

Chairman Hal Rogers
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies
Department of Veterans Affairs FY 2013 Budget Request
March 21, 2012
Opening Statement – As Prepared

Thank you, Chairman Culberson for yielding. And Secretary Shinseki, thank you for appearing before the subcommittee today.

This Subcommittee knows that you come before us today representing our nation's veterans. We must begin by acknowledging their fine service, dedication, and sacrifice. Since the creation of our great country, men and women have answered the call to serve in order to protect our freedom and liberty.

In recent years, we have seen a different kind of threat to our independence emerge in our escalating fiscal crisis. This Committee has been front and center in attempting to address the very real security threat posed by out-of-control Washington spending and trillion dollar deficits. Last year, the Appropriations Committee worked to restore transparency, austerity, and tough oversight to the Appropriations process – and we succeeded in reducing discretionary spending by some \$95 billion since FY10. We must continue to provide strong oversight and control spending to ensure that the American people, our troops, and our veterans are getting the greatest value from each and every precious tax dollar.

Despite the Committee's efforts to responsibly reduce discretionary spending, it is mandatory spending costs that are the largest driver of our debt -and are largely not under the purview of this committee. Mandatory spending continues to skyrocket and put the future solvency of many programs in jeopardy. I remain deeply concerned that the more problems we have with mounting debts and runaway mandatory spending, the harder it is to keep our commitment to our nation's veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs budget we will be discussing in detail today provides the funding for VA medical care, compensation and benefits as well as education benefits, vocational rehabilitation, and housing loan programs. We have the responsibility to ensure that after serving our nation with dignity and honor, our nation's veterans receive the best care available.

Along with other Members of the subcommittee, I am particularly concerned about current disability claims backlogs at the VA. I realize you have plans to harness the power of technology with paperless claims processing and improved business processes to reduce the backlog, but it is simply not acceptable that 60 percent of current claims take more than 125 days to process, and that number will only drop to 40 percent of claims in 2013.

I am also concerned about providing adequate employment assistance to veterans, especially with the thousands of new veterans expected from the proposed Department of Defense drawdown. Unemployment rates across the country remain too high, and prospects for our young Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans are not encouraging. I will be interested to hear about your plans to provide education and training, rehabilitation, and readjustment counseling to make their transition to civilian life as smooth as possible to honor their service.

Finally, prescription drug abuse is our nation's fastest growing drug problem. Our warfighters, coming home with severe injuries are unfortunate candidates for potential abuse. In the FY12 appropriations bill, this subcommittee afforded the VA drug data sharing capabilities with state prescription drug monitoring

programs. I look forward to hearing how your agency is moving forward in integration with these programs.

I look forward to hearing from you today about the Administration's priorities.

Thank you.

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