

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Phil Roe
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Joint Hearing on the Legislative Presentation of Disabled American Veterans
(DAV)**

February 28, 2017

Good afternoon, Commander David Riley, DAV members and members of the DAV Auxiliary.

It is an honor and a privilege for me to be here with Ranking Members Walz and Tester to welcome you all to today's joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees to receive the legislative presentation of Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

Unfortunately Senator Isakson is on medical leave today and will not be able to attend this hearing. I believe I can speak for the rest of the dais in wishing him a very speedy recovery.

DAV represents perhaps the most humbling cohort of American veteran servicemen and women -those who have given up their health and mobility in wartime service of this great nation. Before we continue with my opening remarks, I'd like to take a moment to personally thank you all for your service and sacrifice in uniform, as well as your continued service through DAV.

I want to extend a special welcome to Commander Dave Riley and his wife, Yvonne.

Sir - thank you for your years of service in both the Army and Coast Guard, for your leadership within DAV, and for being with us here today.

I also want to welcome the rest of DAV's national leadership team, as well as the DAV members from my home state of Tennessee who are in our audience today.

Would those of you from Tennessee please stand or raise your hand and be recognized? [APPLAUSE]

I also want to welcome and acknowledge the members here from the DAV Auxiliary. I know many of you wear many hats as volunteers, spouses and caregivers and I want to thank you all for your selfless commitment to serving those who have served.

DAV members across the country provide an invaluable voice for veterans and that voice has perhaps never been more important than it is today. As Commander Riley noted in his personal story, DAV representatives are ever-present both on and off VA campuses, helping injured or ill service men and women navigate the reality of the injuries they sustained while serving.

I want to give a very special, heart-felt thank you to DAV for the disaster relief work performed in Gatlinburg –in my district in Northeast Tennessee. As many of you may know, fierce wildfires hit the Gatlinburg area of the Great Smoky Mountains in November of last year. These wildfires caused 14 deaths, countless fire-related injuries and over half a billion dollars in damage across the county. As the fires still smoldered, DAV first responders were on the ground providing supplies, support and nearly \$30,000 to displaced veterans and their families in the area.

On behalf of the veterans of East Tennessee, THANK YOU.

Over the last three years, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has faced an ongoing access and accountability crisis, ballooning construction mismanagement that has led to one project running a billion dollars over budget, and an unprecedented and last minute budget shortfall that threatened the Secretary's ability to keep the doors open at hospitals and clinics from coast to coast.

In responding to the many crises VA faces, my focus will be:

- To fulfil the Committee's Constitutional responsibility to provide aggressive, top-to-bottom oversight of the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that veterans have timely access to high-quality health care and benefits,
- That poor-performing VA leaders are held appropriately accountable for failing to provide the service that our veterans have earned and deserve, and
- To foster an agenda focused on problem-solving and results, bringing together stakeholders and policymakers to build a better future for VA.
- To revamp VA's outdated legacy IT infrastructure, especially with regards to interoperability of electronic health records.

That said, first among the Committee's current priorities is improving and consolidating the Choice program, which is set to expire in August. We will work to remove the sunset date and allow VA to use the projected \$1 billion in leftover emergency funding which remains in the Veterans Choice Fund, to continue the Choice Program while we work on a comprehensive overhaul of the how VA authorizes non-VA care.

Moving forward, we are going to consolidate VA's multiple care in the community programs under one roof, which will simplify and improve how community care works for VA, for community providers, and - most importantly - for the veterans who need it.

Let me assure you that - throughout that effort - we are going to continue to view community care as a way to supplement, *not* supplant, the care that is provided in VA medical facilities.

We are also going to continue to rely on the valuable feedback from DAV and other stakeholders as we work together to find the best model of care for the VA health care system, and in working to establish a network of community providers under the coordination of care from VA.

DAV's leaders here in Washington have provided essential information - from anecdotal evidence to survey data to important testimony - regarding the successes and shortcomings of the Choice program since it was first created and their ongoing feedback continues to be critical.

I am pleased to see that healthcare for female veterans is a DAV priority included in your testimony, Commander Riley. As a veteran and retired OB/GYN who took care of the unique health needs of female patients for the VA Medical Center in my home town of Johnson City, Tennessee, I am fully supportive of increasing access care for the fastest growing minority of veterans.

The disability claims process is yet another area where DAV's leadership is critical.

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 Riley, I know you share my concern about how important all VA claims are to veterans and, like me, won't be satisfied until all backlogs are eliminated.

We look forward to continuing our partnership with DAV and all stakeholders to address these important claims issues.

As you can see, there is a lot of work still ahead of us.

However, I am optimistic that as our Committee works together with the Senate and the members of the DAV, we can serve our nation's veterans as they have served us.