

BUSINESS MEETING

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2015

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:02 a.m., in room SR-418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Johnny Isakson, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Isakson, Moran, Boozman, Heller, Cassidy, Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Blumenthal, Brown, Hirono, and Manchin.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHNNY ISAKSON, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM GEORGIA

Chairman ISAKSON. I call this meeting of the Veterans' Affairs Committee to order.

I am Johnny Isakson and I am happy to convene this first meeting as Chairman. I am very pleased to have Richard Blumenthal as the Ranking Member. He is a good friend, a great member. And Joe Manchin knows when to walk in. He knows how to make an entrance. He is the newest Democratic Member of the Committee. Joe, we are happy to have you here.

Senator MANCHIN. Senator, it is good to be with you.

Chairman ISAKSON. I appreciate your being here today very much and appreciate your leadership.

Let me make an opening statement. I will then turn to Senator Blumenthal to make an opening statement, and hopefully by the time we have done those, we will have eight Members of the Committee present. That is what we need to have a vote: eight Members, with at least one of them being a minority Member. So we have action we need to take, and it is very important that we get it done. Everybody who is a staff member to a Senator, if you have a Senator that said he was coming or she was coming and they are not here yet, keep tabs on them so they get here as quick as they can, because we can complete this meeting very quickly if we get everybody here.

Let me start off by saying it is indeed an honor for me to be the Chairman of the Committee, and I look forward to working with Richard almost as a co-chairman to try and share information to make sure we are looking out for the veterans of the United States of America and making the VA a better service.

I am going to change some of the procedures with the Committee. One, we are going to operate under the early-bird rule, which means Joe Manchin will be the first person called on for statements or the first person called on for questions after the

Ranking Member and I have had our statements to make, because we are going to go in order of presence. I believe being punctual makes a lot of difference, and if you are here on time, you get to speak on time, and then you can be gone.

The second thing is we are not going to do opening statements for anybody other than the Chairman and the Ranking Member. We are going to do closing statements. One of the things that has always frustrated me is we will have witnesses—here comes another one of our new Members, Governor Rounds, Governor Tillis, or Speaker Tillis. I am sorry. We have got Governors, Speakers, special forces. Welcome. We are glad that you are here.

It has always bothered me that we would have opening statements by every Member of the Committee, have witnesses sitting there having to listen to all of them, and then when we make our opening statements, we leave and the witness is talking to an empty room. So I think if we do closing statements, then that way the Members will be able to close out after the hearing, and we will let them sit there and listen to our closing statements, but it will make things run a lot faster.

We have some rules to adopt which I will share with you in just a few minutes when we have the quorum here to vote, and we have some other things to adopt. But I want to make a point. I want to tell you all why I am so excited about this. I want to dedicate my service in this Committee—and I am going to ask all of you to do the same thing to a veteran of your choosing. But I want to remember Lieutenant Noah Harris who passed away in Iraq on June 17, 2005. He was known as the “Beanie Baby Soldier.” He left after 9/11/2001 as a cheerleader at the University of Georgia and volunteered for an ROTC commission, was in Iraq 2 years later, and died in his second tour in Iraq, and died doing it on his own, going to help Iraqi soldiers who were pinned down by the enemy.

Noah’s parents, Rick and Lucy Harris, are two parents that are just wonderful individuals who have used his life as a tribute to the veterans that have served our country. Noah became my pen pal in 2005 when I first served in the Senate, and he would send me e-mails from the front in Iraq, and he would sign every e-mail that he sent me and he signed every piece of mail he sent to his parents with the following letters: “I-D-W-I-C,” which I have—I will show Richard. I have a coin here with that on there. He always said, “I do what I can.”

So my service as Chairman of this Committee is to tell you I am going to do what I can—and I hope each one of you will do the same thing—to see to it that the Veterans Choice bill is put into place at the Veterans Administration and that our veterans are getting the best services possible.

We have a lot of good employees in the Veterans Administration. We have a lot of good physicians, a lot of good paraprofessionals, a lot of good logistics people, a lot of good imaging people. But I want to tell you something. My experience has been that, of the 314,000 people in veterans health care, there are some who fold their arms knowing we are going to be gone in 2 years and there will be another group coming in so they try to wait us out.

