Committee on Veterans’ Affairs,

Subcommittee on Health

May 21, 2013

H.R. 241, the Veterans Timely Access to Health Care Act

Statement for the Record

Thank you, Chairman Benishek, for holding this hearing today, and for allowing me to testify on behalf of legislation I introduced entitled the Veterans Timely Access to Health Care Act.

America’s Veterans are the backbone of the freedom and prosperity this country has enjoyed for over two hundred years. We owe them a debt that we can never truly repay.

Unfortunately, across the country, and across Florida’s 15th Congressional District, Veterans continue to encounter unacceptable problems and delays receiving appointments from the Veterans Administration (VA) for essential medical and specialty health care needs.

For instance, the VA has set a goal to provide an initial mental health examination within 14 days from the time a Veteran contacts a VA medical provider to schedule a consultation.  They have claimed to meet this goal with a 95% success rate.

However, an Inspector General (IG) 2012 report published greatly contradicts these claims. In fact, this IG report determined the VA only met its goal 49% of the time - with the remaining patients being forced to wait approximately 50 days for the VA to provide this critical mental health evaluation.

To be clear – more than 184,000 Veterans waited approximately 50 days to receive a critical mental health evaluation. Not treatment – just the formal evaluation. This is a disgrace to our Veterans, and something that should not be tolerated.

Additionally, Chairman Mike Coffman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations held a hearing on March 14, 2013 to examine patient wait times at VA medical facilities. Sadly, the Chairman revealed that according to VA documents, at least two Veterans died last year from diseases while awaiting a medical consultation at the VA.

That is why I am proud to have introduced H.R. 241, the Veterans Timely Access to Health Care Act.

This legislation, supported by the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) and The Retired Enlisted Association (TREA), will ensure Veterans seeking primary and specialty care from a VA medical facility receive an appointment within 30 days – period.

This legislation also contains a number of detailed reporting requirements, so that Congress may better track the VA’s progress. And if the VA discovers they are not meeting their goals and mandated 30-day access to care, it is my hope that they will reach out to Congress before their reports are filed so we can work together to meet the needs of our nation’s brave and courageous Veterans.

We are all on the same team, with the same goal of providing timely, high quality care to our Veterans.

However, this legislation will go a long way in ensuring Veteran’s critical medical needs, like those needs of more than 184,000 Veterans who waited 50 days for an initial mental health screening, no longer slip through the cracks of the system. It will also prevent the unnecessary loss of life of those Veterans in need of medical care and consultation.

Moving forward, I would like to work with this Subcommittee to strengthen this legislation – potentially including additional access-to-care standards. Today, this legislation is a first step to hold the VA accountable.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and I yield back the balance of my time.