

**Opening Statement of
The Honorable Jeff Miller, Chairman
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

**Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees to Receive the
Legislative Presentation of the Disabled American Veterans**

**Tuesday, February 23, 2016
345 Cannon House Office Building
2:00 PM**

The Committee will come to order.

Good afternoon.

Commander McIntosh, and members of the DAV members and of the DAV Auxiliary, it is my privilege to welcome you to today's joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees to receive the legislative priorities of The Disabled American Veterans.

In the interest of time and in keeping with the tradition of these hearings, after my opening remarks, I will recognize, Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Brown, and Ranking Member Blumenthal, and I would ask all other Committee members to waive their opening statements.

There will be an opportunity for remarks following your testimony.

Hearing no objection, so ordered.

I would like to give a hearty welcome to DAV Commander David McIntosh Jr. Commander McIntosh is a service-connected Desert Shield and Desert Storm veteran of both the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Army. Following his medical retirement from the U.S. Army at the rank of Chief Warrant Officer in 1997, Commander McIntosh has dedicated his life to his family and serving his fellow disabled veterans. So I thank you commander for your many years of service in and out of uniform, and for being here with us today. I also want to acknowledge Ms. Linda Stake the Commander of the DAV Auxiliary. Thank you for being here ma'am and for representing all of the often unpublicized good work the DAV auxiliary does every single day to meet DAV's goals. I suspect the DAV could not meet its goals without the help of the auxiliary.

Finally, I want to welcome all of the DAV members who have traveled here from my home state of Florida. Would you all please stand or waive your hands? Thank you.

It continues to be a challenging time for veterans and the Department of Veterans Affairs and I thank DAV members across the country for supporting our efforts and for being a tremendous voice for veterans. Your professional and responsive DC staff does a great job of sharing DAV's message and priorities with Members of Congress. They let us know what they hear from you about what is really happening on the front lines at VA facilities across the country. Without your input, we would not be able to do our jobs nor would we be able to improve benefits for

veterans and continue our efforts to help Secretary McDonald transform VA into the department that you all deserve.

With your help, Commander, we will continue to praise and advocate for VA when they deserve it, we will also continue to meet our Constitutional responsibilities to provide proper oversight and challenge the Secretary when the Department falls short of what our veterans deserve. As the former VA administrator General Omar Bradley once said “We are dealing with veterans, not procedures; with their problems, not ours.” We must force VA to indoctrinate this sentiment into their culture and provide world class services to veterans. I know we can all agree that veterans and their families deserve no less.

First among our oversight priorities will be the continued implementation of the Choice program and review of the Secretary’s plan for consolidating care in the community. As I have always said community VA- paid based care is an increasingly important access point of veterans across the country that is designed to supplement, not supplant, the care that is provided in VA medical facilities.

The challenge that we have as we go forward, is striking the appropriate balance between care provided in VA facilities and care provided in the community so that we can ensure veterans are able to access the services they need in a timely manner. We also must also recognize community providers as partners in providing high-quality care to veteran patients and, as such, we must ensure that VA promptly pays for the services they provide.

While we all know the implementation of the Choice program has not been as smooth as we would like, it is important that Congress and VA continue to work with VSO’s like DAV to identify and quickly address problems in the current Choice program we must ensure that the future community care consolidation incorporates the right lessons learned and is set up for success. Importantly, we will continue to rely on valuable input that the DAV’s leaders and members provide as we move forward in those fronts to veterans.

Another major focus will be the backlog of disability claims. While it is worth noting the great work VA has done in reducing the claims backlog, there is still work that needs to be done, and unfortunately, as many in this room can attest, we have to take VA’s numbers with a grain of salt. We know that while the backlog of claims has been reduced, this has come at the expense of production on appeals, non-rating work, and vocational rehabilitation and education claims.

Commander, I know you share my concern about how important all VA claims can be to veterans and we won’t be satisfied until all backlogs are eliminated. VA continues to be given generous increases in resources year after year and now is the time for them to stop focusing on rushed and incomplete production and to instead, focus on quality.

I know DAV has argued for years that VBA’s culture and processes must change to ensure employees are adjudicating disability claims properly the first time. Their inability to complete claims right on first attempt is setting up, what some are calling a tsunami of appeals that is

about to hit the Department. I want to collaborate with DAV and VA and combine our ideas to bring about meaningful reform to the appeals system.

The final issue I want to touch on is improving accountability at the Department. All of the policy goals that you are going to highlight, Commander, cannot be accomplished if good employees are forced to continue to work with employees that don't share in the mission of service to veterans. The majority of VA's employees are great workers who put veterans first but for that small minority of employees that don't, the Secretary must have the tools he needs to properly hold them accountable for their actions. That is why the VA Accountability Act is critically important for VA's success and I welcome your support for our efforts.