What we proposed in the Veterans Choice bill is a way to bring veterans better services at a quicker period of time and bring about

choice, to use Medicare-approved doctors as a force multiplier for Secretary McDonald and the VA health system, and to make sure that our veterans get the best services possible. There are some problems with its implementation, but we want to make sure that the Veterans Choice bill is not only the law of the land, but it is the practice of the land at the VA.

Now, another thing I am going to do that is a little bit different than the way we operated in the past, you know, anybody can have a hearing with members of the VA sitting out there giving us testimony, telling us what they want us to hear. But we are going to go to the VA and have a lot of our meetings. In fact, our next meeting is going to be the third day of February where we are going to do the stand-up at Secretary McDonald's office in the VA building here in Washington. That is when he has all his department heads come up and do a stand-up to tell what mistakes they did yesterday and what they corrected, what things they did that were successes, and what they are doing, and what they need to do to do their job.

I have always felt like if I am out of sight, out of mind, nobody cares what I think. But if they know I care enough to go to them, if we go to them and ask questions and have the Committee there, then we are going to be a better Committee and the Veterans Choice bill is going to get implemented because they know we are watching.

I intend for us to do at least two field trips, one to one of the hospitals that has had terrible construction problems, either Denver or Orlando, where the cost overruns are unbelievable. And I think this Committee owes it to the veterans of America to go to Phoenix and see what has been done in Phoenix to correct those problems. So I am going to be working on organizing those. I am going to invite every Member of the Committee to go, and I hope every Member that can will do so, because I think if we are no longer out of sight and out of mind, we will be a much more effective Committee in seeing to it that the Veterans Choice bill works.

With that said, I am going to—have we got eight yet?

Ms. MEREDITH. We need one more.

Chairman ISAKSON. One more, and then we will go to—but I am going to turn it over to Richard Blumenthal, the Ranking Member, to make his remarks.

**STATEMENT OF SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL,
RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Senator Isakson, and thank you for that very significant introduction to our work on this Committee.

I cannot imagine a member of the Senate with whom I would rather serve than Johnny Isakson in this capacity. His dedication and hard work on behalf of our veterans is unmatched by anyone I know, and so I am deeply honored to serve with him as Ranking Member.

Also I want to thank Chairman Murray and Chairman Sanders, his two predecessors, for the great work that they have done, and welcome especially the new Members of this Committee. This Committee, in my view, just a personal view, is the most important in

the entire Senate because it enables us to really honor an obligation and debt that we have to men and women who have served and sacrificed to our Nation. And it also offers us a unique opportunity for bipartisanship. This Committee, in my experience, has been the most bipartisan of any in the U.S. Senate.

So we have a tremendous opportunity ahead. And I am also very pleased that we have among our new members actual veterans who have served, as you are well aware, which has been, in my view, a gap of the U.S. Senate membership—that so few of our members have actually been veterans.

We have a unique opportunity, and we have a tremendous obligation. We are at a pivotal point, in my view, in honoring the sacred trust that we have to our veterans. It is a pivotal point because we are now emerging from a crisis that has enveloped the Department of Veterans Affairs. We are emerging from a crisis of trust and credibility, and new leadership at the VA is working hard to restore trust and credibility. But it is still very much a work in progress with ongoing investigations, disciplinary action, and positive steps in the right direction to assure greater accountability to our veterans.

There is also new legislation, and Senator Isakson is absolutely correct that one of our tasks over the next 2 years will be to assure effective implementation of the Choice Act and effective oversight and scrutiny, and I join him in the priority that he will give to those areas.

It is a simple, stark fact, and staggering to me, that this Nation will face an unprecedented number of veterans coming out of our military as we downsize over the next year or so. Many of them will come back to civilian life with invisible wounds of war, Post Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injury. And the suicide rate of veterans, 22 a day, is simply unacceptable. It reflects the failure to deal with those invisible wounds of war, as well as the horrendous visible wounds that many come back with.

So we are failing to keep pace and failing to keep faith with many of our veterans, and this Committee will have an enormous opportunity as well as obligation to make sure that we fulfill those obligations in areas where the needs are well documented: veterans housing, the claims backlog, the toxic chemical exposure, and the DOD and VA collaboration, the interoperability of its information systems, for example, and, of course, the continuing need to attract and retain qualified professionals, including psychiatrists and physicians.

