
23 suffered toxic exposure for as long as the U.S. armed forces  
24 has existed. It is time VA and DoD work together to study  
25 and provide Congress the necessary data you need to assure

1 benefits are in place and resourced when veterans need them.

2 Congress must also require that VA use that information  
3 to establish benefits. It is unreasonable to require  
4 veterans to provide scientific and medical evidence for  
5 their claim when that expertise resides within the  
6 Government itself.

7 MOAA recommends Congress invest and advance in joint  
8 Federal research on servicemembers exposed to hazardous  
9 toxins and establish a framework for improving data  
10 management systems to ensure health care and benefits are  
11 established to compensate and support veterans, family  
12 members, and survivors.

13 In closing, veterans and their families have sacrificed  
14 so much during their service. To ask them to continue  
15 serving or continue giving after service by funding their  
16 earned benefits or cannibalizing benefits to pay for another  
17 veteran's benefit or program is asking them to go beyond  
18 what we expect other citizens to do in this country who did  
19 not wear the uniform nor put their life on the line.

20 MOAA looks forward to working with Congress to achieve  
21 these legislative priorities.

22 Thank you, and we look forward to your questions.

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

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1 Chairman Roe. [Presiding.] Thank you, Ms. Campos.  
2 Mr. Adams, you are recognized for 5 minutes.  
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1           STATEMENT OF JOHN ADAMS, NATIONAL PRESIDENT, THE  
2           RETIRED ENLISTED ASSOCIATION

3           Mr. Adams. Thank you, sir.

4           Chairmen Isakson and Roe, Ranking Members Tester and  
5 Walz, and distinguished members of both Committees, good  
6 morning. My name is John Adams. I am the president of The  
7 Retired Enlisted Association, TREA. I am proud to be here  
8 today to present our veterans' legislative goals and  
9 concerns for 2018.

10          We were founded in 1963 and chartered by Congress in 1992  
11 to be the voice of the enlisted, of America's armed forces,  
12 and to their families. It has been our honor to be doing  
13 this for over 50 years.

14          Before I turn to policy questions, I want to say that  
15 we are going to greatly miss Ranking Member Tim Walz from  
16 the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, a TREA life member,  
17 when he leaves Congress at the end of this session. He has  
18 been and hopefully will continue to be a leading force on  
19 veterans' issues. He will be solely missed in D.C.

20          I ask that my written statement be made part of the  
21 hearing. It includes bills that we hope will become law  
22 this year.

23          But what I wish to discuss in the short time I have  
24 here is the continuing mismanagement at the VA. For years,  
25 TREA and our brother and sister organizations have given the

1 VA our full-throttle support, and we continue to do so.

2 We know what an enormous task it is serving American  
3 veterans, their families and survivors. We understand how  
4 hard it is to operate an organization of almost 400,000  
5 employees spread across the country.

6 We are also mindful of the work you and your dedicated  
7 and skilled staffs do to try to provide proper oversight of  
8 the VA as it attempts to provide first-rate service for  
9 those who have served.

10 But we continue to see inconsistent procedures and  
11 mismanagement throughout the system. In the last few years,  
12 your Committees, the VA, and the VSOs have tried to deal  
13 with health care issues, fraudulent reporting in backlogs,  
14 and improper billings at VISNs all over the country.

15 Just last week, a devastating IG report was released  
16 concerning the VA hospital here in D.C. Among other things,  
17 it said that the hospital lacked consistent clean areas of  
18 medical supplies, did not have proper financial controls to  
19 make some purchases that were necessary and cost effective.  
20 And it said that anesthesia was administered before staff  
21 realized that they did not have the necessary surgical  
22 instruments available.

23 The report included that for years, D.C. medical center  
24 suffered a series of systematic and programmatic failures to  
25 consistently deliver timely and quality patient care and

1 which heightens the potential for waste, fraud, and abuse of  
2 Government resources.

3       If this can happen in Congress' own backyard, it can  
4 happen anywhere, as we know it does. Since 2014, in the  
5 Phoenix wait list scandal, your two Committees and the VA  
6 have been working to design funding the permanent Choice  
7 Program to ensure that veterans receive timely, highly  
8 qualified health care.

