

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
FROM
REP. SEAN DUFFY
TO THE HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
ON H.R. 353, THE VETERANS' ACCESS TO HEARING HEALTH ACT OF 2015**

July 14, 2015

Good morning. Thank you, Chairman Benishek and Ranking Member Brownley, for holding this hearing today. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of H.R. 353, the Veterans' Access to Hearing Health Act. I introduced this legislation, along with Rep. Tim Walz (MN-01) and Rep. Raul Ruiz (CA-36), to help address the long wait times and lack of access our veterans are facing in regard to audiology services.

Our aging and younger veterans returning from the battlefield are seeking help from the VA for hearing loss and tinnitus more than any other disabilities facing them today. Yet, the VA does not have the capability to keep up with demand for these services.

A recent Washington Post article cited that since the VA scandal broke last year, the number of veterans on wait lists for appointments has actually increased by 50%. Audiology services are a major factor in the wait times veterans are facing. According to the VA, nearly half of all patients awaiting care are waiting for audiology services.

Veterans, like my constituent Roger Ellison from Marshfield, should not be fighting the VA for care. Roger is 70 years old and a veteran of the Vietnam War. He suffers from hearing loss, but when he sought help from the VA, he was told he could not get an appointment for six months. Unfortunately, Roger couldn't wait that long, so he went to his local hearing aid specialist – and he was seen that day. Roger was willing to pay out of pocket for his hearing aids because six months was just too long to wait.

Audiology services not only affect the older generation, but also the younger generation returning from overseas. Roger and thousands of other veterans are in this situation today because the VA is allowed to use only audiologists—and not other capable providers—to fulfill hearing services to veterans. While audiologists are a great resource for the VA and provide good service for veterans, there are not enough to keep up with the demand.

Hearing aid specialists are a perfectly viable option and stand at the ready to help our veterans in need. Hearing aid specialists have gone through a 1-2 year apprenticeship training period, have completed a comprehensive written exam, and are certified by the state to test hearing, and fit and dispense hearing aids. They are qualified to support the specialized services of audiologists

by fitting, adjusting, and making minor repairs to hearing aids. By allowing hearing aid specialists to serve in their licensed role at the VA, the current burden audiologists have of performing all hearing services will be lifted. With the provisions of H.R. 353 in place, VA audiologists can turn their attention to specialized cases and complex conditions, and people like Roger won't be waiting six months for hearing aids or simple adjustments.

My legislation also asks for a detailed report from the VA on the timely access of hearing health services, the contracting policies in regard to providing services outside the VA, the staffing levels in the audiology department, and a description of performance metrics.

H.R. 353 has the support of the National Guard, the Retired Enlisted Association, Veterans' Health Council, Vietnam Veterans of America, the American Academy of Otolaryngology, the Wisconsin American Legion Executive Committee, and 27 of our colleagues.

As Americans, we can never repay our debt to veterans like Roger, but Congress can pass common-sense measures like H.R. 353 to help make their lives back home a little easier. I urge the Committee to pass my legislation quickly and appreciate your support today.

I yield back the balance of my time.