

**STATEMENT OF TIMOTHY J. WALZ  
RANKING MINORITY MEMBER**

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
BEFORE  
THE HOUSE ADMINISTRATION  
COMMITTEE**

**February 16, 2017**

Thank you Chairman Harper and Ranking Member Brady for this opportunity to appear before your committee to speak in support of the proposed budget for the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

I am pleased to join with Chairman Roe to support the proposed budget. We approached this effort as we do most things in our Committee – in a bipartisan manner, looking at what's in the best interest of the nation and our veterans.

As a committee we have endured budget cuts in previous congresses and have managed to do more with less. Our work is increasing, and I do not know how we can do much more without more resources. Much of our work is bipartisan, and we need to ensure that the Committee has the expertise, the staff, and the resources to assist us in meeting the many challenges before us.

Much will be expected of this Committee during this Congress. We oversee the second-largest federal agency charged with providing healthcare and benefits to our nation's 22 million veterans. We will need to address necessary actions to reform the manner in which VA delivers healthcare to veterans both inside VA facilities and in the community. We must also contend with a growing backlog of appeals for VA benefits claims, and ensure the VA is properly managing the replacement of its aging IT infrastructure, including an Electronic Health Record that must be interoperable with DoD and community providers.

We must ensure VA is recruiting healthcare providers to fill over 37,000 provider vacancies in the Veterans Health Administration. These positions are exempt from the federal hiring freeze because everyone recognizes that filling provider vacancies are critical to ensuring veterans have access to care. Twenty veterans a day are committing suicide. Many of our veterans are suffering from chronic pain and are struggling with opioid addiction.

We still have homeless veterans living on the streets and veterans who struggle to find good paying jobs. We must do everything we can to ensure our most vulnerable veterans are receiving the mental health care and services they need to survive, and that veterans are able to support themselves and their families. This will require a great deal of oversight and attention by our Committee, and Chairman Roe and I are ready to get to work.

We all know from reports in the press and from the hearings our Committee has held that many of these VA programs do not seem to be going well. This Committee must be prepared to make some decisions on behalf of the taxpayers and veterans to ensure that VA makes measurable progress towards its goals over these next two years.

In a tight fiscal environment, among many competing priorities, veterans must remain one of our highest priorities. All of us have veterans in our district who are relying on us to fight for them. One important way to achieve this is to ensure that the resources we have provided to the VA are producing the outcomes that we have intended.

All of this will require an enormous amount of policy, guidance, and oversight by the Committee and it is essential that we have the necessary resources in order to meet our responsibilities. I believe, along with Chairman Roe, that our proposed budget provides those needed resources.

On a final note, as you know, I am the new Ranking Member for the Committee. Change often brings a new direction and focus to our efforts and many changes to the Minority staff of a committee. We currently have staff vacancies we need to fill, particularly in the area of Oversight and Investigation – one of our most critical functions especially in light of the challenges VA has and continues to face. We also need someone to lead our efforts on the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee, so we can ensure veterans are getting the benefits they deserve.

While I understand the fiscal pressures faced by all of us and by our country, I respectfully request that you support our proposed budget level so that we can play our critical and essential role in supporting those who have served and sacrificed for our nation.