9       It is critical that the permanent program guarantees  
10 the VISNs management qualifications for care in the civilian  
11 market and treatments be consistent throughout the country.

12       While we support allowing veterans access to private  
13 medical care when they need but cannot get timely access to  
14 VA medical centers, we oppose any program that would provide  
15 access to more private sector care while diminishing the  
16 VA-provided care.

17       We are concerned that if not designed correctly,  
18 providing more access to private care will erode or erase  
19 existing veteran-friendly VA services by spending VA funds  
20 outside of the VA instead of improving VA's own internal  
21 programs and keeping the care coordinated and directed in  
22 the VA.

23       To all of us in this room, VA health care is not a mere  
24 insurance plan. This is a lifeline for the heroes who love  
25 this Nation and who we love in return.

1           As you formulate veterans' legislation, we also ask you  
2 to keep in mind the members of the Guard and Reserve. Those  
3 individuals are a key component of our armed forces and will  
4 be called upon for regular deployments for the foreseeable  
5 future, yet they still do not have all the benefits and  
6 rights that active duty personnel have. And when  
7 legislation was formed in the past, such as the new military  
8 retirement system, the Guard and Reserve have bene  
9 shortchanged because of a failure to fully consider them in  
10 the legislation. I discuss this at greater length in my  
11 testimony.

12           Again, thank you for the honor of appearing before you,  
13 and thank you for the dedication you and your staffs have  
14 shown working to guarantee that America's veterans and their  
15 families are treated as they deserve.

16           I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.  
17 Thank you.

18           [The prepared statement of Mr. Adams follows:]

19           Chairman Roe. Thank you, Mr. Adams, for your  
20 testimony.

21           Ms. Gibson, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

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1           STATEMENT OF CYNDIE GIBSON, MEMBER, GOVERNMENT  
2           RELATIONS COMMITTEE, GOLD STAR WIVES OF AMERICA

3           Ms. Gibson. Chairmen Isakson and Roe, Ranking Members  
4 Tester and Walz, and distinguished members of both the  
5 Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs, I am  
6 pleased to be here today to testify on behalf of Gold Star  
7 Wives of America, Incorporated, to share our legislative  
8 concerns.

9           I am Cyndie Gibson. I am the widow of Major Parks  
10 Gibson. He was U.S. Air Force, and he died on April 22nd,  
11 2007, while on active duty.

12          I served for 20 years in the Air Force Medical Service  
13 Corps and retired as a lieutenant colonel. I currently  
14 serve on the Government Relations Committee for Gold Star  
15 Wives.

16          We are very grateful for recent laws that have been  
17 passed on our behalf. Thank you for your continued support  
18 of education through the Fry Scholarship and the Forever GI  
19 Bill. We also appreciate this year's NDAA inclusion of the  
20 SSIA at the rate of \$310 per month indefinitely.

21          In his second inaugural speech, President Lincoln said  
22 "to care for him who has borne the battle and for his widow  
23 and orphan." This is the promise our country has made to  
24 our veterans and survivors. Congress has always had an  
25 important role in ensuring that this promise is kept,

1 beginning with the Revolutionary War survivors.

2 Gold Star Wives of America, Incorporated, is a  
3 nonprofit organization, and we receive no Federal grants.  
4 All financial support comes through our widows paying  
5 membership dues.

6 Our mission is mutual moral support through grief and  
7 recovery and also to advocate for benefits, benefits that  
8 are not entitlements, benefit that were earned through the  
9 ultimate sacrifice.

10 We bring awareness of benefit inequities to Congress  
11 and the public. Our written submission to you covers many  
12 of our concerns in great detail, but in the interest of  
13 keeping to our allotted time, my testimony will highlight  
14 two areas of concern--to have current pending legislation,  
15 first DIC, a monthly stipend which has not increased in 25  
16 years; second, the SBP/DIC offset, a dollar-for-dollar  
17 reduction in benefits.

18 First, I will address House Bill 4106, the Surviving  
19 Spouse Income Security Act--it was introduced by  
20 Representative Carol Shea-Porter of New Hampshire--also,  
21 Senate Bill 1990, Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Act  
22 of 2017. It was introduced by Senator Jon Tester of  
23 Montana.

24 Compared to, first, an SBP survivor payments, DIC lags  
25 far behind. There has been no increase other than COLA in

1 25 years. Most recipients are surviving spouses from World  
2 War II, the Korean conflict, and the Vietnam era. Almost 90  
3 percent of DIC recipients are in their 60s to 90s, and their  
4 earning power is obviously limited. It is harder for them  
5 to survive. It has led to homelessness.

6 One example is a widow from Texas, who is 86 years old  
7 and whose husband died on active duty during the Vietnam  
8 era. She gets DIC, but she also substitute teaches in order  
9 to survive.

10 This year's meager COLA increase of \$25 will only buy a  
11 bag of groceries. We urge you to take action through these  
12 two bills to bring parity to the DIC for us. Please rectify  
13 the inequity by increasing the amount of DIC paid to a level  
14 comparable to other Federal employees' benefits.

15 We are asking for your support and your votes in the  
16 passage of these very important bills to keep the promise  
17 our country made to its veterans and their survivors.

18 Next, I will address House Bill 846, the Military  
19 Widows Tax Elimination--it was introduced by Representative  
20 Wilson of South Carolina--and a companion bill, Senate Bill  
21 339, Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act of 2017. It was  
22 introduced by Senator Nelson of Florida.

23 Congress created the Survivor Benefit Plan, or SBP, in  
24 1972 as a purchased annuities benefit, a type of insurance.  
25 In 2001, SBP was expanded to include active duty and reserve

1 line-of-duty deaths. DIC is a different benefit entirely.  
2 It is a loss through death indemnity compensation payment  
3 from the VA. Surviving spouses should receive both SBP and  
4 DIC, but instead, SBP is offset dollar for dollar. The  
5 average monthly offset is \$916.

6 Essentially, the SBP/DIC inequity is an unresolved  
7 concurrent receipt problem that has been acknowledged by  
8 Congress, and partial relief has been granted through  
9 indefinite SSIA payments, but it is partial relief.

10 The offset also affect surviving spouses of those who  
11 die in retirement from a service-connected cause, even after  
12 purchasing this benefit. There is a dollar-for-dollar  
13 offset.

14 One example is a widow from South Carolina. She  
15 receives only \$52 a month in SBP, but she should be  
16 receiving \$1,336. In her case, the difference amounts to  
17 over \$15,000 of denied income every year.

18 Legislative attempts so far to eliminate this offset  
19 have had very limited success in at least one outrageous  
20 byproduct. By law, in order for a widow of a line-of-duty  
21 death to receive full SBP benefits, she must remarry at or  
22 after age 57 or the unfair offset continues. Both House  
23 Bill 486 and Senate Bill 339 will repeal this offset and  
24 eliminate the inequity. We ask not only for your support  
25 but for your votes in the passage of these two very



1 important bills.

2       In conclusion, our members are grateful for the laws  
3 that provide our benefits. We believe it is our duty to  
4 stand with you and ensure that President Lincoln's words  
5 still ring true that our Nation provides for the victims of  
6 her wars and remembers that our benefits are not  
7 entitlements but are a trust that has been earned through  
8 service and sacrifice and that never goes away.

9       President John F. Kennedy said, "A nation reveals  
10 itself not only by the citizens it produces but also by the  
11 citizens it honors, the citizens it remembers."

12       Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify on  
13 behalf of Gold Star Wives of America, Incorporated, and I am  
14 available for any questions you might have.

15       [The prepared statement of Ms. Gibson follows:]

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1 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Ms. Gibson, for your  
2 testimony.

3 I will now yield to Chairman Isakson for 3 minutes.

4 Chairman Isakson. Thank you, Chairman Roe, and I will  
5 be very brief.

6 First, I want to thank you all for your testimony. You  
7 were quite clear and concise and succinct, particularly on  
8 Blue Water Navy and on the caregivers. We have got the  
9 message loud and clear, and we are working as hard as we can  
10 to make those a reality in the near future if we can.

11 Thank you for your testimony.

12 Mr. Bowen, I cannot help, but with you here, mention  
13 Pete Wheeler. Did you ever know Pete?

14 Mr. Bowen. Yes, sir.

15 Chairman Isakson. He was the oldest living veteran, I  
16 think if there ever was one. He served as Commissioner of  
17 Veterans Affairs in Georgia for 70 years almost and was a  
18 great friend of the military and a great friend of mine and  
19 passed away 2 years ago. But this job, you all do it. It  
20 goes unmentioned a lot of times by those of us in  
21 Washington, but the care for the veterans and service to  
22 veterans is key to the State Directors. Again, we thank you  
23 for your service.

24 And to all of you for being here, we are going to work  
25 as hard as we can for you as you have worked for us, and

1 that is awfully doggone hard. And I am going to work  
2 closely with Jon Tester, with Chairman Roe and Mr. Walz and  
3 the others to make sure we have a bipartisan approach to  
4 solve the problems of our veterans, who did not let anything  
5 get in their way when they fought for us. We are not going  
6 to let anything get in our way fighting for you.

7 Thank you very much.

8 Chairman Roe. I thank the Chairman.

9 Mr. Walz, you are recognized for 3 minutes.

10 Mr. Walz. Thank you, mc, and thank you all for  
11 passionate testimony.

12 Mr. Adams, thank you. Kind words coming from you means  
13 a lot to me, and I often say I often wondered as an enlisted  
14 troop where my money went when I paid my dues to things. I  
15 know where it goes. I know the difference. I said I read  
16 The Voice every month to know what is going on here in  
17 Congress because it is better than sitting on this side of  
18 the dais.

19 Ms. Campos, thank you again for your moral clarity on  
20 this, and I thank with Ms. Gibson on the responsibility of  
21 all Americans to pay for veterans. We cannot get caught in  
22 this trap of taking from one to pay another when there are  
23 literally 93 percent of Americans who are willing to pay who  
24 did not serve, and I stay firm on that.

25 Mr. Bowen, it is truly your lucky day, I guess. Last

1 night, S. 324 on the State vets home, adult day care, health  
2 care bill, the Chairman brought it to the floor and passed  
3 that unanimously through voice vote, so it is on its way.

4 Mr. Bowen. Awesome. Thank you, sir.

5 Chairman Isakson. Well done.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Isakson. And, Mr. Mimms, all of us have to in  
8 accepting responsibility. You are correct on Sections 504  
9 and 508 of noncompliance. It has been Democratic  
10 administrations and Republican administrations. We have to  
11 get this right.

12 I know the Chairman's commitment is strong on this and  
13 would ask for some help for us to get that compliance on  
14 those to make sure that you have that access. That is  
15 simply a moral responsibility, and there are too many  
16 stories out there.

17 Again, I think so many of your priorities certainly are  
18 the priorities of this Committee, but again, the Chairman  
19 being here, we were talking earlier. Getting news and  
20 knowing where it is there, changing chaos at the VA is  
21 apparently happening as we sit here. We do not know,  
22 confirmed, but I would be remiss if I did not say that we  
23 understand we may be getting a new VA Secretary.

24 And I am going to quote from the potential incoming VA  
25 Secretary, "A lot of the solutions dealing with the VA are

1 to be privatized to allow those veterans to go elsewhere."

2       Be very clear, as I said again, no one up here believes  
3 that. I do not think anybody sitting at that table believes  
4 that, and I think it is clear to understand that this is  
5 more complex than just simple politics. It is more complex  
6 than saying we all know care in the community is critically  
7 important. We all know we have been doing it for decades,  
8 and the Chairman has been working tirelessly--Chairman  
9 Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and all the members up here  
10 to get a bill.

11       I am hearing you loud and clear. We need to clarify  
12 this. We need to ensure that it is not a false choice  
13 between care in the community and a fully functioning  
14 staffed VA that provides that critical care that you are  
15 asking for. That is something that we can do together. The  
16 commitment is still here to try and get that done, and I  
17 think when your voice comes and tells us that, it really  
18 helps, especially in a time of--again, it looks like we are  
19 going to see more flux, more change. Some things cannot  
20 change, and the one thing that cannot change is the  
21 certainty and the bedrock care that is delivered in the VA  
22 that you know is there, you know it is quality, and you  
23 know, as each of you have said it, you earned it.

24       This is not a benefit. There are many things I support  
25 that are benefits that are important. These are all earned.

1 So thank you, and I yield back.

2 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

3 Senator Cassidy, you are recognized for 3 minutes.

4 Senator Cassidy. Mr. Ledoux, I see your last posting  
5 was at Barksdale, but nonetheless, with a name like Ledoux,  
6 you had to be originally from Louisiana or maybe New  
7 Hampshire.

8 Mr. Ledoux. We live in Louisiana, right there.

9 Senator Cassidy. Well hat is off to you.

10 Mr. Ledoux. Thank you.

11 Senator Cassidy. I was looking you up on the Internet,  
12 but I did not see that.

13 I was looking at your testimony and total agreement  
14 with that which you have been speaking. I am a physician,  
15 and I always know that health care which is closest to the  
16 patient is health care most likely to be delivered, and so  
17 your kind of advocacy for community clinics, for those who  
18 use VA services, great thought.

19 I have folks back home who have to go 100 miles for the  
20 colonoscopy after taking a prep. As a gastroenterologist  
21 and as anybody who is over 50 can understand, that can be  
22 problematic, without being more explicit.

23 [Laughter.]

24 Senator Cassidy. And there is also the issues of  
25 timely payment for providers because if providers are taking

1 care of folks and they do not get paid, they cannot meet  
2 their margins, and ultimately, if you cannot meet your  
3 margins, you cannot see patients.

4 I am just saying that as a fellow who worked in the  
5 public hospital system, but knowing those who work in the  
6 private.

7 I love your testimony. For those concerned about the  
8 gender issues and women being able to get their care  
9 addressed, in total agreement with that.

10 As I again looked on your website--and I noticed about  
11 half the faces on your website are female, and I think that  
12 shows our changing military. And women have just the  
13 privilege to serve as men do in some of these roles that  
14 formerly were just for men. So our VA should respond to  
15 that.

16 I thank you all for your service and put myself at your  
17 service as we work in common for the good of those who have  
18 served our country.

19 Mr. Chairman, with that, I yield back.

20 Chairman Roe. Thank you, Senator.

21 Mr. Takano, you are recognized.

22 Mr. Takano. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to  
23 all the VSOs joining us this morning to share your  
24 testimony. I cannot tell you how much I value your input  
25 and expertise. I cannot address every VSO at the table, but

1 I just want to say, Ms. Gibson, I am very appreciative of  
2 your comments this morning. I am letting you know that I am  
3 a cosponsor of H.R. 4099 and also H.R. 846.

4 I was just, again, impacted by your quantification of  
5 the disparity on that offset. I heard the Ranking Member  
6 just say "Oh my God," and I thought the same thing at the  
7 same time. We do have to correct that.

8 I appreciate--I think it was the moment of silence that  
9 we had for the Californians, the three Californians that  
10 died in the line of their work at the veterans home in  
11 Yountville. What a terrible tragedy that was for us in  
12 California and for the entire Nation.

13 I do want to address something that I think needs  
14 addressing. One thing I have heard time and time again is  
15 that the VA is facing significant staffing shortages in  
16 critical clinical positions. I think we have to do more to  
17 recruit and retain medical providers and front-line support  
18 staff that make our medical centers and CBOCs function, and  
19 although the home that we had in California was not a VA--it  
20 was a State VA facility, we see the risk inherent in the job  
21 they do and the hard work they do.

22 What this means is the VA must have a robust and  
23 effective human resources department, and I am afraid that  
24 is not the case today. The bipartisan co-chairs of the  
25 Commission on Care were stunned at how little emphasis the



1 VA put on HR, and we know that it takes a long, long time to  
2 recruit doctors and to get them even hired--and nurses and  
3 so on.

4 Now, official time, official time fills the gaps when  
5 internal HR falls short. It is used to ensure workplace  
6 safety, develop employee training, and improve workplace  
7 processes and working condition. These in turn help improve  
8 the care and service we provide to veterans.

9 Now, I want to be perfectly clear. Federal law  
10 prohibits the use of official time to conduct internal union  
11 business. Now, eliminating or restricting official time  
12 will not solve the workforce challenges at the VA. We  
13 should be looking at how the VA recruits and retains  
14 employees, strengthening HR, investing in graduate medical  
15 school education, and so many other policies that are proven  
16 to help the workforce.

17 And I want you to remember, I want us all to remember,  
18 that roughly a third of the VA workforce are veterans  
19 themselves. They deserve safe workplaces and fair working  
20 conditions, and they want training to help them do their  
21 jobs more effectively.

22 And while it is easy to misrepresent official time as  
23 wasteful and harmful to veterans, the reality is that it  
24 helps build a stronger workforce and a better VA health care  
25 system.

1 I see I have gone over my time, Mr. Chairman. I yield  
2 back the balance--I yield back.

3 Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

4 Mr. Arrington, you are recognized.

5 Mr. Arrington. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you  
6 all for your service to our veterans and your sacrifice and  
7 service to our country.

8 Every time I meet with young folk from west Texas who  
9 come up here, I tell them about the one special ingredient  
10 to the experiment of liberty and democracy persisting over  
11 240 years is freedom, but I say, you know, freedom is not  
12 free. And there is no freedom without security.

13 So God bless our veterans, and thank you, Lord, for  
14 this opportunity to serve those who served me and  
15 generations of folks like me.

16 I am going to cut to the chase here for me. I would  
17 like to say a lot of nice things about everybody on the  
18 panel. We do work in a bipartisan way, and I think that is  
19 peculiar, unfortunately, for Washington.

20 But there is an issue here that just is stuck in my  
21 craw, and I am just not going to stop beating the drum on  
22 this. And it has to do with something that my friend and  
23 colleague mentioned on official time.

24 In my first hearing as the Chair of the Economic  
25 Opportunity Subcommittee, the GAO reported that there were

1 hundreds of VA employees who spent 100 percent of their time  
2 on official time, and I believe it is union activity. It is  
3 bargaining activity. It is labor relations activity, and in  
4 some cases, it is lobbying even in some cases.

5 I will tell you what it is not, though. Here is what  
6 is more important. It is not the job they were hired to do  
7 to serve our veterans. They were hired because, presumably,  
8 there was a need. There was a need to provide medical care.  
9 There was a need to streamline an appeal for our disabled  
10 veteran or modify their home. There was a need. So we  
11 posted a job, and we hired them. And now some people are  
12 spending 100 percent of their time on something other than  
13 what they were hired to do.

14 I do not care what the union time or official time  
15 looks like. It is not what we hired them to do. Do you  
16 agree with me that that is a problem?

17 I will tell you what the law says.

18 [Applause.]

19 Mr. Arrington. I will tell you what the law says. The  
20 law says you can implement union time or official time, and  
21 that is the law. And I think there are good folks in  
22 unions. I am not debating whether we should have a union or  
23 not, but I am taking a strong position that the law says if  
24 you implement it, it must be reasonable, necessary, and in  
25 the best interest of the public.

1           A hundred percent of your time on union activity or  
2 official time is not necessary. It is not reasonable, and  
3 it is certainly not in the best interest of the customer,  
4 which is our veteran, or the taxpayer. Do you agree with  
5 me?

6           Mr. Ledoux. Yes.

7           Mr. Arrington. Well, I need your help to pass 1461,  
8 H.R. 1461. It does not eliminate it. It just says you  
9 cannot spend more than 25 percent of your time. That is  
10 reasonable. That is reasonable.

11          Thank you guys for your service, and Mr. Chairman, I  
12 yield back.

13          Chairman Roe. I thank the gentleman for yielding.

14          Ms. Kuster, you are recognized for 3 minutes.

15          Ms. Kuster. Thank you, and thank you so much for being  
16 with us, each of you, and if there is anyone from New  
17 Hampshire still in the room, thank you for joining us.

18          I just want to echo my colleagues. We have a very  
19 bipartisan commitment to our veterans here. We are all  
20 working on the Blue Water Navy issue, and we hope that we do  
21 get that resolved finally. I know that this has been a  
22 priority for quite a long time.

