

Chairman Hal Rogers
House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs
Department of Veterans Affairs FY 2014 Budget Hearing
April 18, 2013
Opening Statement As Prepared

Thank you, Chairman Culberson for yielding. Secretary Shinseki, thank you for being with us today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' Fiscal Year 2014 budget request. In other subcommittee hearings, I've already lamented the fact that this budget request is woefully late and in its totality, full of gimmicks, tax increases, and generally unhelpful, but we will persevere.

Let me begin by taking an opportunity to again thank the service and sacrifice of the veterans that you are here representing today. As this subcommittee has done in the past, we want to reaffirm our commitment to providing our nation's veterans with the benefits they deserve. 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 share the concern about the current backlog of VA disability claims. While there has been an unprecedented demand after 10 years of conflict, changes to PTSD and Agent Orange eligibility, and other revisions resulting in 940,000 Veterans added to the system over the last four years, it is woefully unacceptable that seventy percent of these pending claims are over 125 days old. That's especially disconcerting as this subcommittee has gone to great lengths to make additional investments in processing and efficiency. I am, however, encouraged to hear about recent contract awards to speed electronic document conversion and am hopeful that you can quickly build on these steps to significantly reduce, if not end the backlog by 2015.

You may recall that last year I and other Members of the subcommittee emphasized to you how important we feel it is for the VA and the Defense Department to create an integrated electronic health record. We were encouraged by the progress both Departments seemed to be making on that effort, but now we understand that you and DOD have opted to create two separate records systems that would be interoperable. We hope that you will be able to convince us that this revised approach will produce the same result without delays and increased costs.

Finally, prescription drug abuse is our nation's fastest growing drug problem and remains one of my top priorities. In the past several years, we have had many discussions on how we can better assist our veterans prevent prescription drug abuse or offer assistance to those facing addiction and I look forward to continuing to work with you as we tackle this epidemic.

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

Thank you.

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