So I look forward to working on these challenges with you, Mr. Chairman, and other Members of the Committee on both sides of the aisle, and I believe that we have a lot of work, but we have a lot of good people dedicated to getting it done, and we will get it done.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. I look forward to working with you.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Richard.

We now have a quorum, so we are going to go straight to our business. We are going to operate the Committee under the early-bird rule, which means you will be called on for recognition for

questions or statements based on the order in which you arrived. I think that it is very important to be punctual, and I want to have as many people as possible stay when we have witnesses so they do so.

We have a new staff director. I have appointed Tom Bowman. Tom, where are you?

Mr. BOWMAN. Right here, sir.

Chairman ISAKSON. Tom is going to be the staff director for the majority. Our door is going to be open to you 24/7. I tried to demonstrate in preparing for this meeting that we are going to share every bit of information with the Democratic side at least 72 hours before we act so they know what is going on. We did that. Richard and I worked together well yesterday with some issues that we would have confronted otherwise if we had not. So we are going to always have an open-door policy, always have free flow of information.

As I have said many times in Atlanta at the VA hospital, we do not just have Republican veterans and have Democratic veterans, we have American veterans. This Committee is about serving the veterans of the United States of America regardless of their race, creed, color, nation of origin, or their political affiliation. This is going to be the most bipartisan Committee in the U.S. Senate operating because those that recognize the need for those who sacrificed themselves for our country need to be rewarded with the best possible health care available and the best services from the Veterans Administration.

With that said, we have a quorum.

We now have Dr. Cassidy (Senator from Louisiana). I think I recognized all the other new Members except you. We are glad to have you. Dan Sullivan, we are glad to have you here. Thom Tillis, we are glad to have you. I promoted you from Speaker to Governor—or demoted you from Speaker to Governor, whichever it was. Governor Rounds (Senator Mike Rounds from South Dakota), we are glad to have you here. And, Joe Manchin, a great member of the Senate, we are glad to have you here.

The first order of business, before we go to the Clay Hunt bill, is to adopt the rules of the Committee. They have been circulated more than 72 hours. Every Committee Member has had them. If anybody has a comment—if they do not have a comment, we will adopt the rules.

[A motion was made and seconded.]

Chairman ISAKSON. It has been moved and seconded that the rules be adopted. All in favor, say aye?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Chairman ISAKSON. The rules are adopted.

The second thing we have to do is adopt the budget.

Now, I will be glad to go through it line by line with each of you and call on staff, but rest assured it is enough budget for us to do the things I outlined in my opening remarks or whatever Richard and I feel like we need to do, so I would appreciate a motion on adopting the budget.

[A motion was made and seconded.]

Chairman ISAKSON. A motion has been made and seconded. All in favor, say aye?

[A chorus of ayes.]

Chairman ISAKSON. Any opposed?

[No response.]

Chairman ISAKSON. The budget is adopted.

Now, the third thing that we are going to do and the most important thing is the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention bill, and I am going to call on Ranking Member Blumenthal to make the presentation before we vote. But I want to tell you what we are doing, and I want everybody to listen to this closely.

I made the determination when the House passed this bill last Thursday night—and it is a democratically introduced bill by a Democrat from Minnesota, Mr. Walz, in the House of Representatives. We are taking up the House-introduced Democratic bill that passed unanimously on the floor of the House. I believe we are going to pass it here unanimously today, and it is going to go to the floor where I hope it will be UC'd. I have already talked with the Leader, and this will be the first act of this Congress to go to the President of the United States for signature. And it could not be more important than it has been handled in such a way to recognize the importance of both parties in sponsoring it, recognize Richard as the cosponsor of the Senate-sponsored bill, which he and Senator McCain introduced. Ranking Member Burr from the Committee over the last 2 years has been on this bill. The Chairman in the House has been on the bill. So it is a bipartisan bill.

But we are adopting the Walz bill, which is identical to the Blumenthal-McCain bill. It is the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention bill, and I would like to call on the Ranking Member to make a brief explanation of the bill.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I want to personally thank you for making this our first bill and expediting it so it can be potentially the first act of this Congress that the President signs. And the sooner we can send it to his desk, the sooner we can get approval of it. And I think it reflects the bipartisan approach that I mentioned earlier, very intently on the Chairman and my part to make it bipartisan.

