

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Jeff Miller
Chairman, Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives
Oversight Hearing**

*“From Tumult to Transformation:
The Commission on Care and the Future of the VA Healthcare System”*

**Wednesday, September 7, 2016, at 10:30 a.m.
334 Cannon House Office Building**

The Committee will come to order.

Good morning and thank you all for joining us for today's oversight hearing, “From Tumult to Transformation: The Commission on Care and the Future of the VA Healthcare System.”

The Commission on Care was established two years ago by the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act and tasked with examining access to care and how best to organize the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system and deliver care to our nation's veterans over the next two decades.

The Commission's final report was delivered at the end of June and with us today to discuss it and the eighteen recommendations it includes are Commission on Care Chairperson, Ms. Nancy Schlichting, and Vice Chairperson, Dr. Delos (Toby) Cosgrove.

I want to thank them for being here today and I want to express my gratitude to them and to all of the Commissioners for the time and effort they put into the Commission's important work.

I also want to thank the many veterans service organizations (VSOs) and other stakeholders that provided statements for the record for today's hearing.

The advice, counsel, and support offered by our VSO partners is vital to the work that this Committee does everyday on behalf of America's veterans.

I am personally grateful for the input that they have provided me as Chairman and will, I'm sure, continue to provide this Committee as Congress moves forward to strengthen the VA healthcare system for future generations of American heroes.

Like me, the VSOs are - by and large - supportive of many of the recommendations the Commission has made.

The Commission rightly recognizes that the current VA health care system has many strengths as well as many weaknesses.

Moving forward, it will be important to ensure that any transformative effort VA undergoes preserves those strengths – which include, in many cases, the provision of care equal in quality to that available outside the Department's walls.

However, VA's weaknesses – which include persistent access failures, noncompliance with federal prompt pay laws, a lack of accountability, a bloated and self-preserving bureaucracy, and billions of taxpayer dollars lost to financial mismanagement of construction projects, IT programs, bonuses for poor performing employees and more - are legion and growing.

This is evidenced by not only the Commission's almost three hundred page final report but also by the thousands of pages that made up last year's Independent Assessment, the years of work performed by this Committee, the Government Accountability Office, the VA Inspector General and others, and - most importantly - by the daily experiences of the millions of veterans who rely on VA for care and are all too often left disappointed.

I wholly agree with the Commission's call for creating an integrated VA community care system, modernizing VA's outdated IT systems, better managing VA's vast capital assets, reorganizing the massive and unfocused Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Central Office, reviewing eligibility for care in light of the modern healthcare landscape, and more.

However, I disagree - - as does the Administration and many of the VSOs - with the Commission's call for the establishment of a board of directors to provide governance, set long-term strategy, and direct and oversee reform.

The Commission is right to recognize that VA's position as our nation's second largest Federal bureaucracy carries inherent challenges that are deserving of our detailed consideration.

However, given the crises that seems to erupt anew on an almost daily basis where VA is concerned, any efforts to shield the VA healthcare system from Executive and Legislative branch oversight is a non-start.

Outsourcing the crucial role of a cabinet secretary to an independent board that is neither elected nor accountable to the American people would be irresponsible and inappropriate, not to mention unconstitutional.

The debt that our nation owes to her veterans is a debt that we all share and the Commission's work represents the culmination of a unique moment in history for VA and the veterans VA exists to serve.

There have been and likely will be other Commissions devoted to examining VA and how well the Department is meeting its most important mission – providing accessible, high quality care to our nation's veterans.

But, it is incumbent on all of us to not let the work of this Commission fall by the wayside like so many other studies have.

The scandals that have characterized VA for the last several years have opened the door to finally changing the systemic, cultural, and deeply entrenched problems facing the VA healthcare system.

Ignoring this opportunity would be a dereliction of our duty.

Translating that momentum into lasting and meaningful reform will require a commitment to having uncomfortable conversations about how - as a nation - we can begin to pay the debt we owe the men and women of our Armed Forces and to taking the risks necessary to challenge the status quo that has left them wanting and waiting.

Whoever sits in this chair after me will be responsible for - and I am sure more than capable of - moving the ball forward and I am hopeful that today's hearing will help set the tone for that effort.