

Opening Statement of the Honorable Chairman David P. Roe M.D.
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of The American Legion

Wednesday, March 1, 2017
10:00 A.M.

Good morning everyone. Let me begin by congratulating Commander Schmidt on his election as the Legion's National Commander at the 98th National convention last summer. He is a decorated Air Force retiree with many years of service to this nation, to the American Legion, and to our veterans.

I would say to his bride, Linda that she and their two daughters and six grandchildren have much to be proud of.

I also want to send a hearty welcome to National Auxiliary President Mary E. Davis. Ms. Davis thank you for what you and members of the Auxiliary do every day for veterans, servicemembers, and their families.
Thank you for being here.

Commander, I look forward to our discussion today about the American Legion's legislative priorities for this first session of the 115th Congress.

For many years, the American Legion has served as a source of guidance for those of us serving veterans here in Congress. We value your input and we are grateful for your continued service to the Nation and to our communities.

I know that many of you have traveled from across the country to be here today. In particular, I would like to recognize members from my home state of Tennessee who are in the audience. Would you please stand or raise your hand and be recognized?

Thank you for leaving the beautiful volunteer state to join us here today.

Over the course of my eight plus years in Congress and as a member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I have seen some of the good work that the Department of Veterans Affairs and its employees do on behalf of veterans on a daily basis – such as providing quality healthcare, fully implementing the new GI bill, guaranteeing thousands of home loans for veterans, and providing a dignified final resting place to forever memorialize our Nation's heroes.

Unfortunately, I have also seen a seemingly endless parade of mismanagement and waste at VA. Examples include the billions wasted on questionable I-T projects and lavish spending at certain VA medical centers on art. And do not forget the billion dollar overrun for the major hospital construction project in Denver that remains far from complete.

And without a doubt, as a doctor and veteran myself, the most egregious failure I have seen was the corrosive culture that allowed unscrupulous employees to manipulate scheduling data while patients languished and died waiting for care.

It's been close to three years since the nationwide scheduling scandal was first exposed. Since that time, VA has undergone massive leadership changes that I believe are putting the Department back on the right track. However, it is obvious that more changes are needed as serious organizational problems remain entrenched.

In our efforts to reform how VA manages its people by instilling a new sense of accountability in its workforce, the Legion has been a stalwart ally in our efforts and I thank you for that support.

I am confident that each of you are held accountable in your jobs just as I know we all were when we wore the uniform. VA employees, especially senior employees, should be equally accountable. Accountability must be ingrained into the VA mission for veterans.

Obviously we have more to do but with the Legion's continued support, I look forward to engaging in that effort. Clearly, it is going to take a sustained oversight effort on a bipartisan and bicameral basis to support the cultural change that the new Secretary has admitted is needed at VA.

We have been working closely with Secretary Shulkin and I hope to unveil a new accountability bill this week.

Another top priority of mine for this Congress is to provide the necessary changes to the VA Choice Program so veterans can receive the high quality healthcare they deserve whether that is at a VA facility or from a qualified health care provider in the community.

Secretary Shulkin accepts the need for outside healthcare providers so that veterans are not forced to travel or wait for an in-house VA appointment when a community option is available. I believe that the option should be the veteran's choice and not the decision of the VA.

In the past, VA has provided a plan to consolidate all outside care authorities into a new veterans' choice program and we are working with VA and others on developing legislation to make that program a reality.

It is high time that we put the needs of the veteran, not the bureaucracy, first and I look forward to hearing from you all on how we can achieve this goal together.

We ask that the American Legion remain engaged in visiting and reporting on what is happening at the local level with VA facilities.

Please continue to keep Congress informed about the veteran experience especially with regard to disability claim processing and the delivery of healthcare from VA and non-VA providers in the community.

Your System Worth Saving task force has been invaluable as we address the challenges facing VA.

I look forward to our continued collaboration in ensuring that each and every veteran receives the benefits and high quality healthcare they have earned and deserve.

Thank you all for being here today and I yield back my time.