Senator McCain and I reintroduced it with the support and co-sponsorship of many of you here, including Senators Murray, Sanders, Tester, Brown, Hirono, Manchin, Boozman, Moran, and Sullivan. I want to thank all of you for your support of this important measure.

In a sense, the need for this legislation is reflected in the story of the person for whom it is named, Clay Hunt. He was deployed to Anbar Province near Fallujah in January 2007. He had enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2005, and was injured during his first deployment. He came back, recuperated at Twentynine Palms, and was trained as a sniper. He went to Afghanistan in his second deployment, and he returned in late 2008, honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in April 2009.

He struggled with the inadequate care afforded by his local VA hospital for the wounds of war that returned with him—Post Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injury. His mom, Susan Selke, testified before this Committee during the last session and, in heart-wrenching terms, described his struggle and the inadequate care that he received.

I am personally familiar with the needs that are reflected in this bill because a friend of mine, Justin Eldridge of southeastern Connecticut, similarly perished as a result of the invisible wounds of war, and I was very proud that his widow, Joanna Eldridge, was my guest last night at the State of the Union. Justin, like Clay Hunt, returned from combat only to lose his personal war against those same invisible wounds and inner demons and also in the face of inadequate mental health care from the local VA facility.

This bill is a downpayment on that need. It is far from the ultimate and final solution. It is the beginning of progress toward better mental health care for the VA. And it would provide, number 1, for accountability, requiring the VA to contract with an independent third party to provide impartial annual review of its mental health and suicide prevention programs in order to identify, among other things, the best practices and measure patient satisfaction. It would also increase the services available through the VA by attracting and, in fact, rewarding VA psychiatrists by giving them the option of repaying their debt. This provision would allow the VA to contribute up to \$30,000 to eligible individuals in loan repayment assistance and thereby attract more psychiatrists, grow the pool of qualified professionals who can provide the counseling and services that are so necessary.

The bill would also improve communications with veterans by establishing a Web site. It would provide for more community outreach and basically support services. And for combat veterans, it would also enable them to enroll in VA health care for 1 year. This provision is important because we have heard from numerous witnesses in this Committee that it can take some servicemembers an extended period of time when they return home to realize that they may be suffering from these invisible wounds of war.

So the provisions of this bill are a step in the right direction. I am hoping that we can build on them. Part of what we need to do in this Committee is build on the progress that is being made right now in many different areas, whether it is employment or housing, as a spur to those kinds of efforts. And I might add that this bill is welcomed and supported by the Secretary McDonald, who has told the Chairman and me that he welcomes this kind of support for the efforts that are ongoing within the VA, and certainly he is committed, as is, I think, increasingly the VA itself, to providing better mental health care for the veterans, particularly those who come back with the invisible wounds of war.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. Well, thank you, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and I want to acknowledge that the pending business before us, yesterday there were four amendments that were going to be offered by previous Chairman Sanders. He and I met yesterday afternoon, and when I explained to him the way in which I intended to operate the Committee, he kindly withdrew those amendments, so we will deal with those at a later time. What I explained to him was that I am a big believer in regular order. I do not think Rule 14— things that bypass the Committee and go straight to the floor—is the right way to do it. I think we ought to have our say in the Committee. But that means that as Chairman I have to be willing to bring bills up for debate, bring bills up for hearing, and

bring bills up for amending in the Committee. And we are going to do that.

We are not going to lose our focus on the Veterans Choice bill, but we are going to see to it we function as a Committee where everyone is engaged, everybody is involved, and we do not bypass the Committee process to get proposals to the floor of the U.S. Senate. So Bernie, when he heard that that is the way I was going to do it, realized he could have his say on his bills when he introduced them individually. I want to thank his staff and thank Bernie for the cooperation that he gave.

I thank Richard Blumenthal for his cooperation, and I know Senator Moran, Senator Boozman, and Senator Heller all had interest in the bill, but thought the greater good of getting this to the floor of the Senate then getting it to the President's desk to be signed as the first bill this year, sends the right signal for the Committee, and I want to thank them for their cooperation very much as well.

Is there any discussion?

Senator Manchin.

Senator MANCHIN. The other thing, I want to applaud both of you for making this the first priority and all of us signing on to it. When I first got here, you know, unemployment for our veterans was the most critical thing I saw happening—acclimating into the private sector when they came back. And then you look at that, and we lose 22 veterans a day to suicide—22 a day.

