



Chairman Hal Rogers

House Committee on Appropriations

FY 2017 Budget Hearing: Department of Veterans Affairs
March 2, 2016
Opening Statement As Prepared

Mr. Chairman, thank you for yielding. Secretary McDonald, I appreciate you taking the time to be here today. I welcome you back to the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs subcommittee.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is entrusted with one of the most central responsibilities of our Government – providing comprehensive care for our veterans and ensuring that they enjoy the highest quality of life after they have served. With the high number of young veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and the number of disabled veterans rising, the challenges facing your Department are mounting on several fronts. Our veterans deserve and have been guaranteed access to quality healthcare, timely decisions on their disability filings, as well as assistance with education and employment – and they look to your Department to fulfill each of these promises.

Not so long ago, we learned of negligence and mismanagement at the VA that left veterans on waitlists for critical healthcare services for months at a time. Last summer, one year after these facts surfaced, we received reports that the waitlists had increased by 50% in one year's time – even after this Congress appropriated \$15 billion dollars to reduce the waitlists and hire more caregivers. To this day, the magnitude of the waitlist problem remains unclear and the VA Inspector General is just now beginning to release the findings of their investigation into the 73 hospitals across the country that forced our veterans to wait for care – care that in many cases never came. You and I both know that treating our veterans with this level of disregard is utterly unacceptable and truly deplorable. Everyone on this panel wants to hear more about what you are doing to bring these wait times down and offer our vets the care they deserve.

Congress has responded to this challenge by offering veterans the option of accessing care outside of the VA system through the VA Choice Program, and we need to continue to have a national conversation about the optimal way to match each veteran with the healthcare provider that will best serve them. At the same time, we must continue to move forward with initiatives aimed at modernizing and streamlining VA programs and services. Digitizing VA medical records has been an important focus of this Congress for several years, and we have been pressing the Department to get this done for some time now. Mr. Secretary, you have requested a funding increase for the digitization of VA medical records in your Fiscal Year 2017 budget request. This Committee appreciates the Department's prioritizing of this project this year, and we support your efforts to make the claims process more efficient and reduce the backlog of veterans claims. Our veterans seeking access to their rightfully earned benefits are depending on us.

Finally, I know you are well aware of the epidemic of prescription drug abuse facing our civilian population and our veterans. This time last year, we discussed the troubling news that at least one VA hospital had been overprescribing opioids and contributing to this epidemic that we have been fighting so hard to prevent. We now know that at least one veteran lost his life because the proper prescribing protocols weren't followed and the staff on hand was not equipped to intervene. I am pleased to see that the VA Inspector General investigated this unfortunate case, and that the facility is now investing in training programs for its employees to prevent such a tragedy from reoccurring. This Committee is interested to know how the Department is acting to ensure that this sort of mismanagement and recklessness is not occurring at other facilities and that it never happens again under our watch. You have a committed partner in this Committee in the fight against opioid abuse and addiction among our veterans, and we stand ready to provide you with the support you need in this effort.

I look forward to learning how the Department plans to serve our veterans, and guarantee them timely access to quality care, after they have so honorably served our nation in uniform. Thank you.

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