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Statement of Chairman Bernard Sanders

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of DAV
February 26, 2013

"Thank you, Chairman Miller. I am pleased to be here today and to join you and our colleagues in welcoming the Disabled American Veterans. I would also like to thank each and every veteran here today for their honorable military service.

This is my first hearing as Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and I am delighted that I can spend this important personal milestone with all of you. I can tell you that the Senate Committee has plans for an aggressive agenda this Session – and I look forward to DAV's continued input into the legislative process.

Let me begin by thanking DAV for being here today. The work done by the Disabled American Veterans is so critically important to our nation's veterans, and their families, in local communities as well as on a national level. DAV provides expert advice and assistance with claims; ensures veterans have access to quality medical care by providing transportation to VA's medical facilities; and advocates for all disabled veterans. For this, I am grateful. The knowledge DAV gains from its daily interactions with veterans is an invaluable resource for members of these Committees and the Congress as a whole, as we continue to address the issues that are so important to our nation's veterans and their families.

Again, I want to thank all of you for what you do on behalf of our nation's veterans and for being here today to help highlight the issues that need the Congress' continued attention. I would also like to acknowledge DAV members who are here today from Vermont: Robert Nicodemus, Aura-Lee Nicodemus, Richard Bugbee, Roberta Bugbee and Department Commander Bob Pixley. Thank you for traveling to be with us today and for all the work you do on behalf of Vermont's veterans.

We are all too familiar with the challenges facing VA, and often allow them to cast a shadow over VA's successes. So I think it is important to take a moment to acknowledge some of the very good things that VA is doing every day. For example, VA has one of the highest reported rates of patient

satisfaction in the country and that is no small feat; VA continues to acknowledge that some exposures cause long-term health consequences – we saw this with the Secretary’s granting service-connection for conditions related to Agent Orange exposure; VA has taken an aggressive stance on homelessness by taking on the ambitious goal of eliminating veterans’ homeless by 2015; and through its world class research program, VA is making significant advances in health care for veterans.

I believe the claims backlog is one of the most significant challenges VA faces. To VA’s credit, they have been working aggressively to overcome this backlog by creating a more efficient paperless system, called the Veterans’ Benefit Management System, and are now processing more claims than ever before. In the last three years, VA has processed more than 1 million claims to include more than 250,000 claims for Agent Orange exposure. At the same time, more than a million new claims have been filed in each of those three years, all while VA tackles the daunting task of bringing its workforce up to speed on the new system and eliminating some of VBMS’ technical issues. So clearly, there is room for improvement.

That is why we must continue to work together to find innovative solutions until we have truly created a 21st century claims system that provides our veterans with the timely and accurate decisions they deserve. I don’t want one veteran to be discouraged from reaching out to VA for help in the future because of a negative experience with the claims system. This is one area where we can use DAV’s expertise.

The significance of this last point is made even clearer when we see the high rates of suicide among veterans. In recent years, we have made great strides in terms of understanding and acknowledging the difficulty servicemembers have in dealing with the invisible wounds of war, and in developing and offering more effective treatments. VA has hired more mental health providers, but there are still not enough and our work is far from complete.

I do not believe that there is a “one size fits all” treatment for PTSD and other mental health conditions. We must tailor these treatments to fit the individual and expand the types of treatments available to include complementary and alternative medicine options. I also believe VA should reach out to local communities and partner with Federally Qualified Health Clinics and Community Health Clinics that can provide quality mental health services closer to where veterans live.

We have made a promise to our veterans that, after sacrificing so much for our country, they and their families will be taken care of when they return home. If even one veteran feels that he or she does not have anyone to reach out to or that the right type of treatment is not available, then we have failed in our promise.

We must make outreach a top priority, so that veterans no longer struggle needlessly because they did not know help was available. In talking with veterans and veterans' advocates, I am hearing that there are many veterans who are unaware of their earned benefits. I recently visited with a former Navy Seal who was unaware that he was eligible to enroll in the VA health care system after his military service in Iraq, Afghanistan and other locations. We must recognize that we cannot rely solely on social media and websites to communicate with veterans about their benefits. Local efforts must be put into place as well – with VA visiting Senior Centers and other areas where older veterans congregate.

Outreach is particularly important when it comes to women veterans. The face of the veterans' population is rapidly changing; there are over 2.2 million women veterans today and the number of women who receive care through VHA has doubled since 2000. With greater rates of women serving than ever before, we can only expect for this number to grow.

Women face a unique set of health challenges, challenges that VA is currently developing a capacity to address. Perhaps the most pressing women's health issues are those that stem from Military Sexual Trauma. MST is epidemic, with one in five women veterans subject to this trauma over the course of their service. It is up to VA to see that these veterans are provided with the physical and mental health care that they desperately need.

Recently, the White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont opened a Women Veterans' Comprehensive Care Clinic. It is absolutely beautiful primarily because of group of local women veterans assisted in the design, as well as the interior design of the clinic.

As the debate over the national debt continues to drag on, we in Congress cannot forget the debt we owe to veterans and their families – after sacrificing for our well-being, the least we can do is ensure theirs. While VA is exempt from sequestration, I remain committed to protecting VA from future cuts that would hamper its ability to adequately serve veterans.

Some in Congress believe the Chained Consumer Price Index is a viable option to battle the deficit crisis. This careless attempt to balance the budget on the backs of disabled veterans is wrong. Adoption of Chained CPI would substantially cut the Department of Veterans Affairs benefits of more than three million veterans and survivors. Such actions would be an injustice to the honorable men and women who have proudly served our nation.

Any attempt to balance the budget on the backs of those who served and their families is a non-starter. Asking for disabled veterans to make due with less, in order to protect tax loopholes for the wealthiest Americans is beyond the pale. It is unconscionable. Soon, the Committee will have the opportunity to consider the President's budget for this coming fiscal year. We will not accept anything that fails to fulfill the promises we have made to our nation's veterans and their families.

Clearly, veterans face a tremendous series of issues, far more than they should ever have to. No veteran, family member or caregiver should ever have to fight the Federal government to receive their earned and well deserved benefits.

Commander Polzin, again welcome and I look forward to hearing your testimony today and to working together in the future. Thank you again DAV members for your continued service in your local communities and your steadfast commitment to those who have served in the United States Armed Forces.”