So we know we have serious problems, and to address this in a unanimous fashion without any debate—and I hope it will be UC'd on the floor. I think it will be. I think the President will be glad to accept this and sign this and start saying that we can function in some normal order.

So, I am just very pleased to be on this Committee. I see, Johnny, with you and Richard and your leadership and how this is moving, so I thank you and applaud you.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you.

Does anybody else have a comment?

[No response.]

Chairman ISAKSON. If not, just for the record, this bill was objected to in the Senate in December of last year because of a cost of \$22 million and because it was thought to be duplicative orders to the VA. I have worked with those that objected. The bill is paid for. The House put in a provision for fungibility within funds prorated to the VA, so there is no cost issue anymore. And certainly when you have 8,000 veterans a year committing suicide, which is more veterans than have died in all of Iraq and all of Afghanistan since we have been fighting, then you have a serious problem, and this is not duplicative. This is emergency legislation that needs to help our veterans, and I appreciate very much Senator Manchin's words. I appreciate Richard Blumenthal's words.

And if there is no other comment, we have had a request for a roll call vote, so I will ask the clerk to call the roll.

THE CLERK. Mr. Moran?

Senator MORAN. Aye.

THE CLERK. Mr. Boozman?

Senator BOOZMAN. Aye.

THE CLERK. Mr. Heller?

Senator HELLER. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Cassidy?
 Senator CASSIDY. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Rounds.
 Senator ROUNDS. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Tillis?
 Senator TILLIS. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Sullivan?
 Senator SULLIVAN. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Blumenthal?
 Senator BLUMENTHAL. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mrs. Murray?
 Senator BLUMENTHAL. Aye, by proxy.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Sanders?
 Senator BLUMENTHAL. Aye, by proxy.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Brown?
 Senator BROWN. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Tester?
 Senator BLUMENTHAL. Aye, by proxy.
 THE CLERK. Ms. Hirono?
 Senator HIRONO. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Mr. Manchin?
 Senator MANCHIN. Aye.
 THE CLERK. Chairman Isakson?
 Chairman ISAKSON. Aye.

The clerk will report the vote.

THE CLERK. On this vote, the yeas are 15, the nays are 0.

Chairman ISAKSON. The bill is adopted, and it will be sent to the floor. I want to thank the Members for their participation. I want to note this is probably the best attendance I have ever seen in a Committee of the U.S. Senate. You guys and ladies have done extremely well.

As I announced at the beginning, we were not doing opening statements anymore in this Committee. We will be doing closing statements, and we are doing it by the early-bird rule. So, the first person here was Joe Manchin. Senator Manchin, if you have a statement to make, you are recognized.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JOE MANCHIN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WEST VIRGINIA**

Senator MANCHIN. Very quickly. Mr. Chairman, again, thank you, and I am excited and honored to be serving on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, and I would like to thank Senator Isakson and Senator Blumenthal for their leadership. I have no doubt that we will do great things in the 114th Congress.

Our Nation's veterans helped build this country and have paid a tremendous cost to keep America safe and strong. It is a true honor to represent them in this Committee and to work toward ensuring they receive what has been promised them.

West Virginia has one of the highest percentage of veterans per capita as any State, and I know we are all proud of our veterans. And those of us who have been Governors have been able to have a special relationship with our veterans and our National Guard, and those who have served in leadership in the legislature the

same. I have always said that Congress has to set its priorities based on its values, and we certainly value our Nation's veterans. And we have to prioritize the important work this Committee does to support them.

An example is the veterans' unemployment, and I just spoke about that, but we still have 4.7 percent of veterans unemployed; however, 6.9 percent of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, well above the national average, are still unemployed. These are dedicated and hard-working men and women who are skilled leaders, deserving a good job. That is why, with my good friend Senator Mark Kirk, when we first got here, we looked around and we started—and I would encourage all of you to be a member of the Congressional Veterans Jobs Caucus. If you want to help a veteran, hire a veteran. I would encourage all of you to make sure you have veterans hired in your offices, whether it be here in Washington or at home. Give that a high priority, and we can set a high mark and an example for all employers.

It is my hope, Mr. Chairman, that we will focus on the issue and hold hearings to better understand the challenges facing our veterans, as you have done today and what we are going to be challenged throughout these long fights and vigilance against terrorism. While we focus on jobs, we must also ensure that our veterans' families have open access to the benefits and services that they deserve and have worked for and earned.

That is why I am also proud to support the bill we just passed out of here, and I am sure it will go very quickly through the procedures as far as with the Senate and sent to the President. As I said before, we lose an average of 22 veterans a day, and you have said over 8,000. It is unheard of and it is unacceptable.

On top of that, we have more veterans homeless than ever before. That is unacceptable in this great country. There is so much more that we have to do.

This bill creates critical life-saving programs for our veterans struggling with PTSD and depression. They deserve our help, and I am honored to be part of this, Mr. Chairman, and thank you so much for taking the lead on this.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much.

Senator Rounds?

Senator ROUNDS. Mr. Chairman, I do not have a statement.

Chairman ISAKSON. Senator Rounds passes.

Senator Hirono, the beauty of the Committee.

**STATEMENT OF HON. MAZIE HIRONO,
U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII**

Senator HIRONO. I do not know what to say to that. Well, thank you. I am really honored to be on this Committee, and supporting veterans is a bipartisan issue.

I am really glad that this is the first bill that we are moving out of this Senate and in the House. And as we go forward, I am looking forward to your leadership and that of Ranking Member Blumenthal to do all the things that we need to do to support our veterans because of the kinds of statistics that Senator Joe Manchin just reviewed. Mahalo.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you, Senator Hirono.

Senator Tillis?

**STATEMENT OF HON. THOM TILLIS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA**

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Senator Blumenthal, for bringing this forward. It is a pleasure to have the first vote go to the Senate floor to be a bipartisan vote that places priority on veterans. As a member from a State with nearly 900,000 veterans, this is a very important issue to me. There are many others. I look forward to your continued leadership and more progress and more installments that we can make on the repayment of our debt to our men and women who have served this country.

Thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. Thank you very much.
Senator Brown?

**STATEMENT OF HON. SHERROD BROWN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM OHIO**

Senator BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the good work already that you and Senator Blumenthal have done. I have been on this Committee since 2007 and consider it a high honor to get to serve those who serve us. We all know people, friends of people, if not people, as Senator Blumenthal said, soldiers who have committed suicide, who have dealt with so many emotional problems of the cost of war, and this Committee needs to always be very serious about that.

I am pleased with our new VA Secretary, who is an Ohioan and has already made a difference in that agency. I am particularly pleased with the new Chair of this Committee. I have served with Senator Isakson on the Ethics Committee. He has co-chaired it with Senator Boxer and done it always fairly and evenhandedly in a job that he did not ask for. This one I know he asked for, so he will do it even better.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. Hopefully this one will be a lot easier.
Senator Sullivan?

**STATEMENT OF HON. DAN SULLIVAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA**

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Senator Blumenthal. I would agree with your comments about this being the most important Committee in the U.S. Senate. I am very honored to be here and to start to rebuild what I think is critical, which is the sacred trust and responsibility that we have in the Congress and the Federal Government to our veterans, and we need to prove that. So I look forward to working with all the Members of the Committee and certainly am proud to represent Alaska, which I believe has the highest number of veterans per capita of any State in the United States, and so I am very honored to be here representing them.

Thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. And we are honored to have a veteran like yourself on the Committee. Thank you very much.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you.
Chairman ISAKSON. Senator Moran?

**STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS**

Senator MORAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Senator Sullivan, welcome to the Committee. Thank you for your service to our country. We are honored to have a veteran on this Committee as we try to protect and serve those who served us.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for your remarks today. Senator Blumenthal, thank you for your remarks, although I was offended when you suggested that you could not think of a better person to work with. You are my Ranking Member on another committee.

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. As soon as I said it, I knew that I had committed a grave error.

Senator MORAN. And, Senator Isakson, Chairman Isakson, I would encourage you to have our Phoenix visit sooner rather than later.

Chairman ISAKSON. Cool weather.

Senator MORAN. This is a good season to be in Arizona.

I have been a Member of the Veterans Committee since I came to the Congress, so I am an 18-year member in the House and Senate Veterans Committees. In my House days, I chaired the Subcommittee on Health Care. I have always asked to serve on the Veterans Committee. I am not a veteran, but I grew up with Vietnam in the back of my life and wanted to make certain that the things that I saw happen in those days never happened again, and that regardless of war, regardless of what anyone is asked how to serve their country, that they are honored and that our commitments are kept. So I look so much forward to working with the Members of this Committee under your leadership to see that we accomplish what our task is.

I am pleased to be a sponsor of the Senate version of the bill that just passed the Committee. Among all the testimony that I have heard as a member of the Veterans Committee in those 18 years, the mothers' testimony was perhaps the most compelling that I have ever heard. And what I took away from that testimony was the realization that while all of us decry the bureaucracy, the paperwork, slipping through the cracks that occurs at the VA, what those mothers reminded us of is that there is a real consequence. It is not just bureaucracy; it is not just another problem at the VA. When the VA fails our servicemen and -women, when it fails our veterans, the potential is a loss of a life. And both mothers indicated that they believed that their sons would be alive if the VA had responded in a way that was appropriate and necessary. But it did not happen.

And so our responsibilities certainly are to rid the VA of its bureaucracy, but it takes on new importance to me and I assume to all of us when we realize that failure to do so means the loss of life. So I am pleased that our first step certainly is this piece of legislation.

Mr. Chairman, I was encouraged to hear about your intention to have ongoing and thorough oversight of the Department of Vet-

erans Affairs. I indicated to the new Secretary when he first testified that one of the occurrences over the last several years, it seemed to me, was we had a VA—we have always had problems at the VA, but it seemed like the attitude had changed as if they were helpless to solve their problems, to find the solutions. And I want to work side by side with you and Members of this Committee to see that Secretary McDonald has the tools necessary for him to succeed in his mission to change the nature of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I certainly was a supporter of the Reform Act, the Choice Act. For my entire time in Congress, I have been pushing the VA to provide services closer to home or to give the veteran individual choice as to where to receive those services, and this is another step in that direction. But I would tell you that in all my conversations at home, even when it is not intended to be a veterans audience, the conversations continue to be about how the VA is failing to meet the needs of those who served our country.

Recently I was in Junction City, Kansas. It is a community that is near Fort Riley. I was touring a manufacturing plant that asked me to visit with their employees. Not a single question among those 50 employees related to anything other than how the VA is not meeting their needs. There was not any question or conversation about a business issue, about any unemployment issue. It was all about the VA failing to meet the needs and how they are falling through the cracks.

I raise this only because, as we know from this legislation, our work can be about life and death, but there are many hundreds of thousands of veterans across our country who are desperately seeking the assistance that they earned and deserve, and it is our task to make certain that the Department of Veterans Affairs provides that, that quality of care and that compassion to meet the needs of those who served us.

I want to be your ally. I am pleased to be seated so close to you, Mr. Chairman, and I look forward to working with you and Senator Blumenthal as we accomplish our goals.

Chairman ISAKSON. Well, I thank you, Senator Moran. I thank you for your remarks, and I want to underscore what I said in my opening remarks. There are a lot of great people in the VA health services, but there are some that fold their arms and say, "We will go away. There will be a new Committee in 2 years. Implementing change is not something we want to do." And we want to change the culture and the attitude where it is a can-do attitude and we get all the frogs in the wheelbarrow and we are all going in the same direction, and we are going in the same direction for one reason, and that is to see to it our veterans get the health care services they deserve.

Senator MORAN. Mr. Chairman, if you can allow me to intrude, let me also say that there are a number of veterans who continue to compliment the service that they receive at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Chairman ISAKSON. Absolutely.

Senator MORAN. And so while I am concerned about those who do not, there are many people who work every day at trying to take care of our veterans and meet their needs, and in many instances

they are successful. We want to reward and encourage those folks and make certain that the rest of them receive that quality of care.
Chairman ISAKSON. Senator Boozman.

**STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN BOOZMAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARKANSAS**

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and it really is an honor to serve on this Committee. This is probably the most bipartisan Committee in Congress, again, just the common need of trying to serve our veterans.

This is a great step in the right direction. I have visited with several of you. We have had hearings in the past. We need to get this step in the right direction done. But it is only a step in the right direction, something that I know that all of us are committed to continuing through this next Congress. We have done this. We need to continue to identify things that we can do as a Committee to help the VA as we help those that, you know, for a variety of different reasons are having trouble in this particular area.

