

STATEMENT OF
GENE KOUBA
NORTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
SENATE BUDGET COMMITTEE
FIELD HEARING
BISMARCK, NORTH DAKOTA
MARCH 28, 2008

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Senate Budget Committee:

My name is Gene Kouba, and I wish to thank you allowing me to speak on behalf of the North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs.

Effective 1 Feb 2008, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. James B. Peake announced an increase in veterans travel reimbursement from 11 cents per mile to 28.5 cents per mile. This is the first increase in the mileage reimbursement in over 30 years. While increasing the travel reimbursement per mile, the VA, as mandated by law, also increased the deductible amounts applied to certain mileage reimbursements. The new deductibles are \$7.77 for a one way trip; \$15.54 for a round trip, with a maximum of \$46.62 per calendar month. However, these deductibles can be waived if they cause a financial hardship to the veteran.

Starting 1 April 2008, a new Commissioner of Veterans Affairs for the Department will start his employment. His name is Mr. Lonnie Wangen, and we are all looking forward to working with him at the start of next week. On April 21 through 23, the department's biannual training with the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) will take place here in Bismarck, North Dakota, at the Comfort Inn. This training is important as it brings new and pertinent information to all CVSOs about programs offered by U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to veterans and family members served by the CVSOs of each county.

The North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs has been assisting the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs with Native American outreach claims fairs, having taken part in the two claims fairs in 2007 at Belcourt and Devils Lake, respectively. Our next scheduled Native American outreach

claims fair, with the Fargo Regional VA Medical Center, is at New Town, North Dakota, in October 2008.

The North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs has hired a State Women's Coordinator, to assist women veterans on sensitive gender-related issues and to assist women veterans in filing claims with the Veterans Administration. As I deliver this message, Ms. Betty Helmer is at accreditation training with the American Legion in Washington DC.

The last issue I wish to comment on is the approval for the new building of a North Dakota Veterans' Home at Lisbon. I wish to personally thank Senator Conrad for his help and support in seeing this vision become a reality for the veterans of North Dakota. There are others present that I'm sure will give much more detailed testimony regarding this issue.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments for the Senate Budget Committee record on behalf of the North Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs.