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HEARING ON:
2014 LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 5, 2014

United States Senate,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
and
United States House of Representative,
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:00 a.m.,
in Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Bernard
Sanders, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Senators Present: Senators Sanders, Blumenthal,
Hirono, Johanns, and Boozman.

Representatives Present: Mr. Miller, Huelskamp,
Coffman, Walorski, Michaud, Takano, Brownley, Kirkpatrick,
O'Rourke and Walz.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN SANDERS

Chairman Sanders. Good morning.

[A chorus of good morning.]

Chairman Sanders. Let me thank all of you for being
here. As American citizens, I want to thank all of you for
your service to our country and I want to thank the VFW for

1 the extraordinarily wonderful work it does in representing
2 America's veterans. So, thank you for being here.

3 I want to thank at Commander Thien for your outstanding
4 work and we look forward to having a productive and
5 important hearing.

6 I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the VFW
7 members who are here from the State of Vermont. Vito
8 Dimarco, Ronald Tallman, Russell Bibins, and Brenda
9 Cruickshank have all served with the VFW for many, many
10 years and we thank them very much for their service. Thank
11 you.

12 These hearings are not perfunctory. They are serious
13 hearings, because our job is to listen to the needs of the
14 veterans of this country. Every Committee in Congress plays
15 an important role, but we are kind of unique, because we
16 have a special constituency; and you are that constituency.

17 For us to learn about the problems facing the veterans
18 community, we need to hear from you and we take very
19 seriously what you have to say as well as what the other
20 veterans organizations have to say.

21 Last year, and I should tell you I am just completing
22 or beginning my second year as Chairman, we went through the
23 series of hearings; and all of us, in a bipartisan way,
24 listened very carefully to what the needs of veterans were.

25 We have worked hard to incorporate those needs into

1 serious legislation. Legislation which came to the floor of
2 the Senate last week did not get the votes that it needed
3 but we are going to come back and we are going to win that
4 legislation and get the votes that we need.

5 [Applause.]

6 Chairman Sanders. Let me tell you what the VFW itself
7 said about that legislation. It said, if signed into law,
8 this sweeping legislation would expand and improve health
9 care and benefits services to all generations of veterans
10 and their families. Most notably, it would expand the
11 current caregiver law to include all generations of veterans
12 and provide that advanced appropriations to ensure monthly
13 compensation and pension as well as education payments are
14 protected from future budget battles.

15 The bill also offers in-state tuition protection for
16 recently transitioned veterans, improves access to mental
17 health and treatment for victims of sexual assault in the
18 military, and authorizes construction of more than 20
19 community-based outreach clinics to serve veterans in rural
20 and remote communities.

21 If there is one thing that I have learned since I have
22 become Chairman, and I know that all of the members up here
23 share that, because we have studied this issues, is the cost
24 of war and the cost of service is much higher than most
25 people understand.

1 Right now, just right now at this moment, when we look
2 at Iraq and Afghanistan alone, just those two wars, we are
3 not just looking at 6700 men and women who lost their lives,
4 we are looking today at hundreds of thousands, hundreds of
5 thousands who have come back with PTSD and TBI; and we are
6 not going to desert those men and women who are struggling.

7 [Applause.]

8 Chairman Sanders. We are looking at 2300 men and women
9 who suffered wounds in Iraq and Afghanistan such that they
10 are unable to have children. They want families, unable to
11 have it. But today the VA does not provide help for in
12 vitro fertilization or adoption or helping them have
13 families.

14 If they want families, we are going to make sure that
15 they are able to have families.

16 [Applause.]

17 Chairman Sanders. Now, I know there is an issue that
18 is dear to your hearts and dear to I think many of us up
19 here; and we made progress on this in 2010; and here is the
20 story.

21 Somebody gets hurt seriously in war; they are disabled.
22 They come back in a wheelchair, come back without arms.
23 Maybe they come back without eyesight. And, their loved
24 one, often a wife, maybe a mother, maybe a sister, maybe a
25 brother, maybe a cousin is with those veterans, those

1 disabled veterans 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

2 Just think for a moment, the stress that that caregiver
3 is under. Not easy. This Congress and the President made
4 significant progress three years ago, and I am very proud of
5 that. We passed the Caregiver Act which said that for all
6 of the men and women coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan
7 in that situation, we are going to give support to those
8 caregivers; and I think that was the right thing to do.

9 But in my view right now, and what we have in our
10 legislation, is to expand that program to all families from
11 all wars.

12 [Applause.]

13 Chairman Sanders. I know the VFW has been concerned
14 about the issue of advanced appropriations. What does that
15 mean? This is why it means. It means that a couple of
16 months ago when the government was shut down, many people do
17 not know this, but we were seven to 10 days away from
18 disabled veterans not getting their checks which they depend
19 upon every single month to get by.

20 Advanced appropriations means that the VA will have
21 money in the bank to make sure that if God forbid--I
22 certainly do not want to see another government shutdown--
23 but if that ever happens again, we will be certain that
24 veterans get the checks that they are entitled to.

25 [Applause.]

1 Chairman Sanders. So, let me just conclude by thanking
2 you for standing up for veterans and to letting you know
3 that the American people are clearly behind your goals.

4 They understand that there is no greater sacrifice that
5 anybody can make that when he or she put their lives on the
6 line to defend this country and when they come home, we have
7 the moral obligation to make sure that we do everything we
8 can to protect those men and women who have sacrificed so
9 much for this country.

10 I know that Chairman Miller and I have a good
11 relationship. We may disagree on this or that issue; but I
12 know that every person up there, Democrat, Republican,
13 Independent, cares about veterans; and we are going to work
14 together to do everything that we can to protect your needs.

15 So, thank you all very much for being here this
16 morning.

17 [Applause.]

18 Chairman Sanders. Congressman Jeff Miller is the
19 Chairman of the House Veterans' Committee. He is doing a
20 great job there. We are delighted that he is here.

21 Jeff.

22 Chairman Miller. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman,
23 for the invitation to be on this side of the complex today.

24 Thank you to everybody from the VFW that is here to
25 listen to the Commander testify. Thanks to the Commander-

1 in-Chief, Mr. Thien, for being here. I look forward to your
2 testimony. Thank you for your years of service in uniform
3 and out of uniform. It is greatly appreciated.

4 Also Sissy Borel, National VFW Auxiliary Chair, we are
5 proud to have you here and we thank you for the many things
6 that the Auxiliary does.

7 Those that are here from the Sunshine State, if you
8 would, raise your hand. It is so much nicer at home than it
9 is in Washington today. It is great to have you here with
10 us today. Each of you are a credit to your community, to
11 this Nation, and we are proud to have you with us here in
12 your Nation's Capital.

13 I do want to give a special welcome to my fellow
14 Floridian, Karen Nigara, who is Chairman of the National
15 Legislative Committee. I spent some time with her yesterday
16 and the folks from Florida.

17 Commander, our work begins with your testimony here
18 today. After reading your written statement, there is no
19 doubt that you have a great deal to be proud of.

20 Whether it is the 8.6 million volunteer hours that VFW
21 members contribute each year or the \$3 million in
22 scholarships that your organization provides to students
23 annually, Americans across this country know, they really do
24 know the good works of the VFW and what you do in their
25 communities every day. Eye witnessed a lot of these first-

1 hand and I am personally grateful to each and every one of
2 those who volunteered for the hard work.

3 I am grateful for the hard work that VFW does right
4 here in your Nation's Capital. In my three years as
5 Chairman, hand in hand with the VFW and our other VSOs, we
6 have reduced veteran unemployment, provided retraining
7 assistance benefits to tens of thousands of unemployed
8 veterans. We have ensured the safety of veteran patients
9 and VA employees by strengthening protections against sexual
10 assault and other safety incidents at the VA medical
11 centers. We have conducted close oversight of VA's
12 disability claims process--a long way to go still--major and
13 minor construction programs, and its mental health care
14 system.

15 Throughout these efforts, many more VFW support,
16 advice, and encouragement have been what I would say in
17 valuable.

18 I want to personally thank you for your resounding
19 support of H.R. 813, The Putting Veterans Funding First Act.
20 Chairman Sanders has already alluded to it, and you all know
21 that the Veterans Health Administration is largely shielded
22 from budgetary impasse but other functions critical to the
23 department and to veterans are not, including accounts for
24 information technology as well as for construction, spending
25 on vital maintenance and improvements projects.

1 And, I am going to continue to advocate for passage of
2 this measure as the possibility of future political gridlock
3 must not compromise the functionality of the Department of
4 Veterans' Affairs or the delivery of earned benefits to our
5 Nation's veterans.

6 [Applause.]

7 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN MILLER

8 Chairman Miller. I also want to thank you for your
9 overwhelming support of H.R. 357, the GI Bill Tuition
10 Fairness Act of 2014, which passed the full House last
11 month. All of your hard work you did to gather support for
12 that bill did not go unnoticed, and I would like to ask for
13 your continued support in advancing this important
14 legislation over here in the Senate.

15 I know that the Senator had that particular piece of
16 legislation in his bill over here as well.

17 The major provision of this legislation offers public
18 colleges and universities a choice. Either they charge
19 veterans that are recently separated from active duty in-
20 state tuition or they are no longer eligible to enroll
21 veterans under the GI Bill.

22 It is time that public colleges and universities
23 recognize that veterans served this Nation as a whole, all
24 50 states, and that reality ought to be reflected in the
25 benefits that they have earned.

1 Commander, one other area that I was pleased to see
2 mentioned in your written statement was in the need for
3 continued oversight of management accountability at
4 Veterans' Affairs. In your written statement, you commented
5 that working at VA is not a right, it is a privilege; and I
6 agree wholeheartedly.

7 What troubles me is that too many senior managers at VA
8 take advantage of this privilege. In fact, if you look at
9 recent preventable deaths at VA medical centers, patient
10 safety incidents and the claims backlog increases, the
11 department senior executives who presided over negligence
12 and mismanagement are more likely to have received a bonus
13 than to be held accountable and received punishment.

14 When the senior leaders are not held accountable, the
15 Secretary is sending a message to the hundreds and thousands
16 of hard-working VA front-line employees that negligence and
17 poor performance are to be supported.

18 This is why I ask for your support for your support of
19 a measure that I have introduced. It is H.R. 4031, the
20 Department of Veterans' Affairs Management Accountability
21 Act of 2014.

