

Speech before the Budget Committee
March 10th, 2009

Chairman Spratt, Ranking Member Ryan, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I come before you with a simple, yet urgent request. We need to accurately fund treatment and compensation for veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

For too long we have heard the harrowing stories of soldiers returning from war, bearing the scars and wounds of battle, only to face an adversarial process in seeking treatment and compensation. This is especially true for soldiers who have PTSD. In the Iraq and Afghanistan wars alone, more than 100,000 veterans have been diagnosed with PTSD. Tragically, however, only 42,000 have been granted service-connected disability for their condition.

As it currently stands, veterans have to “prove” the stressor that triggered their PTSD, even if they have already been diagnosed. They need to track down incident reports, buddy statements, present medals, and leap other hurdles to meet the threshold that VA mandates in order to receive desperately needed compensation. In an era where mental injuries are stigmatized and in a war that has no front or rear line - it is clear that the current VA regulations are in need of change.

As Chairman of the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, I have introduced legislation to manifest this change. HR 952, the COMBAT PTSD Act, lowers the burdensome threshold that veterans have to meet to receive compensation. The COMBAT PTSD Act has received immense support, including the endorsement of the American Legion, the VFW, DAV, Military Order of the Purple Heart, the IAVA, and other VSOs. I have received a pledge from the new Secretary of the VA, General Shinseki, to work with me on implementing the ideas expressed in the legislation.

This legislation does not come without a cost, which is why I am taking this opportunity to testify before you so that the merits of this bill can be heard and accurately reflected in the budget. Last Congress, CBO scored this legislation at \$4.7 billion over 10 years. This is due to the fact that so many veterans who have been fighting the VA for years, sometimes up to 20 or 30 years, will finally be granted long overdue compensation. However, I want to note that the RAND Corporation recently conducted a study and concluded that left untreated and undercompensated, PTSD will cost our nation \$6.2 billion over 2 years – a great deal more than the CBO score of \$4.7 over 10 years.

To offer one quick example, I helped a WWII veteran in my district, Ken MacDonald, receive over \$100,000 in retroactive benefits for PTSD. Ken had two ships blown out from underneath him, swam in the waters with fallen and sharks, and probably witnessed atrocities that we can't even fathom – yet was denied PTSD compensation for more than 60 years. I was incredibly proud and lucky for the ability to help Ken get his benefits, but unfortunately every soldier doesn't win the battle with the VA which is why this legislation is so urgently needed.

The time to act is NOW. The number of Veterans returning from war with PTSD, depression, and, sadly, those who commit suicide, are growing every year. It is unconscionable that our veterans, like Ken McDonald, must wait in some cases 60-plus years for the benefits that they have earned defending their freedom. That is why I respectfully ask that you include in the FY 2010 Budget Resolution sufficient funding to treat the problem of PTSD in returning veterans.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify and for your consideration of my request. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.