23          We have had some very compelling hearings about our  
24 caregivers, and we want to be supportive and expansive in  
25 the benefits to caregivers.

1           And I want to thank you, Ms. Gibson, for drawing our  
2 attention to the equity issues for the survivor benefits.  
3 You have certainly got my attention that a woman would be  
4 forced to remarry in order to get the benefits that--I  
5 cannot even imagine that is legal in this day and age, but  
6 we are happy to sign on and support you and try to move  
7 those bills as well.

8           And I just want to echo my Ranking Member, Mr. Walz. I  
9 for one am very troubled by the turmoil in Washington right  
10 now and particularly the veterans. I would be the first to  
11 say that Secretary Shulkin's time has not been without  
12 controversy. We have had a tremendous controversy in  
13 Manchester, New Hampshire, at our VA, but he did step in and  
14 came to New Hampshire. We have a task force under way. We  
15 are trying to solve some complicated issues about getting  
16 access to high-quality care for every veteran.

17           I live in a rural district, and so people have to  
18 travel quite a long way. We want to make sure that whether  
19 it is a combination with community care or whether it is  
20 working with our community partners that via collaboration  
21 we are trying to work with our medical school, at Dartmouth  
22 Medical School, to make sure that we have the connection to  
23 the latest and greatest ideas that are coming out of high-  
24 quality care for our veterans and that can be used beyond,  
25 that can be used in the civilian community.

1           We have some wonderful research that is going on to  
2 tackle our opioid epidemic, and the veterans were first into  
3 that problem. But I am hoping that they can lead us out  
4 through decreasing the rates of opioid prescriptions and  
5 increasing options for pain management. Some of that  
6 research is happening, and our veterans are seeing the  
7 benefits of that.

8           But we need leadership at the top, and to have someone  
9 under consideration that is talking about privatization  
10 before they even come to their first hearing for approval, I  
11 think is a real tragedy for our veterans and could be very,  
12 very disruptive to our care. So I just want to put that out  
13 there.

14          I appreciate you all coming. Thank you for your great  
15 testimony, and we will follow through.

16          Thank you, and I yield back.

17          Chairman Roe. I thank the gentlelady for yielding.

18          And I want to apologize for being a little late. I had  
19 another, as most of us do--if I could be at three places at  
20 once, I would be at three places at once, but I could not.

21          I want to thank Mr. Van Ess for coming by my office  
22 yesterday and spending a little time with me. I appreciate  
23 that very much.

24          Mr. Van Ess. Thank you, sir.

25          Chairman Roe. I want to run through very quickly--and

1 it has been stated that this is a bipartisan committee that  
2 gets things done, and I just want to very quickly run  
3 through just a partial list in the last 14 months of what  
4 this Committee has accomplished.

5 The Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act.  
6 The Secretary said he needed that to help run the VA. Much  
7 of Mr. Arrington's issue, I think can be dealt with this.

8 Appeals modernization. Look, we have all known people  
9 who have waited years to get their appeals adjudicated. I  
10 mean forever, it seems like, 8, 9, 10. It is amazing some  
11 of the stories that I hear. We are trying to speed that up.  
12 We have got a process. We will keep doing oversight on  
13 that.

14 A bill that I am extremely proud of and used in 1975  
15 and 1976 was the GI Bill. I used that when I got out of the  
16 U.S. Army, and I am today grateful. To this day, I am  
17 grateful that my country invested \$300 a month in me for 2  
18 years. I had a young family. It helped me a lot at that  
19 time. So I thank my country for that right here in front of  
20 you all.

21 Now that bill was sunsetted at 10 years. I could only  
22 use it for 10 years. It was then sunsetted 15. Now it is  
23 forever.

24 Our Purple Heart recipients, if you get a Purple Heart,  
25 you spilled blood for this country. You deserve the GI

1 Bill, and you get the GI Bill now.

2 Our Gold Star, our reservists. I did not serve--look,  
3 you know, we have a volunteer Army. I actually volunteered.  
4 I just realized that. I volunteered to go to the mailbox  
5 one day, and I got a draft notice, so that is how I  
6 volunteered.