22 What this does is it provides the Secretary with the
23 authority to remove any senior executive service employee
24 for poor performance. These employees are directly
25 responsible for the day-to-day success or the failure of VA

1 programs and they must be held to the highest standard which
2 is what you as veterans deserve.

3 I hope that this bill will have VFW support and that
4 you will continue to work with us to empower the Secretary
5 to lead VA into the future.

6 Commander, thank you for being here today and I do look
7 forward to your testimony.

8 [Applause.]

9 Chairman Sanders. Thank you, Chairman Miller.

10 Senator Johanns.

11 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHANNIS

12 Senator Johanns. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 Good to see you all here today. Let me start out and
14 say good morning to Chairman Miller, Chairman Sanders,
15 Ranking Member Michaud. It is good to be here with each of
16 you.

17 I want to thank those who have convened this joint
18 hearing to listen to the legislative priorities of the VFW.
19 I would like to extend a very warm welcome to all VFW
20 members who have traveled here today. Because of the
21 weather, conditions of travel I know were tough. I had a
22 tough time getting back myself.

23 I also think it is entirely appropriate that we start
24 every one of these hearings with a thank you to our veterans
25 and to their families. You teach us every day that our

1 freedoms are not free, and we appreciate the sacrifice that
2 you have made for us and we cannot say that enough.

3 Commander Thien, it is good to welcome you. I was
4 visiting with the Congresswoman to my right and we talked
5 about how cold it was back home in Indiana. She used the
6 word tundra. I could use that word in Nebraska also.

7 I do have a little bit of connection with your State.
8 My wife Stephanie is a proud graduate of Central High School
9 in Elkhart, Indiana. So, a great community.

10 And congratulations. I think you were elected in last
11 July, and we appreciate your commitment to this great
12 organization.

13 Your service in the U.S. Navy and the Indiana National
14 Guard as well as the years of experience you have developed
15 in working with veterans is truly priceless. I am anxious
16 to hear your testimony and your responses to questions.

17 The testimony that you provide today will be valuable
18 as our Committees analyze VA's fiscal year 2015 budget
19 request and look at ways to improve services in the VA.

20 As you know, in past years Congress has made VA a
21 priority. Budgets reflect that. Provided budget and
22 personnel increases to try to do everything we could to
23 ensure access to care for veterans.

24 However, for many veterans, this has, unfortunately,
25 not lead to better outcomes especially those seeking timely

1 mental health care and specialty care appointments.

2 For those caught in a long-term backlog of disability
3 claims and for those facing decisions that are often times
4 too often incorrect, we have got to do better, all of us,
5 and we have to do it in a bipartisan way.

6 I would like to highlight, if I could, in my opening
7 comments two areas that are deeply concerning. One is the
8 disability claims backlog and the growing backlog in appeals
9 and dependency claims.

10 As this issue continues to be the center of national
11 scrutiny, it is imperative for the VA to rate disability
12 claims quickly, give people an answer, and most importantly
13 do it accurately.

14 Over the last several years, Congress has provided
15 funding, lots of funding, to allow VA to develop new
16 technologies, to hire thousands of additional claims
17 processors, and to pay overtime to try to get the work done.

18 But even with these and other new initiatives, veterans
19 still face large backlogs, they faced long delays and
20 infrequent errors when trying to access disability benefits;
21 and this has to stop.

22 Veterans face delays not only when they apply for
23 disability compensation but also when they are trying to
24 access needed mental health and specialty care. We all know
25 that veterans have sacrificed so much already and deserve

1 the best health care that we can provide.

2 However, they are faced with delays in scheduling
3 appointments and accessing needed services. Ensuring
4 veterans have access to needed mental health and specialty
5 care service has to be a top priority for both the House
6 Veterans' Committee and the Senate.

7 Additionally, many quality of care issues have been
8 uncovered at VA facilities that need to be addressed
9 immediately. As many of you know, during the last year
10 there have been over 40, 40 VA Inspector General health care
11 inspection reports regarding access to health services in
12 quality of care provided by the VA.

13 These reports highlight serious problems veterans face
14 while accessing critical services which have actually
15 resulted in patient harm and even death.

16 There are many other issues you raise that deserve our
17 attention including the high unemployment rate among
18 veterans, the lack of progress on the VA's major
19 construction list. I look forward to working with my
20 colleagues in the Veterans of Foreign Wars on all of these
21 important issues affecting veterans, their families, and
22 their survivors.

23 You know, we have tried to do a lot for veterans over
24 the past years, but it just breaks my heart when we do
25 something and then do not see the results, and I know it

1 bothers anybody in the room. We have got to get better at
2 delivering these services that we promised you already. We
3 have got to get better at that.

4 Again, I thank you, Commander, for your leadership. I
5 thank you for your presence today and thanks to the Chairman
6 for this opportunity to hear the VFW and its membership
7 about issues that our veterans are currently facing.

8 Thank you, and I yield back to the Chair.

9 Chairman Sanders. Thank you, Senator Johanns.

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Sanders. Congressman Mike Michaud is the
12 Ranking Member of the House Veterans' Committee.

13 OPENING STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN MICHAUD

14 Mr. Michaud. Thank you.

15 First of all, I would like to thank you, Chairman
16 Sanders and Chairman Miller for having this joint hearing
17 today but also for both of your commitment to making sure
18 that we do right by our veterans here in the United States.
19 I want to thank you both for that effort.

20 Commander, I want to thank you and the Auxiliary for
21 being here today. We thank you and nearly 2,000,000 members
22 of the VFW for your military service and your continued that
23 dedication to our country and its veterans.

24 Commander, I would be remiss if I did not let you know
25 that you have excellent staff here in D.C. Mr. Wallace and

1 Mr. Kelley. They do an excellent job in making sure that
2 both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee are
3 aware of your issues so I want to thank them for their
4 continued service as well in representing the VFW that
5 before the halls of Congress.

6 I also want to thank those in the audience from the
7 great State of Maine. I know that Commander Olson and a few
8 members of the Maine VFW brought some wonderful Maine
9 weather with them here in D.C. and I want to thank them for
10 coming as well. This is a spring day in Maine.

11 Commander, I share the VFW's commitment to ensuring
12 that fiscal constraints are not carried on the backs of our
13 deserving veterans. We owe it to America's veterans to
14 provide a stable VA budget. I want to thank you for your
15 support of H.R. 813, Putting The Veterans Funding Act first.

16 We have seen how well advanced appropriations works for
17 the VA medical care. It is time that the rest of VA's
18 discretionary budget is treated in the same way.

19 The VA is pursuing a wide range of initiatives from new
20 methods of health care delivery to an electronic benefits
21 management, investments that will help bring the department
22 into the 21st century.

23 Working with you and the Department of Veterans'
24 Administration will make sure that these initiatives are
25 implemented fairly, transparently, and in the best interests

1 of veterans and the American taxpayer.

2 The VFW is an active and valued partner with us in
3 Congress. We work very well together to make sure that we
4 keep our promise to America's veterans. Making sure that
5 the VA can meet challenges of the 21st century is a job for
6 all of us and I know that VFW and your members across the
7 country and your staff here in Washington are ready and
8 eager to that challenge.

9 I look forward to your testimony here today, and again
10 I want to thank you for your long history of distinguished
11 service in and out of the uniform, Commander.

12 So, thank you very much.

13 With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my
14 time.

15 [Applause.]

16 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Congressman
17 Michaud.

18 As the Congressman mentioned, the VFW has a
19 an excellent and strong team here in Washington who keeps us
20 advised about your concerns and they have been a pleasure to
21 work with.

22 I want to introduce Bob Wallace, VFW's Executive
23 Director. Bob has been a passionate advocate for our
24 Nation's veterans for many, many years.

25 Bob, would you please introduce your team.

1 Mr. Wallace. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

2 Members of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs
3 Committees, I am honored to have the privilege of
4 introducing to you the National officers of the Veterans of
5 Foreign Wars of the United States and their Ladies
6 Auxiliary.

7 Mr. Chairman, please allow me to ask those to be
8 introduced to please remain standing, and I wish the
9 audience applaud when the last one is introduced.

10 The National President of our Ladies Auxiliary, Sissy
11 Borel, from Louisiana. The National Secretary-Treasurer,
12 Jan Owens, from South Carolina. The Commander-in-Chief's
13 wife Linda Thien, from Indiana. The Senior Vice Commander-
14 in-Chief's wife, Mary Stroud, from Nevada. Junior Vice
15 Commander-in-Chief's wife, Betty Jean Biedrzycki, from
16 Pennsylvania.

17 Senior Vice Commander-in-Chief, John Stroud, from
18 Nevada. Junior Vice Commander-in-Chief, John Biedrzycki,
19 from Pennsylvania. Adjutant General, John E. Hamilton, from
20 Florida. Quartermaster General, Robert B. Greene, from
21 Kansas. Judge Advocate General, Harold M. Burke, from New
22 York. Surgeon General, Peter T. Buchanan, from Colorado.

23 National Chaplain, Robert H. Dickerson, from Texas.
24 National Chief of Staff, David G. Havelly, from Indiana.
25 Inspector General, Terry W. Vance, from Illinois. Chairman

1 of the VFW National Legislative Committee, Karen Nigara,
2 from Florida.

3 Director, VFW National Legislative Service, Raymond
4 Kelley, from Maryland. Director, VFW National Veterans'
5 Service, William Bradshaw, from Maryland.

6 I would also like to recognize the presence of many of
7 our past commanders in chief.

8 Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

9 [Applause.]

10 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Bob.

11 Now, I would now like to introduce Congressman Todd
12 Young. Congressman Young, would you please introduce the
13 Commander.

1 STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE TODD YOUNG, A
2 REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF
3 INDIANA

4 Mr. Young. Well, thank you so much, Chairman Sanders,
5 Chairman Miller, and all the other members of this
6 Committee, for your good work on behalf of our veterans. It
7 is really an honor to be here on behalf of the State of
8 Indiana, and it is a pleasure to introduce VFW Commander-in-
9 Chief and fellow Hoosier, Mr. William A. Thien.

10 Mr. Thien has spent the last four decades serving his
11 fellow veterans through his involvement with the Veterans of
12 Foreign Wars and he deserves our utmost respect for his
13 service to our country and his dedication to our Nation's
14 veterans.

15 Mr. Thien served bravely in the United States Navy from
16 1969 to 1974 and served an additional five years in the
17 Indiana National Guard. During his service, he earned the
18 Vietnam Service Medal with Three Stars, Vietnam Campaign
19 Medal with 1960 Bar, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal,
20 Korea, National Defense Service Medal, and several other
21 decorations from our State's National Guard.

22 In 1971, Mr. Thien join VFW Post 3281 in New Albany,
23 Indiana, where he maintains his Gold Legacy Life Membership.
24 Since joining the VFW, he served as All-American Post
25 Commander, All State District Commander, All-American State

1 Commander and, of course, his most recent position as
2 Commander-in-Chief.

3 He has also held positions on numerous National
4 Committees including service as Vice Chairman of
5 Citizenship, Education and Community Service and as Chairman
6 of the National Scholarship and Recognition.

7 Proud Hoosiers, Mr. Thien and his wife Linda currently
8 reside in Georgetown, a quaint town in Indiana's Ninth
9 Congressional District.

10 Mr. Thien, it is an honor to introduce you here today,
11 and I am privileged to represent you in Congress. I know
12 that we in Congress look forward to your continued
13 leadership on issues facing our Nation's veterans in the
14 21st century.

15 I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

16 Chairman Sanders. Congressman, thank you very much for
17 that introduction.

18 Mr. Thien, the floor is yours.

19 [Applause.]

1 STATEMENT OF WILLIAM A. THIEN, COMMANDER IN CHIEF,
2 VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS; ACCOMPANIED BY KAREN
3 NIGARA, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE;
4 RAYMOND KELLEY, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE
5 SERVICE; ROBERT WALLACE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
6 WASHINGTON OFFICE; AND WILLIAM BRADSHAW, DIRECTOR,
7 NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE

8 Mr. Thien. Chairmen Sanders and Miller, Ranking
9 Members Burr and Michaud, members of the Senate and House
10 Veterans' Affairs Committees, on behalf of the Veterans of
11 Foreign Wars of the United States and our Auxiliaries, I
12 want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today on
13 the VFW's legislative priorities.

14 Before we start, I want to personally thank Ranking
15 Member Michaud for the more than a decade of service on the
16 House Veterans' Affairs Committee. You have been a true
17 student of the issues and a strong advocate for veterans.
18 Your leadership and your bipartisanship has not only helped
19 the Committee but it has also improved the lives of our
20 veterans. Thank you for your service.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Thien. We want to thank Senator Sanders for your
23 hard work on S. 1982. The VFW looks forward to working with
24 you and all the members of the Committees to ensure of its
25 passage.

1 The VFW and patriots everywhere are concerned today
2 because it seems that most of America has forgotten our
3 Nation is still at war. Our Nation is still at war. Sadly,
4 some here in Washington has opened up a new war against the
5 very programs that you and your Committee have fought hard
6 to bestow on our service members and our veterans and
7 certainly on their families as seen with a recent backroom
8 deal to lower military retiree costs of living adjustments.

9 I must thank you for correcting this unfair attack on
10 our military community but I must also ask that you do all
11 you can to ensure that back room, middle of the night deals
12 never again harm the well-being of our military personnel,
13 our veterans, or their families.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Thien. The VFW wants open and frank debate on all
16 the issues affecting our Nation's heroes so that everyone
17 fully understands the true impact on those who have stood
18 ready to defend America.

19 Some believe the cost of war ends when the last troops
20 leave Afghanistan. We know this is not true and that is why
21 we need a fully funded, state-of-the-art VA health care
22 system and a robust benefits program designed to meet the
23 needs of all generations of war fighters, past, present, and
24 certainly in the future.

25 There is a lifetime cost and obligation to sending

1 America's finest off to war and rest assured the Veterans of
2 Foreign Wars of the United States will do everything in our
3 power to make sure that the Administration and the Congress
4 live up to that obligation.

5 [Applause.]

6 Mr. Thien. For VFW's full legislative priorities for
7 2014, I will refer you to my prepared testimony. For the
8 balance of my time today, I would like to focus on five
9 major issues that demand immediate action.

10 First, the VFW remains concerned about the potential
11 impact of the looming budget sequestration on military
12 veterans and programs. The future effects of sequestration
13 are still unknown.

14 If sequestration continues to be the law of the land
15 after fiscal year 2015, we do not know if the VA will be
16 exempt. We do know that the Department of Defense will be
17 hit extremely hard which will be devastating to our troops,
18 their readiness, and our National security.

19 Congress must find a reasonable alternative to
20 sequestration that will protect the VA's ability to provide
21 care and benefits for those who have already sacrificed to
22 this great Nation and allow the DOD to field a fully capable
23 military of quality well-trained troops. The VFW calls on
24 Congress to fix sequestration immediately for the sake of
25 our Nation and for those who volunteer to defend it.

1 Second, the VFW believes that our veterans must ever be
2 held hostage by budget uncertainties which is why we are
3 calling for full advanced appropriations for VA accounts
4 through The Putting Veterans Funding First Act.

5 Last year the government shutdown nearly cut off the
6 arms of benefits of millions of disabled veterans, student
7 veterans, and survivors. Had the shutdown gone past
8 November 1, the economic impact on the veterans community
9 would have been devastating.

10 Thankfully, the VA hospitals stayed open during the
11 shutdown thanks to advanced appropriations for VA health
12 care, meaning veterans could still receive the critical care
13 that they need.

14 Congress must keep the promise to protect our veterans
15 in times of budgetary uncertainty by passing a full advanced
16 appropriations for VA.

17 [Applause.]

18 Mr. Thien. Third, the post-9/11 GI Bill was designed
19 to cover the full cost of in-state education at public
20 colleges. Sadly, many public schools consider veterans as
21 being stateless for tuition purposes because of their past
22 military commitments.

23 No veteran should be disqualified from in-state tuition
24 because of military service. This is why the VFW calls on
25 Congress to pass a three-year protection for veterans who

1 recently left active duty to attend the public school of
2 their choice at a reasonable rate.

3 The House has already decisively passed H.R. 357 by a
4 vote of 390 to zero and we urge the Senate to quickly follow
5 suit.

6 Fourth, the VFW remains concerned about the VA
7 disability claims backlog and the VA's current efforts to
8 overhaul its claims processing system. As the Veterans
9 Benefit Administration transforms from a paper-based to an
10 all-electronic system, we must ensure that the laws in place
11 to protect veterans remains intact.

12 The quality of ratings cannot suffer in the effort to
13 move claims more quickly through the system. The Veterans
14 Benefit Management System or VBMS has the potential to allow
15 the VA to work efficiently in an all-electronic environment.
16 However, VBMS continues to suffer from processing delays and
17 frequent and unpredictable downtime.

18 As a part of their effort to reduce the backlog and to
19 encourage electronic claims filing, the VA has published
20 Proposed Rule A081 in October of 2013 requiring claimants to
21 complete standardized forms before starting the claims
22 process.

23 We believe the VA's proposal will rollback veterans
24 rights by making it more difficult to file a claim, cheating
25 thousands of veterans out of months worth of benefits.

1 Under the current law, a veteran can start a claim by
2 sending any written communication to the VA. Veterans then
3 have up to one year to complete the required VA forms. If
4 the VA awards benefits, the veteran receives back pay to the
5 date when the veteran first contacted the VA.

6 If the proposed rule goes into effect, an informal
7 communication would no longer serve as a veteran's date of
8 claim, unless the veteran files electronically. This has
9 not incentivized electronic claims. It penalized the
10 veteran who chooses to file by other means.

11 The VFW urges Congress to protect the ability of the
12 claimants to file an informal claim whether electronically
13 or on paper.

14 In response to the public outcry over the outrages wait
15 times for what awaiting decisions, the VA has triaged his
16 caseload to focus on the backlog of disability claims while
17 neglecting other categories of claims like dependent claims
18 and appeals. Congress must hold the VA accountable for this
19 backlog as well.

20 The VFW recently visited VA regional offices in St.
21 Petersburg, Florida, where our staff reviewed 79 paper and
22 electronic claim files with the rating decisions.

23 What we found was 21 cases had problems or errors.
24 That represents 26.6 percent of the cases we reviewed. The
25 VA reports ratings in St. Petersburg are on the average

1 wrong 10 percent of the time. While not all the errors that
2 were found there involved ratings, 17.7 percent of the
3 ratings we reviewed were errors. This is significantly
4 higher than what the VA reports.

5 Further, we identified three clear and unmistakable
6 errors in earlier ratings. One of these decisions, when
7 corrected, should provide an award of benefits to a veteran
8 dated back to 1985.

9 In addition, the VFW found that raters accepted a
10 number of inadequate VA examinations for ratings. Based on
11 our review, the VFW is concerned that some raters would
12 rather rate a case using inadequate or negative evidence
13 rather than to return the examination to be completed
14 correctly.

15 The VFW will continue to hold the VA accountable for
16 its obligation to process timely and accurate claims, and we
17 plan to make more site visits to assess progress in the
18 coming months.

19 Finally, the VFW remains concerned about the access to
20 quality care for our veterans, particularly veterans
21 suffering from invisible wounds such as posttraumatic stress
22 disorder, traumatic brain injury, or military sexual trauma.

23 The VA anticipates veteran health care enrollment will
24 grow beyond 9 million veterans in the fiscal year.
25 Meanwhile, the VFW continues to hear of delays in

1 appointment times. We must not fail to provide timely care
2 to our heroes. It is the right thing to do, the right thing
3 to do.

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Thien. To properly care for our veterans, Congress
6 must fully fund the VA accounts and pass a capital
7 infrastructure budget that allows the VA to maintain safe
8 and efficient facilities to include proper contracting for
9 community-based outpatient clinics.

10 Suicide presents the most serious challenge to the VA,
11 to the military, and of course, to our Nation. One suicide
12 is too many but knowing that 22 veterans commit suicide
13 every day is a crisis.

14 The VA recently hired more than 2000 new mental health
15 providers and administrative staff. The VA also started a
16 peer-support program hiring more than 1000 veterans to serve
17 as peer support specialists.

18 The VFW sees no indication that this initiative was
19 sufficient, however noble was not sufficient to meet the
20 mental health care needs to satisfy the VA's 14-day care
21 mandate.

22 The VA reported that nearly 600,000 women veterans were
23 enrolled for health care in 2012, a number that is expected
24 to increase as the military downsizes. The VA has made
25 positive strides expanding female health care services but

1 we must do more.

2 Military sexual trauma victims still face challenges
3 when filing a claim or seeking treatment which is why we
4 urge the Senate to pass S. 294, the Ruth Moore Act, whose
5 companion in the House was passed last June.

