

**Statement of
Larry Zimmerman
Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the
United States House
Committee on Veterans Affairs**

August 14, 2014

Good morning Chairman Miller, Vice Chairman Bilirakis, Representative Noem, and members of the committee. I am pleased to be here today to present our concern with the healthcare challenges faced by veterans in rural America.

My name is Larry D. Zimmerman and I serve as Governor Dugaard's Secretary of the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs. Our Department is the voice for South Dakota's 75,000 veterans. I served active duty Army from 1973-1976 in the 4th Infantry Division at Ft Carson, Colorado, and served 29 years in the South Dakota National Guard, most recently serving at the State Command Sergeant Major. I had the distinct honor to complete a tour of duty in Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom as the Operations SGM for the nine Northern provinces in that country.

South Dakota is fortunate to have three VA healthcare facilities in our state, 12 community based outpatient clinics and three vet centers. We are fortunate to have 66 county veterans service officers and seven tribal veterans service officers and over 20 veterans service organizations that are committed to enhancing the lives of our veterans.

In 1889 the Grand Army of the Republic secured territorial legislation to construct a veterans home. It's our understanding that Dakota Territory was the first of all territories to provide a home for their veterans. In 1907 the Battle Mountain Sanitarium opened its doors in Hot Springs to focus on short term medical needs of veterans. Although over the years, both facilities have changed names, the VA Black Hills Health Care System and the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home have worked together to provide care for our veterans for over 107 years.

Veteran's healthcare is a critical issue and it is important that we honor the promise to take care of those individuals who secured and protected our freedoms. During a one-year window, Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home transported our heroes to the VA healthcare facilities in Hot Springs 1,272 times for urgent care, eye-care, dental care, dialysis, respiratory care, x-rays, urology, podiatry, and mental healthcare. In addition, during that same one-year time frame, 40 heroes were admitted to acute care at the VABHHCS in Hot Springs and 108 were transported to Rapid City via the VA. Additionally, thousands of veterans drive from other states, tribal lands and many of South Dakota's most rural areas to receive medical care.

Our heroes deserve the opportunity to enjoy the rest of their lives and be assured that they will have access to quality healthcare. South Dakota has a strong legacy of taking care of our veterans and we at the Michael J. Fitzmaurice State Veterans Home will guarantee that our heroes needs will be taken care of no matter what decisions are made of.

In closing, I appreciate the support that your Committee has given us on all issues relating to veterans and I appreciate the invitation to present this information with you and I will be pleased to answer any questions you may have.