So I look forward to many hearings in the future concerning this and, again, just continuing to work on it so that we can help those in need.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman ISAKSON. And I very much appreciate your long-standing commitment on the issue of suicide. You and I have worked together a lot on that, and we will continue to do so, and this is a step, but only a step, in the right direction.

Last, but certainly not least, Senator Heller.

**STATEMENT OF HON. DEAN HELLER,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEVADA**

Senator HELLER. Mr. Chairman, first of all, I want to thank you and the Ranking Member for bringing this piece of legislation forward today, and we would be thrilled if it was the first piece of legislation signed by the President. I do think that sends the right message, and it is the right issue.

I also admire the mothers who came before this Committee last Congress to tell the stories of their sons. And I know it took a tremendous amount of courage for them to do so, and I hope that this bill helps turn that tide for other veterans out there that may be facing the same problem.

Second, I am honored to be back on this Committee for the 114th Congress. Serving on this Committee has always been a priority for me, not only because my father and brother served, but also because Nevada has 300,000 veterans. The veterans organizations in my State are a passionate group of people who are truly dedicated to ensuring that fellow veterans and all future servicemembers are cared for.

Last Congress, after it came to light that veterans were mistreated at the VA facilities across the Nation, this Committee came together and fulfilled our oversight responsibility to hold the VA responsible. I was proud to be part of the Committee at such a crucial time, and I am pleased that Chairman Isakson has committed to continuing this oversight and ensuring the Choice Act is implemented properly for our veterans.

However, our work on this Committee is nowhere near complete. There are many other issues our veterans are facing beyond just appointment wait times at VA health care facilities. As I have stated during every Committee hearing, I believe the disabilities claims backlog is one of the most pressing issues our veterans are facing. The VA made a commitment to end the backlog by 2015 so that no veteran waits more than 125 days for their claims to be completed. Yet today, as we are here today, in my homestate of Nevada nearly 4,000 veterans are waiting longer than 125 days, and the Reno VA regional office remains one of the worst in the Nation.

Across the country, 245,000 veterans are also languishing in the VA's claims backlog. That is why in 2013 I started the VA Claims Backlog Working Group, along with Senator Casey, so that we could come up with some solutions to fix the VA backlog permanently. Together, the working group developed a VA Backlog Working Group report and legislation which Members of this Committee, including Ranking Member Blumenthal, Senator Moran, and Senator Tester, all joined in supporting.

While some of the solutions in this bill were implemented by the VA or were passed by Congress, there are many reforms that still need to be made to ensure that the claims process moves into the 21st century. I look forward to continuing to work with Senator Casey and my other colleagues to reintroduce this bill and report so that the VA has the tools it needs to eliminate this backlog.

I also think this Committee has an opportunity to renew its focus on caring for our women veterans. Given that the number of women veterans will be increasing in the years to come, the VA must do its part to ensure that the VA facilities are meeting their needs. I have been working with a colleague to address many of the issues facing women veterans through legislation, and I hope it is a topic that this Committee can have a hearing on in the months to come.

Last, I remain committed to advocating on behalf of the issues facing Nevada's veterans locally. This includes the availability of rural care, transportation to VA facilities, waiting times at the Reno and Las Vegas medical centers, construction of a new VA clinic in Pahrump and Laughlin, among many other priorities.

Again, we have a lot of work ahead of us on this Committee to truly keep the commitments our Nation has made to care for those who have served and sacrificed. The best part of this Committee is that it has a strong history of bipartisanship, so I look forward to working with the members on both sides of the aisle to achieve this goal.

Mr. Chairman, thank you.

Chairman ISAKSON. Well, thank you, Senator Heller, and I want to thank every Member for their very competent remarks.

I think everybody listening would understand that there is not a Member of this Committee that is not committed to our goal. We are committed to see to it that our veterans get the best health care possible.

And I want to thank the staff members for getting their Senators here on time today. This was a remarkable achievement. You all deserve a lot of credit, because this is how a Committee meeting can run if we all are on time and get our business done.

With that said, I do not think I have left anything out. Is there any other thing for the good of the order?

[No response.]

Chairman ISAKSON. If not, the meeting is adjourned. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[Whereupon, at 10:41 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]