6 The VFW is very concerned with reports of negligent
7 veteran deaths in VA facilities. While we know the vast
8 majority of VA staff are dedicated employees but in the VA
9 must also hold employees accountable for negligence.

10 Serving veterans and working for the VA, as was said
11 earlier, is a privilege, not a right; and we look forward to
12 working with you to correct these deficiencies.

13 Finally, the VA's caregiver program has been a huge
14 success but the program must expand to include all of those
15 families who serve as caregivers for veterans who were
16 seriously injured before 911.

17 I can tell you from a personal basis as a VFW member
18 and as a World War II father that I took care of, it was
19 tough on me to do it and work also.

20 Chairman Sanders and Miller, Ranking Member Burr and
21 Michaud, members of the Committee, these five issues that I
22 spoke about today are just the beginning.

23 In closing, let me always stress the importance of the
24 POW/MIA mission, the importance it is to our organization.
25 Our members will not rest until we have the fullest

1 accounting of those missing and unaccounted for from all of
2 our Nation's wars. We made that promise to those folks and
3 we are going to keep that promise.

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Thien. The VFW looks forward to working with each
6 of you to better serve our service members, our veterans,
7 and certainly their families. I want to thank you for this
8 opportunity to testify today. I will look forward to your
9 questions. Thank you very much.

10 [Applause.]

11 [The prepared statement of Mr. Thien follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Commander, thank you very much for
2 your very detailed presentation. Everybody should know that
3 what he presented was a small part of what his written
4 testimony was about, and that is important because we need
5 to know the issues that you are concerned about and we are
6 going to study those issues.

7 So, thank you so much for that excellent presentation.

8 What I would like to do in my time is pick up on a
9 point, Commander, that you made at the latter point of your
10 testimony, that is, the caregivers' program.

11 As you know, Congress did the right thing in 2010 by
12 developing a very effective program for the families of
13 injured soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan. Tell me if you
14 believe and why you believe, or your staff may want to jump
15 in, it is important to extend that caregivers program to the
16 veterans and their families of all wars.

17 Mr. Thien. Thank you, Chairman Sanders.

18 It is extremely important. I had a fortunate situation
19 that I had four sisters to help me stay with my mother and
20 father when they were ill. So, I was fortunate in that
21 aspect but everybody is not that fortunate.

22 We believe that it is such a great program but we know
23 there are hardships on other veterans, pre-9/11 veterans,
24 veterans that are out there trying to take care of their
25 families.

1 So, it is very important. It is a great program, and
2 that is why we believe there is a need, there s a need out
3 there for that program to extend to the other classes of
4 veterans.

5 Chairman Sanders. Okay. Thank you.

6 Let me ask another question on an issue that you did
7 not get into. Most medical specialists believe that dental
8 care should be considered as part of health care, and most
9 people perceive that in America as a Nation we have a real
10 dental care crisis. A lot of people cannot afford good
11 quality dental care.

12 The legislation that I have authored includes a
13 significant pilot project to begin to bring dental care into
14 the VA with the understanding that dental care must be
15 considered a part of health care. You cannot segregated.
16 You cannot isolate it.

17 [Applause.]

18 Chairman Sanders. Commander, I would appreciate your
19 thoughts or your staff's thoughts on the view, should dental
20 care be part of VA health care. Sir.

21 Mr. Wallace. I will take that one, Mr. Sanders. The
22 number one issue that guard and reservists could not be sent
23 to war was because of dental. They were put into units
24 until they got their dental taken care of because they could
25 not afford dental care in the outside world. We cannot

1 allow veterans not to afford dental care in the outside
2 world. You are right on target and the VFW supports you.

3 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

4 [Applause.]

5 Chairman Sanders. So, I think, as most people know,
6 dental care is provided for service-connected problems but
7 not for non-service-connected, and I think we have to move
8 forward in that direction.

9 My last question deals with an issue, a very sensitive
10 issue, in that, as I mentioned in my remarks, some 2300 men
11 and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan came back with
12 wounds which prevent them from having babies.

13 Should, in your judgment, the VA help those families be
14 able to have children if that is what is important to them?
15 And that raises the issue of reproductive health and so
16 forth.

17 Anyone want to take a shot at that.

18 Mr. Thien. I will take a shot at that. Absolutely.

19 [Applause.]

20 Chairman Sanders. The issue there, and everybody put
21 yourself in the place of a young man or a young woman who
22 serves the country, who wants to start a family and now is
23 unable to do so and it is terribly important to them.

24 So, I thank you for your support of that and we are
25 going to do our best to get legislation passed which

1 includes the VA helping those families get the help that
2 they need.

3 I would like to now give the mike over to Chairman
4 Miller.

5 Chairman Miller. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much.

6 Commander, there has been a lot written in the press
7 over the last year and particularly about the disability
8 claims backlog. There has been a huge focus by the
9 Secretary and people within the department to try to reduce
10 that backlog, and you mentioned it in your comments.

11 But what I would like you to expound on a little bit is
12 where it concerns me, and I know it does you, where VA may
13 be sacrificing quality of the decision of the rating and the
14 benefit for, or in the name of, increased production.

15 I know that you said you recently made a visit to the
16 St. Petersburg RO, and obviously that is in my State and I
17 visited it several times.

18 But I would like to know what type of issues you
19 discovered while you were down there because it does not
20 appear to have been a very positive visit.

21 So, accuracy being sacrificed for productivity and then
22 St. Peterburg RO visit, if you could expound on that a
23 little bit.

24 Mr. Thien. Mr. Chairman, you know, a great thing about
25 being commander-in-chief of the Veterans of Foreign Wars is

1 that I have certainly subject matter experts. When I said
2 we went down there, we as in the VFW, not myself personally.

3 So, I would take that to those that were actually
4 there. Thank you Sir.

5 Mr. Bradshaw. Mr. Chairman, when we went to St. Pete,
6 and I think all over the country, VA is in a hurry to meet
7 the 2015 deadline, and we are in a hurry for them to meet
8 that.

9 But when you do things like physical examinations
10 coming back from the medical center that you know is not
11 ready to rate the case but in a hurry you rate the case
12 anyway which means that the rating is not accurate, all of
13 the little things that happens during the rating process is
14 now hurried.

15 And the thing that we worry most about is we want our
16 service officers to be included to do quality reviews. As
17 you know, when the claim is rated, the service officers have
18 24 hours to be able to respond to that and says yes, we
19 agree or we do not agree.

20 But we want to make sure that happens to keep us
21 involved in the loop so that we can help them and also help
22 veterans to say this is the mistake that you are making.

23 I am not sure that there is a specific mistake that all
24 of them make. But when you rush things and you do not take
25 your time, there are many mistakes that are made that hurts

1 veterans.

2 Chairman Miller. There is a lot of focus on two-year-
3 old claims and older. Supposedly, they have all been
4 resolved. I would just like a show of hands of anybody in
5 the room that may have a claim that is older than two years
6 old.

7 [Pause.]

8 Chairman Miller. Thank you very much.

9 Commander, you mentioned that your members have
10 encountered delays in receiving specialty care. What I
11 would like you to talk about a little bit is what services,
12 other than dental, what services need to be more readily
13 available and what do your members see as the greatest
14 barriers to receiving some of that care?

15 Mr. Wallace. We have one staff member in D.C. who is
16 dedicated to responding to issues, compliments, complaints,
17 issues. We established years ago a 1-800-VFW-1899 telephone
18 number. Over the years we have gotten thousands of issues
19 that have been presented to us.

20 We continue to hear about mental health. We continue
21 to hear about specialty care as far as orthopedics and so
22 forth. I will be more than happy to get the list, provide
23 the list to you of what we do hear about and what we see.
24 It depends on where you are in the country. It depends on
25 all kinds of things.

1 The VA does not really have truly good appointments
2 system. You know, you should be able to get on a computer
3 and make your own appointment.

4 What we continue to hear also is people that will have
5 an appointment will get called and they say the doctor is
6 not going to be in tomorrow; we have to reschedule you. It
7 will be rescheduled for God knows how long. And, that is
8 very critical on the mental health side and it cannot exist.
9 I mean, we cannot have that kind of thing going on at all.

10 But we will provide you with that list that we have.

11 Chairman Miller. Thank you, Bob.

12 I yield back.

13 Chairman Sanders. Thank you, Chairman Miller.

14 Senator Johanns.

15 Senator Johanns. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and again
16 thank all of you for being here. Your testimony was great.

17 Commander, I certainly appreciate that. The Chairman
18 is right. Your written testimony is lengthy and filled with
19 great information.

20 Let me, if I might, zero in on something you mentioned
21 both in your written and oral testimony, and that is VBMS.
22 I do not have at my fingertips the amount of money that our
23 taxpayers have spent on this system but it is a ton. We all
24 know it is a ton.

25 The whole idea was that we would improve processing of

1 applications. We would increase accuracy. A lot of
2 promises were made when this thing was being debated.

3 Let me just ask you point blank two questions. One is.
4 Do you think those promises are being kept? Do you think
5 this system is delivering?

6 And then number two, kind of linked with that question
7 is the question of do you think we will meet the target of a
8 eliminating the backlog by 2015?

9 And I am going to open up that to anyone, anyone else
10 up there or out there that is at the table that would like
11 to offer some thoughts on that.

12 So, is VBMS doing what it should be doing and are we
13 going to meet the 2015 goal?

14 Mr. Wallace. If I may, Senator, VBMS is having some
15 fits and starts on predictability and down time and so
16 forth. They still have not fully integrated the Veterans
17 Service Organizations into the process on everything that
18 has to be done with VBMS.

19 We think it has the potential to do everything that it
20 is said it could do. We continue to be concerned about the
21 push. 2015 has become the law of the land. In our opinion,
22 if the backlog was 200 days before they started this
23 initiative and it goes down to 140 days, that is a hell of a
24 progress. If the error rate was 67 percent and it gets down
25 to 90 percent or 85 percent, that is a hell of a progress.

1 So, we do not see that they need to keep that strict
2 125, 98 percent because what it is doing is putting a lot of
3 pressure on people and they are making mistakes, as Mr.
4 Bradshaw recently said.

5 Will they make the 2015 number? I am not sure. But in
6 the same respect, they need to continue to get the IT money
7 so they can continue to advance the system. Remember, they
8 started with nothing but paper records. So, they started at
9 Ground Zero and are working their way up. Your oversight,
10 continued oversight, is very, very important to hold them
11 accountable on what the heck they do.

12 Senator Johanns. You know, I am in this unique
13 position. I have decided I will not seek another term in
14 the Senate. So, at the end of the year, I kind of wrap it
15 up. Here is kind of how I feel about these things.

16 I think it is important to keep the promises we have
17 made to the veterans. Now, I love adding things, and I see
18 from the applause you do too. But having said that, it just
19 seems to me that we are not keeping those promises.

20 If you have got to wait forever to get your disability
21 rated, that is not fair. If you have got to wait forever to
22 get mental health services, my goodness, wait for mental
23 health services? What if you are in a crisis, you know, how
24 does that work out? Or what if you are right on the edge of
25 the crisis, how does that work out? It does not work out.

1 I would like your thoughts on that. Does that not seem
2 important that we kind of take stock of where we are at and
3 be able to say we are keeping our promises that we have made
4 with past legislation because I think we are failing today
5 in doing that. I would like your reaction to that.

6 Mr. Wallace. I think we have a long way to go to keep
7 the promise. As a Nation, we were not ready and prepared
8 for what happened with the two wars and the influx of
9 people, casualties, and the severity of their casualties.

10 Mr. Miller is going to love this one, but my favorite
11 phrase is there is a lack of leadership, management, and
12 accountability in many parts of the system that need to be
13 held accountable.

14 Senator Johanns. Yeah, I could not agree more.

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Wallace. I think most people come to the VA every
17 day want to go to work and want to do the right thing; but
18 if they are not led by the right people, if they are not
19 mentored by the right people, if they do not get the right
20 training, and they are not told when they make a mistake
21 that here is the mistake you made, learn from it and let us
22 move forward, you just have a system that continues to go
23 bad.

24 Senator Johanns. Yeah. I will just wrap up with one
25 last thought, if I could. I think fortunately in this arena

1 veterans issues had been bipartisan. It is one of the
2 things I like about sitting on this Committee. We do not
3 fight about who is Republican or Democrat typically. It is
4 there but, yeah.

5 [Applause.]

6 Senator Johanns. We want to do the right thing and
7 here is what I would say it is so important for your
8 organization to reach out to somebody like me on
9 legislation. I am in the minority.

10 I am not running anything quite honestly but I want to
11 hear from you because I want to have a discussion with you
12 about what are we not getting done, what promises are we not
13 keeping, should we prioritize those promises, what about our
14 \$18 trillion debt. We do not want that for our kids and
15 grandkids.

16 Veterans are who they are because they put the country
17 above themselves. So, I think these are very important
18 issues. You are always welcome in my office, Commander, Mr.
19 Wallace, whoever you wanted to send over. We will always
20 make time for you, to hear you out and have a good debate
21 about where we go forward and how best to do veteran
22 services.

23 Thank you. God bless you.

24 [Applause.]

25 Chairman Sanders. Congressman Michaud.

1 Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

2 And once again, Commander, I want to thank you for your
3 testimony and for being here this morning.

4 In your testimony, you caution that VA needs to
5 maintain oversight of the patient-centered community care,
6 the PC3, program. What specific danger do you see in the
7 roll out of this program and are you primarily concerned
8 with the lack of standardization in that program?

9 Mr. Wallace. Mr. Michaud, just like the state-run
10 nursing homes that the VA contributes the per diem to, they
11 have to have proper oversight. They have to have proper
12 oversight.

13 We also have to worry about, you know, to make sure
14 that the quality of care that is being delivered is there.

15 We think it is a positive thing, though, because you
16 cannot build VA structures all over the country; and if you
17 can get care in your local community for primary care or
18 specialty care that you may have to drive 3- or 400 miles to
19 in some parts of the country, that is positive.

20 But we are very concerned about the fact that VA has to
21 have proper oversight and we have told them that and we want
22 to see reports of what they do as this program continues to
23 go forward.

24 Mr. Michaud. Thank you. Do you feel that capital
25 leasing--when you look at construction, we have under-funded

1 that for a number of years. Do you feel that capital
2 leasing or construction, which one is the better approach to
3 meeting the VA's infrastructure needs that they currently
4 have?

5 Mr. Kelley. Thank you, Mr. Michaud.

6 I do not know if you can put one above the other. They
7 both are very unique. We need both. We need to pass into
8 law Mr. Miller's bill, H.R. 3521, that will extend the
9 capital leasing. That is very important for the community-
10 based clinics that have expired.

11 Veterans are having to go out on the fee-based out
12 which is more expensive. So, we need to pass that.

13 We also need to properly fund the construction
14 programs. Since SCIP was introduced, the strategic plan for
15 capital infrastructure, it really laid out where the
16 deficiencies were, where the gaps in safety were, where the
17 gaps in access were.

18 Since that has come out, each year major construction
19 has been reduced by a third, the funding for it has been
20 reduced by a third each year after that. That is going in
21 the wrong direction.

22 We need somewhere around \$60 billion to close all of
23 those gaps. Maybe construction is not the right direction
24 to go. We need to look into it but we need to an honest,
25 open debate on what direction to fill those gaps moving

1 forward.

2 Mr. Michaud. Thank you. My last question actually
3 deals with actually state veterans homes and taking care of
4 the long-term care needs of our veterans.

5 As the World War II veterans and Vietnam era of
6 veterans are moving up, there is definitely going to be a
7 capacity issue at the VA. When you look at the report that
8 just came out early this year, the GAO says it is more cost-
9 efficient to take care of veterans in the state veterans
10 home versus the VA system. I know there is some question
11 about the cost estimates.

12 Do you think Congress should actually start focusing on
13 some of the longer term needs that we have not focused on
14 such as the long-term care needs of our veterans? And if
15 so, what do you think is the best way of dealing with that
16 since, in a lot of states, whether it is Florida or Maine,
17 we have a great, you know, state veterans home operation
18 within different respective states out of there.

19 Any comments on that?

20 Mr. Wallace. I definitely think you should be,
21 Congress should be looking at the state veterans home
22 program and expanding it. It is cost-effective and the
23 quality of life that a veteran or a family member receives
24 in a state veterans home is second to none.

25 I had the privilege many years ago of running the

1 Veterans' Affairs in the Garden State of New Jersey, and I
2 had three nursing homes at that time, veterans homes.

3 You just walk down the hall and some veterans
4 organization was with you and somebody said my television
5 broke. Two hours later they got a brand-new television.

6 They have all the quality of life issues. They have
7 everything. Again, it is cost-effective. It is closer to
8 where the residents of the homes live. It is easier for
9 families to get there. It is just a positive and it is a
10 win-win for everybody. I would urge the Congress to look at
11 that as we go forward.

12 Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much.

13 Thank you Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

14 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

15 Now, we are going to go to other members.

16 Congresswoman Walorski.

17 Ms. Walorski. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 I wanted to add my welcome, Commander Thien, to your
19 wife. It is good to see fellow Hoosiers here. I am so
20 proud of what you have done, and I just wanted to say that I
21 am humbled and honored to be in this room with all of you
22 from the VFW. I just wanted to thank you for your service
23 and let you know that to me you are the hometown heroes all
24 over this country and I am grateful to be serving on the VA
25 Committee and advocating on your behalf. So, thank you for

1 being here today.

2 My question is, Commander, and maybe to Mr. Wallace as
3 well, I share your concern on the five items that you talked
4 about, Commander Thien, and particularly am concerned about
5 the issue of the alarming increase in suicide and have had
6 the horrible misfortune of having that already in my
7 district and I have only been in Congress 15 months. I
8 think horrific.

9 And my question is. Do you think the lack of
10 coordination on the transition services between the DOD and
11 the VA is improper? Is that the place when it comes to
12 transition services that we should be looking at this or
13 what are the recommendations of the VFW?

14 I am all ears when it comes to what more can we do in
15 making sure that we get the proper mental health services to
16 our soldiers.

17 Mr. Wallace. We spend a lot of time on military bases
18 visiting military bases and talking to service members here
19 and overseas. There is still a stigma in the military
20 saying I have a problem. That stigma then relates to what
21 could happen after the fact.

22 There are some good programs out there. One of them is
23 the warrior to vet peer helpline that is set up that DOD has
24 now embraced. It was a National Guard program and it has
25 now expanded to DOD. So, people can call and ask the

1 question is it common to be experiencing this kind of issue
2 or that kind of issue.

3 I think there is also an awareness problem in society.
4 We try to tell our VFW members to talk to someone to see if
5 there is something that does not sound right or seem right
6 that you can do something.

7 The sad thing is one year ago we came to town and one
8 of the individuals who came was an Iraq war veteran, gung
9 ho. He was the first one in the lobby who was going to go
10 visit his congressional delegation. He was the last one at
11 night that took all the notes and everything else. Three
12 days after he left here, he committed suicide. No one had
13 any idea.

14 Further investigation found out that he was a patient
15 at the VA and he was really getting counseling and
16 everything else. He had some real serious problems.

17 So, sometimes you cannot even tell that. But I think
18 the more awareness we get out there is a better.

19 This peer-to-peer group I think that the VA has
20 started, I think there are 1000 of them initially now,
21 should be expanded because that is an opportunity to get it
22 off your chest. Nobody goes into combat and experiences
23 what individuals who are going there see and comes back the
24 same person.

25 We all handle it differently. We may have families

1 that do it. We may have friends that can help and work
2 through it and so forth. Or get us help.

3 So, the more awareness that can promote, the more
4 positive comments that are made by people that it does take
5 a hero to go get help I think is what it is necessary.

6 Also a concern that we have is the VA mental health
7 timeline. The 14 days, you know, that they put into effect,
8 is it really being met or is it not. GAO says it is not.
9 The IG says it is not.

10 Those kind of things I think have to be, you know,
11 firm. When you call for an appointment at VA, someone has
12 got to make sure that they are triaging you and getting you
13 into care if you need that care right away because it took a
14 hero to make that phone call.

15 Ms. Walorski. Absolutely.

16 Mr. Wallace. If you are not under VA care.

17 Ms. Walorski. One quick follow-up question. On the
18 issue of MST, we have been very involved as a Committee on
19 the House side on legislation with MST. What are you
20 hearing from the ranks in the VFW from folks about
21 additional services that need to be provided from the VA
22 about their issues? Are they being addressed?

23 We did some bills on travel reimbursement in rural
24 areas because folks could not even get to places. What are
25 you hearing on MST follow-up from the VA?

1 Mr. Wallace. We are hearing pass the Ruth Moore Act in
2 the Senate. That is number one. We are also hearing that
3 VA is getting better. They are not asking victims to get
4 into a room with a bunch of men and had a counseling
5 session.

6 Ms. Walorski. Yes.

7 Mr. Wallace. They have learned. They are starting to
8 learn. But we are also hearing that there are some barriers
9 out there. People are not very comfortable sometimes and
10 have to get the right clinician and so forth.

11 Again, if we have a list, I will be more than happy to
12 provide it to you.

13 Ms. Walorski. I appreciate it.

14 Mr. Wallace. Because it is a very sensitive issue, and
15 it is male and female.

16 Ms. Walorski. Correct.

17 Mr. Wallace. And we have a couple of males that are
18 part of our organization that come forward to us and ask for
19 help, that said 20 years ago, 25 years ago I experienced
20 something that has been built up in me and with all of this
21 publicity coming out, I finally feel I can talk about it.
22 Can you help me get some care?

23 Ms. Walorski. I appreciated.

24 I yield my time back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

25 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

1 Congressman Walz.

2 Mr. Walz. Thank you, Senator and thank you, Commander,
3 for your testimony. Most importantly thank, all of you, for
4 coming here. You know why you came here. You know why it
5 is important and I often say, looking at his room, it is a
6 visual representation of the conscience of America.

7 If we ever need a reminder, yesterday morning a plane
8 landed at Dover carrying the body of Marine Corporal Caleb
9 Erickson from Waseca, Minnesota, a 20-year-old who was
10 killed by this Nation's enemies in Afghanistan. As the
11 Commander clearly said, this war is far from over.

12 The business we do here is serious business dealing
13 with this Nation's national security and keeping the faith
14 with those who are willing to put themselves on the line.

15 Corporal Erickson's family did that. They will know
16 that pain forever. While it was their son, he is our
17 warrior and that responsibility to get this right, to be 100
18 percent right, is absolutely unwavering.

19 So, I know how frustrating it can be. Some of you have
20 been doing this for decades. Democracy takes active
21 participation. It takes work and you know that.

22 My biggest fear is to ever imagine looking out that
23 this room and not seeing you here. That is the fear we
24 have. So, we have work to do. There are things we can get
25 on.

1 I certainly believe we are capable of doing it. The
2 frustrations we have, and I always say I am the VA's biggest
3 supporter but I am there a harshest critic when they need it
4 and I appreciate this Committee.

5 Chairman Miller has clearly pointed that out where
6 there are shortcomings that need to be addressed and we need
7 to get them.

8 I have one question that I would like to see on this.
9 There is a young man named Jason Erhardt who lost a leg and
10 an arm in Iraq, getting care and rehabilitating.

11 A few years ago, we were able to pass a provision in
12 the Camp Lejeune bill with TBI that said--the VA was taking
13 their responsibility to rehabilitate these folks to a
14 certain level and their goal was to get Jason healthy and
15 they did wonderful care and get him in a wheelchair and then
16 the suggestion to the family was that he may need to be
17 institutionalized in a home.

18 What they did not count on was that was not quite
19 Jason's plan. He decided he would get better, and he
20 decided he would continue to make improvements, and he
21 decided that he did not want to be told. He said, what kind
22 of man wants to be told he has plateaued; I have not
23 plateaued.

24 And then he told me, what kind of man wants to drive a
25 damned minivan. Can they not outfit a truck for me so I can

1 drive that?

2 And, he started talking like that and we said, this
3 Nation has a responsibility to bring those warriors back to
4 the highest possible functioning we can ever get, and we do
5 not know what that level is.

6 Through Senator Sanders and the others who worked on
7 this, Jason's family has helped and the Caregiver Act has
8 helped but it failed them in times. There is more that we
9 can do.

10 My question to you is. Is it time for a National TBI
11 Center, like a PTSD center, to take this outside research?
12 I represent the district that has the Mayo Clinic.

13 There are breakthroughs on the horizon that can bring
14 these warriors back, that can bring their lives back to a
15 level that we could not have imagined. Is that something we
16 need to do? Is that the way to go on this, in your opinion,
17 or not?

18 Mr. Wallace. First of all, I think every, every
19 disabled veteran, every disabled veteran wants to get back
20 to normal life and excel. Your example is just one and
21 there are many more out there.

22 We do not know enough about the brain and the mind and
23 what goes on and how it is affected. We do not know what
24 causes me to have PTSD and not you or you to have it and not
25 me, and we both experienced the same traumatic event.

1 We need to do more research. We need to put more money
2 into it to figure this out and get it right. So that if we
3 figure out that you are susceptible to PTSD, we do not send
4 you into a situation where you may be affected and have that
5 for the rest of your life.

6 I think the National Centers of Excellence are
7 something that should be done. I think DOD and VA should be
8 sharing more of that information and working closer
9 together. They should be in lock step in how they treat
10 people and how they hand them off. I think you are on the
11 right road. We support that.

12 Mr. Walz. Great. We will pursue it.

13 I would like to make one final comment, and on this,
14 Commander, as it was said by my colleagues here, your
15 national staff is second to none. I appreciate that.

16 Bob Wallace has worked closely with us. We have the
17 POW/MIA commission focusing on our counterparts in Russia
18 which is very timely right now where we have worked for
19 decades because of the archives the Russians have that
20 allows us to try to track down and recover our warriors and
21 get them home as we promised.

22 I would encourage all of you, whatever you can do to
23 continue pushing that to make sure that that is a priority
24 because I am always very fearful.

25 We have Senator Chambliss and Manchin over in the

1 Senate and myself and our hero Sam Johnson from Texas to
2 work on that. Through Bob's help, the State Department and
3 others we are making progress.

4 My fear is is that during this time of tension with the
5 Russians we lose some of that momentum and more importantly
6 we lose the commitment that all of you know is so important.

7 It is so much more than people. It is the whole faith
8 and values of this Nation that we continue to strive to make
9 sure that every single one is returned. And, yes, it is
10 hard work; yes, it is long. But we have to keep that open.

11 So, I encourage you to do whatever you can do to
12 continue to push to make that happen, and I yield back.

13 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much.

14 [Applause.]

15 Chairman Sanders. Congressman Coffman.

16 Mr. Coffman Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all
17 for coming here today.

18 Let me just ask one question. How many Colorado VFW
19 members do we have here today? Please raise your hand.
20 That is great. That is great.

21 I come from a long tradition, military tradition in
22 Colorado. My father was a World War II veteran and a Korean
23 War veteran. I was the first Gulf War veteran and an Iraq
24 war veteran, and I am proud to be with you here today as a
25 life member of the VFW. So, thank you.

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Coffman Thank you for your testimony.

3 Mr. Thien, I want to thank you, the VFW, for endorsing
4 my VA Construction Assistance Act that aims to help the
5 major hospital projects underway in Aurora, New Orleans, and
6 Orlando.

7 Would you please elaborate on VFW's position on the
8 ability for VA to successfully construct and manage large-
9 scale facilities such as the one in Aurora? Aside from
10 funding, what reforms should VA look for in order to
11 improve?

12 Mr. Kelley. Thank you, Mr. Coffman. We are happy to
13 support your legislation. I think it is moving in the right
14 direction. The VA has proven time and time again that,
15 given a large scale project, they take too long and they
16 spend too much money to get it done.

17 Your legislation will allow them to use the resources
18 within the Army Corps of Engineers to be a project manager,
19 to make sure there are some efficiencies, that there is a
20 standardized method in which they go about doing each one of
21 these contracts, that there is enough people in place, that
22 there is a single point of contact, not three people
23 responding to one response and giving three different
24 answers to the contractor and do something going in the
25 wrong direction that they have to fix later.

1 So, what you put in your legislation does move in the
2 right direction. We are happy to work with you moving
3 forward.

4 Mr. Coffman Thank you very much.

5 The Transition Assistance Program for our active duty
6 personnel moving into civilian life I am very concerned that
7 there is not an adequate job by the active duty military
8 working in conjunction with the VA to make our returning
9 service members really aware of all the benefits that they
10 have.

11 I really found that to be the case certainly on the
12 issue of apprenticeship programs and on-the-job training
13 that a little known program that allows them to use their GI
14 Bill benefits towards that purpose. What efforts can be
15 made to improve the success of on-the-job training programs
16 to get our vets into great careers?

17 Mr. Wallace, is that your area?

18 Mr. Wallace. That is another awareness issue. TAP has
19 gotten a heck of a lot better. It really has from what it
20 was. Everybody is required to go and they do have the
21 modules that are offered.

22 What we are hearing at some bases is that the
23 contractors who give the presentations cannot answer
24 questions. So, if I asked about apprenticeships, they say
25 okay give me that and we will get back to you; and some of

1 the soldiers, sailors, or Marines are saying that nobody
2 ever gets back to them.

3 So, they are reading a script and they do not have the
4 technical knowledge.

5 Some places, like I was just at Fort Hood last week and
6 at Fort Hood the VA folks work hand-in-hand with the TAP
7 folks; and if they have a question, they will email it to
8 them or they will ask them to come over and clarify it for
9 everybody.

10 It is a learning process, this new TAP program. I
11 think we have got to watch it. You have got to look at it,
12 you know, after it is implemented for 18 months, two years
13 to see where it has got to be fine tuned.

14 But as a former Speaker of the House of Representative
15 said, "All politics is local"; and some facilities like Fort
16 Hood are doing a good job. They are going above and beyond
17 what has to be done to do it.

18 So, I think you have got to continue the oversight and
19 the awareness program. It is an information overload.
20 There is no question about it. When you are sitting there
21 for five days, you are getting information overload. Maybe
22 I do not understand something. I may have been told it but
23 I do not understand it.

24 So, I think we have got to just watch it for now until
25 it grows and matures and fine tune it as we go forward.

1 Mr. Coffman Very quickly. Does the VFW have a
2 position on alternative treatments for TBI, PTSD like
3 hyperbaric oxygen?

4 Mr. Wallace. We have not specifically said hyperbaric
5 oxygen. We spent a lot of time with former the Secretary of
6 the Army who has been pushing hyperbaric oxygen, had a
7 meeting with some staff members on the Hill and so forth.

8 We want all alternative medicine methods looked at. We
9 want anything that can make life more productive and improve
10 the quality of life for America's veterans, our military
11 personnel and families done. So, as I say once in a while
12 if it is flipping a switch on a light and that is going to
13 help them, do it.

14 Hyperbaric has come back with some reports of the
15 trials that were done at Camp Lejeune and the Pendleton, and
16 I think it was Fort Carson, and I think Fort Gordon did the
17 trials. They did not say that it was a benefit to
18 individuals.

19 Yet, there are some tests that have been done in
20 Louisiana and they are doing some good stuff in Colorado.
21 But it is outside the system that is doing it because it is
22 not FDA approved and so forth and so on.

23 If hyperbaric works, we want to promote it. If
24 something else worth, we want it promoted. But the
25 clinicians will not push hyperbaric until the results of

1 these studies and the trials have come back positive. That
2 is the roadblock that veterans are facing. That is why they
3 are going out to the outside to get that treatment.

4 Mr. Coffman I continue that discussion off line. I
5 yield back.

6 Chairman Sanders. Congresswoman Brownley.

7 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I do want
8 to thank the Commander for his testimony today and your
9 written testimony and to thank the VFW for what you do every
10 single day on behalf of our Nation's veterans and for your
11 service to our great country. Thank you very, very much.

12 And, I too would like to recognize any Californian
13 members who are here today that I can offer a warm welcome.
14 Any other California members. Well, thank you for leaving
15 the good weather of California and tolerating our snowy D.C.
16 weather here here. So, thank you very much.

17 I wanted to inquire a little bit more on, Commander, in
18 your written testimony you discussed the need to expand the
19 veterans reach training and assistance program, the VRAP
20 programs, for older veterans.

21 I actually today introduced a bill. I have called it
22 The Help Hire Our Heroes Act, which would extend that
23 program. I certainly could use your help on the bill
24 specifically but would really like you, if you would, to
25 elaborate on what you believe some of the benefits to that

1 program are.

2 Mr. Kelley. Thank you for the question.

3 The benefits are that veterans that do not have any
4 other resource for employment, they are out of every other
5 resource. The state unemployment has run out. They do not
6 have any more GI Bill eligibility. They may have had a
7 career and because technology advanced, they have worked
8 themselves out of a job. They need to be retrained.

9 This is a perfect opportunity for veterans who are a
10 little bit older to get an opportunity to get those basic
11 training skills to get back into the career field.

12 We found with the existing model that it needs to be
13 expanded a little bit. Some four-year colleges probably
14 could provide some of that training. It is limited to two-
15 year institutions which reduces accessibility for a lot of
16 veterans.

17 Some community colleges are good but there are some
18 community colleges that have one program that is a four-year
19 program. That cuts them out. We need to make sure that
20 every program that should be eligible is eligible, not just
21 a narrow focus.

22 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, Mr. Kelley.

23 I also wanted to ask a little bit. I appreciate in
24 your testimony the emphasis on female veterans and their
25 quality of health care with in the VA. I am just wondering.

1 Is there any data that you have? My concern, I agree with
2 the concern and my concern is how we in Congress provide the
3 right oversight, because I am not sure that we have
4 specifically defined all of the needs that we need to
5 undergo to make sure that we are providing parity both in
6 physical health care for women and mental health care for
7 women because I think in both cases that care and that
8 delivery of care may very well be different.

9 So, we have a very large country and expanding women in
10 the military and women veterans, and I am wondering if we
11 have sort of the data to know where the gaps are and what we
12 need to be doing and how we can oversee that.

13 Ms. Nigara. Thank you, Commander, and thank you for
14 that question. I certainly do not have data for that to
15 give you, and I think that maybe we could probably do that.
16 But I can speak personally.

17 I have a unique perspective maybe, that I am a military
18 retiree so I am eligible for TRICARE but I am also a
19 disabled veteran and I use the VA. In fact, I use the VA
20 primarily for my health care.

21 My experience is that women's health care in the VA is
22 inconsistent, as you alluded to, across the country. I live
23 in Jacksonville, Florida. We have a brand-new VA clinic
24 with a very robust women's health care center.

25 It is private, with private entrances and privacy

1 allowed with the veteran and the doctor which I think is
2 important to some women. So, in my experience at my clinic,
3 it is absolutely excellent. I am very happy with it.

4 In fact, I am happier with that than my civilian doctor
5 that I have been TRICARE. But I know that across the
6 country it is not that way in every facility and every
7 clinic.

8 Some of the limitations of physical limitations of the
9 actual clinic, the facility itself. Some may be
10 implementation issues, oversight issues, a variety of
11 things.

12 But I can speak from personal experience in my clinic
13 that I use. Excellent care, excellent doctors. The only
14 complaint that I would have is the consistency and
15 continuity of the doctors that are in the women's clinic.
16 They do not stay very long, and that maybe just a VA problem
17 in general with doctors. I mean, you get comfortable with
18 one doctor, one gynecologist and you had him for a while but
19 they just do not stay very long. And I have a feeling that
20 is across the board in other areas of health care as well.

21 Ms. Brownley. Well, thank you for that. I would very
22 much like to work with you and the VFW so that we, because
23 I do think it is important for us to solve the problem that
24 we have to clearly identify the problem.

25 And, I think we have on a broader scale but I think

1 that that definition has to be very detailed city by city
2 across the country.

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

4 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

5 Senator Boozman.

6 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.
7 It really is a real honor to have you here, Commander Thien,
8 and I want to echo the fact that you have heard so much that
9 your staff in Washington really does do a good job and we
10 really appreciate their help in presenting us with lots of
11 facts when we need them and in pressing forward.

12 The other thing I would like to say is we really do
13 appreciate the Auxiliary. I like to tell the story about, I
14 have got a wife and three daughters, and about being at a
15 meeting that I was very familiar with and I said that the
16 Auxiliary there was the backbone of the organization, and I
17 know that is true in your organization.

18 On my way home, my wife was with me and she said, John,
19 they are not only the backbone, they are the brains.

20 [Laughter.]

21 [Applause.]

22 Senator Boozman. The other thing that is so important
23 again it is great that you are here, Commander, and your
24 team; but the most important thing is that the room is
25 filled with people who have made the trip and Mike and

1 Tamara Switser are from Arkansas are a great example of
2 that.

3 But there is no substitute for you being in the office
4 is personally. I think your team up here can attest to
5 this, talking to your Congressman, talking to the staff and
6 letting them know how important these issues are, not only
7 here but also back in your State and things like that.

8 I would like to talk a little bit about the, you know,
9 trying to get the not just for mandatory counts but for the
10 discretionary spending also so that we can have extended
11 budgeting periods.

12 I agree with you, Mr. Wallace, that, you know, we have
13 got some real problems with leadership and things in the VA
14 and we have got tremendous people that are working hard.

15 But how much more do we compound that problem if you do
16 not know what your budget is going to be until you get into
17 the cycle? We had a great displaying of, you know, we have
18 got something accomplished here.

19 A few weeks ago we pass an appropriations bill. The
20 problem was it was three months late. How does any
21 business, how does any family, you know, run their own
22 finances when you simply do not know what your funding is?

23 So again, can you all comment a little bit more about
24 how important that would be to get this done?

25 Mr. Wallace. Funding is the key. The issue of more

1 veterans into the VA and the unknown cost is something we
2 have talked about at length. There are some precautions
3 that have to be made.

4 Number one, we have to make sure that the disabled
5 veterans are a top priority. Number two, we have to figure
6 out a source of income. Maybe it is the veteran who comes
7 in and has to pay more money.

8 Number three, we have to put in some restrictions to
9 make sure that I as a medical center director are not going
10 after those people instead of taking care of disabled
11 veterans.

12 I think it is a positive idea but I think it is
13 something we have to work through, and we talked to the
14 staff about doing that, to make sure that we can give
15 veterans the opportunity, if they want to come into the
16 system, to come in; and if they are not service-connected,
17 then there is a price for admission and so forth.

18 But then we get to the capacity issue which how many
19 can come in at one time, and that is what all has to be
20 studied. But again, I think we should give the veterans
21 that opportunity but we have got to look at all the corners
22 and so forth.

23 Senator Boozman. We appreciate that. The other thing
24 on the, you know, the Committee, House and Senate, worked
25 very, very hard. You all worked very, very hard to get a

1 very, very robust GI Bill passed, and we can be very proud
2 of that.

3 The idea that we cannot get state institutions or
4 institutions in general to apply in-state tuition makes the
5 most sense to me. We are literally as a result of testing
6 that bill have dumped many, many millions of dollars into
7 their coffers, and like I say, that is something that we
8 need to get done.

9 In regard to veterans' suicides, you know, it is such a
10 complicated effort, not a complicated effort but a
11 complicated situations. We have got a lot of veterans who
12 have not overtly killed themselves but they are drinking
13 themselves to death.

14 They are self-medicating or they are using prescription
15 drugs or other things that they should not be doing. They
16 tell us that half of the, around half of the people that
17 have committed suicide had never been deployed.

18 So, it is not an easy situation. And then, in the
19 veterans' community, you know, the average age is older, you
20 know, up around 50. So, what I would like to do is is
21 really, you know, anything you can do to survey your
22 members, anything that you can do to help us with the root
23 cause would be very, very helpful.

24 My concern, and I think we are better at this now, is
25 simply the VA, we put so much pressure on them and you all

1 put pressure, we put pressure that they are doing a much
2 better job.

3 There is a tendency sometimes to medicate individuals
4 in an effort to do something rather than getting to the
5 underlying causes and then in some individuals instead of
6 that helping it goes the other way. I think it actually
7 makes the situation much worse where individuals become
8 suicidal.

9 So, can you comment on that a little bit for us?

10 Mr. Wallace. DOD was atrocious for just giving people
11 medications. They give them 90 days worth of medications,
12 set them out on the street, and let them go get a VA
13 appointment, get another 90 days worth of and you could sell
14 them on the street, trade with people who use alcohol or
15 what-have-you.

16 They have gotten better than that. The warrior
17 transition units and the wounded warrior regiments now have
18 case managers who manage and most people that are on really
19 powerful drugs do not get more than seven days supply and
20 are monitored constantly.

21 But that does not prevent them from going out on the
22 street and doing it if they are not taking care of the other
23 causes that they have with the drugs.

24 I think VA is getting better at it. I could never sit
25 here and tell you that throughout the whole VA system they

1 are erring to what should be done because, as you say, the
2 easiest way to take care of a patient is to just give them
3 the drugs and say that will keep quiet. That is not what we
4 want to do. We want to take care of that individual in the
5 right way.

6 I think it is getting better from what we have seen in
7 the past but there still is a long way to go.

8 Senator Boozman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

10 Congressman O'Rourke.

11 Mr. O'Rourke. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 Commander Thien, I would like to give you my
13 perspective as a freshman member of Congress new to the
14 Veterans' Affairs Committee in the House and just thank you
15 and your team and the members of the VFW for helping to make
16 this a successful year for us and to get up to speed on the
17 issues where we did not have the subject matter expertise,
18 meeting with our staff, the testimony from Mr. Kelley, Mr.
19 Wallace and others on the Subcommittee on which I serve and
20 your feedback on legislation that we have worked on to
21 improve that legislation has been invaluable.

22 So, I just wanted to thank you and tell you that it has
23 made this first term in Congress so far very effective for
24 us and I really appreciate what you and the VFW do.

25 Of the issues that you brought up in your testimony,

1 perhaps the most acute for the constituents and veterans
2 that I serve is access to mental health care and to mental
3 health care providers in El Paso, Texas.

4 We serve nearly 80,000 veterans in that VHA clinic
5 right now. We have had a very hard time fully staffing the
6 manning named table as prescribed. A very difficult time
7 recruiting and retaining mental health care providers.

8 We have gone so far as, I have personally called
9 recruits, a psychiatrist that we were trying to hire in El
10 Paso. We worked with the local VHA to hold them
11 accountable.

12 We have had numerous meetings with Dr. Petzel to make
13 sure that we are getting to that 14-day commitment that we
14 have so far failed to do.

15 We are working on legislation right now that would give
16 psychologists the authority and responsibility of
17 prescribing, something that happens in the Department of
18 Defense right now. And to Mr. Wallace's point about that
19 being an easy fix prescribing versus, you know, a
20 comprehensive therapy, we understand that danger but we also
21 have a shortage in prescribers in El Paso.

22 I think about, when I was campaigning for this office,
23 meeting a young, very young Afghan war vet who had PTSD, was
24 in El Paso, did not have family or friends or a network or
25 roots in that community, was attending community college on

1 this post-9/11 GI Bill, working in a restaurant at nights,
2 told me he had PTSD and was supposed to see a therapist
3 every week.

4 He said he was lucky if he got in every six or eight
5 weeks. Every time he went in, it was a different counselor
6 or therapist. So, there was no continuity in care.

7 And since then, since I have been in office, I found
8 that the problem is worse than we thought. We surveyed the
9 veterans in the community. 25 percent who have tried to
10 make a mental health care appointment were not able to make
11 one within 12 months.

12 So, given some of the things that I have described that
13 we are working on, what would you or someone else on the
14 panel that is there with you, what would you recommend that
15 we do in addition to what we are doing right now.

16 Mr. Wallace. That is a good question. Seriously,
17 there are not enough mental health providers in the country;
18 and if I am one, I may not want to come to Texas. That is
19 another problem, you know, where they are.

20 That is why this PC3 is positive to get, they have a
21 network of mental health people that they used to use,
22 TriWest does, that used to be used for DOD or TRICARE. So,
23 you have a cadre of people there that can help them. But it
24 is a difficult issue.

25 The other side of that is that we are very concerned

1 that they do not lower the standards of what they consider a
2 mental health professional.

3 If I graduate today with a degree, a Bachelor's Degree
4 in sociology, am I a mental health professional? No. I
5 have got a long way to go to get to that degree. So, we are
6 also riding VA to make sure that they do not do that.

7 They have got to do more work with universities so that
8 they groom people down the road but that is not helping
9 today in Waco or wherever or New Jersey or Connecticut or
10 Wyoming. It is just not doing it today. It is a real
11 serious problem.

12 I feel sorry for that veteran who is supposed to be
13 seen every week who is not being seen in 12 weeks. I mean,
14 that individual has got some real serious mental health
15 problems and somebody should be watching him very carefully,
16 and the VA is negligent by not seeing him. I mean, that is
17 unacceptable.

18 Mr. O'Rourke. I would just add that it is not
19 exclusive to these young veterans returning from Afghanistan
20 and Iraq. I have met with a PTSD support group for Vietnam
21 era veterans on several occasions. The shortcomings in
22 access and capacity are being felt by them as well.

23 It really begs the question asked by the Senator
24 earlier when we talk about meeting our commitments before we
25 add additional services. You know, I would take it one step

1 further and I do not know that we can add additional wars
2 and add additional commitments when we cannot take care of
3 the veterans who have served in the wars so far, and that is
4 always present in my mind as we look at commitments that we
5 are making around the world.

6 [Applause.]

7 Mr. O'Rourke. So, with that, I will yield back.

8 Mr. Wallace. If I may just say one other comment. The
9 vet centers are a very positive program. We should be
10 encouraging the VA to get more Vet Centers going on because
11 they are right out in the community. People who go do not
12 feel comfortable in going into a VA medical center and so
13 forth. That is a very positive program. If we expand
14 those, it would be a plus for all veterans, because Vietnam
15 veterans are using Vet Centers than current war veterans
16 are.

17 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

18 Senator Hirono.

19 Senator Hirono. Thank you, Chairman Sanders. And
20 Chairman Miller, good to see you.

21 I want to add my thanks to all of you who are here for
22 your service and I particularly would like to give a shout
23 out to the VFW folks who have traveled from sunny Hawaii to
24 cold D.C. That is what I call solidarity and commitment.

25 So, Frank Bragg and your wife Susan, George Bartlett,

1 Norbred Ennis, Fred Chang. Aloha.

2 We have gone through a number of questions that runs
3 the range from how do we provide adequate health care,
4 mental health care, how do we address the military sexual
5 trauma issues, et cetera. So, I am really glad to have sat
6 in for all of those questions.

7 Now, Commander Thien, you do mention in your testimony
8 that it would be helpful if you could get third-party
9 billing, reimbursements mainly from Medicare for the non-
10 service-related health care services that are provided by
11 VA.

12 Do you have an idea as to how much reimbursement this
13 would be?

14 Anyone can answer.

15 Mr. Kelley. Thank you for the question. I will follow
16 up. I think it is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$3
17 billion a year.

18 Senator Hirono. \$3 billion. So, you could do a lot
19 with \$3 billion a year.

20 Mr. Kelley. Absolutely.

21 Senator Hirono. Although, of course, that creates I
22 suppose a challenge for Medicare which is having its own
23 issues.

24 I also note, Commander Thien, in your testimony that
25 you mentioned the new GI Bill comparison tool that the VA

1 recently released with the Department of Education, and so,
2 this is to enable veterans to really comparison shop with
3 various institutions of higher learning, and I think that is
4 great.

5 However, for example, I did log onto the University of
6 Hawaii and the information given under the University of
7 Hawaii, and I noted that one of the pieces of information
8 that I think would be really helpful is how much is the
9 actual cost of going to the University of Hawaii and what
10 would be the gap between that actual cost and what the GI
11 Bill would cover.

12 So, would not that kind of information which I am told
13 is available be good to include in this new tool?

14 Mr. Kelley. I will answer that one as well. VA has
15 just recently rolled out its comparison tool. It is on
16 their website. You can find it in there. And yes, the TAP
17 program should be leading veterans or service members know
18 as they leave that that is a place for them to go as they
19 make their college career choices, what is best for them,
20 what is the most cost-effective for them, where the programs
21 are that they want to take part in.

22 Senator Hirono. But would you agree that there could
23 probably be more information that would be helpful to enable
24 the veteran to make a good choice?

25 Mr. Kelley. Access to the information, yes.

1 I would like to wait and see how the comparable tool
2 works. We have used it. We sat around the office and used
3 it and thought, holy cow, that is very good. It is very
4 comprehensive. It will allow you to compare anything from
5 prices to the degree programs. But service members and
6 veterans do need to know that that tool is there.

7 Senator Hirono. Yes.

8 Mr. Kelley. So, what we can do to outreach, to make
9 that known to them needs to be--

10 Senator Hirono. I would agree. The first thing is
11 that they should know is that it is available to them and
12 the second thing is that we want to make sure that the
13 information contained therein is as informative as possible.

14 So, having looked at what was in the University of
15 Hawaii information, I think that we probably could put a
16 little more without adding to the cost of the whole thing.
17 Okay.

18 I know that there are various federal veterans
19 preference programs, laws, for example, in employment and
20 contracting, et cetera. Has VFW done any analysis on these
21 preference laws as to which ones really work, where
22 improvements could be made, et cetera, because we want to
23 make sure that what we put in place really does the job?
24 And maybe there are certain programs that work really well
25 to enable our veterans to come back and have the kind of

1 quality of life and work that they are entitled to?

2 Anybody want to respond to that?

3 Mr. Kelley. I do not know if there has been clear
4 analysis of what has worked great and what has not. If you
5 look across departments, you see some Department of
6 Veterans' Affairs, DOD that have very high hiring of
7 veterans. You go to the Department of Energy, it is very
8 low.

9 It may be skill set. It may be the desire of the
10 individual veteran of where they go. So, meeting that 3
11 percent may not always be there.

12 Also on contracting, getting service disabled and
13 veteran-owned businesses to get those contracts, that
14 process needs to be a little easier. Getting their name
15 into the system right now is a little tough so we need to
16 figure out how to get their business into the pool of
17 businesses that can get those contracts a little bit easier.

18 Senator Hirono. So, some kind of analysis would
19 probably be useful.

20 With your indulgence, Mr. Chairman, I just want to make
21 a note that since there are so many questions relating to
22 how we provide mental health services to our vets, I just
23 want to note that David Frankel in his most recent book,
24 "Thank You For Your Service" notes that there are some
25 500,000 of our troops who have come back from service in

1 Afghanistan and Iraq who are mentally wounded.

2 So, the need is great.

3 Thank you.

4 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much.

5 [Applause.]

6 Chairman Sanders. Let me wrap up the hearing by
7 thanking all of you for coming to the Nation's Capital from
8 all over the country, thanking Commander Thien and his great
9 staff for their comments and response to our questions.

10 In a sense what you have seen this morning is what you
11 have fought for. This is democracy. What this means is
12 that our job who have been elected from states all over the
13 country is to listen to your needs.

14 You elected us, you defended this country, and what our
15 job is now to work in a nonpartisan way and I really want to
16 say that I think in the House and in the Senate, you are
17 looking at Committees that are serious about these issues
18 and I believe that we are going to overcome a lot of the
19 partisan nonsense which takes place here in Washington.

20 That, in fact, we are going to do the job that you sent
21 us here to Washington to do, and with your help we are going
22 to pass some strong legislation that will make you all
23 proud.

24 Thank you all very much for being here today.

25 [Applause.]

1 [Whereupon, at 11:49 a.m., the Committee was
2 adjourned.]