7 [Laughter.]

8 Chairman Roe. And our volunteers now, these people  
9 that serve, I did not serve in the military; they drafted  
10 everybody they needed when I was in the service. Basically,  
11 now our guardsmen and reservists are right alongside our  
12 frontline troops, and we have upped their benefit in that.  
13 For that, I am very proud.

14 We have had three votes on the Choice Act. Right now,  
15 the VA provides 36 percent of all VA clinical care, which I  
16 am very much interested in, is provided outside the VA.

17 Two of us, Dr. Wenstrup and I, just got back late  
18 Monday night from spending 2 days in Puerto Rico, going over  
19 that, and there is some shout-outs down there. You hear a  
20 lot of bad things the VA does. The VA hospital down there  
21 opened up its doors to every citizen down there. They had a  
22 generator that worked all the time. The equipment worked  
23 there. In the other hospitals, much of it did not. They  
24 opened their doors to the people in need, and for that, we  
25 need a shout-out for the VA for doing that.



1           Telehealth. That is another new tool that is in the  
2 toolbox of our medical provides. We just passed a bill this  
3 year to expand telehealth across State lines for our VA  
4 providers. Adult day care was mentioned just a minute ago,  
5 which will be a tremendous help.

6           Opioids, Ms. Kuster talked. We are working on other  
7 pain management.

8           Our job--and I can tell you, one of the things, if I  
9 can get done as the Chairman of this Committee, with the  
10 help of everyone else is Blue Water Navy. I want to get  
11 that done, and I am working. I can tell you I am working--

12           [Applause.]

13           Chairman Roe. The Caregiver Program, we just had a  
14 great hearing and a roundtable recently on that. that is  
15 moving forward, and it is going to get done.

16           So two things are going to happen, I think, this year,  
17 big things like we did last year.

18           I think, as Mr. Walz mentioned, there has been a lot of  
19 controversy around--I think Dr. Shulkin has done a bang-up  
20 job. We certainly on both sides of the aisle have worked  
21 with him very well, and I would certainly hate to see him  
22 leave that position. We have a great working relationship.  
23 He understands that needs, and as has been mentioned, this  
24 is a huge organization. 370,000 employees, that is bigger  
25 than anything that anybody that has ever sat in that seat

1 has ever managed, I can promise you, and he does understand  
2 that, that the VA, just like I understand the VA from the  
3 examining room up--not from the top down, but I understand  
4 how the health care is provided.

5 I have provided it for over 30 years to people, so I  
6 know how it works, and I know when you pass bills that make  
7 it harder for that to work--I have seen that happen. We  
8 have done that and made it harder for our doctors and nurses  
9 to provide.

10 One other thing that was mentioned was the shortages,  
11 staff shortages, tremendous problems in Puerto Rico. They  
12 just have a tough time keeping people there, but it is a  
13 nationwide problem, I will tell you. It is not just VA. My  
14 own hospital at home in rural east Tennessee, in Johnson  
15 City, Tennessee, and Kingsport, Tennessee, they are  
16 advertising across the country for nurses now. So we have a  
17 shortage of medical people, not just at VA but everywhere.

18 I want to thank each and every one of you, and I want  
19 to apologize to those of you who I did not get to hear your  
20 testimony. But I appreciate every one of you and every  
21 person in this room for taking time, your time and effort  
22 and money to come up here and testify on behalf of our  
23 Nation's veterans, and I salute you for that.

24 Mr. Walz, do you have any closing comments?

25 Mr. Walz. No. I agree with the Chairman.

1 Chairman Roe. I appreciate your being here.

2 They have got something else for me to read, so if I  
3 can find the right page, I will get to it.

4 I want to thank everyone, as I have stated, and for all  
5 of you who have come from across the country, and I ask  
6 unanimous consent that all members have 5 legislative days  
7 in which to revise and extend their remarks and add  
8 extraneous material.

9 Hearing no objection, so ordered.

10 Meeting is adjourned. Thank you.

11 [Applause.]

12 [Whereupon, at 11:44 a.m., the joint committees were  
13 adjourned.]

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