

**Chairman John Boozman Opening Statement**  
**Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and**  
**Related Agencies**

**Hearing to Review Fiscal Year 2020 and Fiscal Year 2021 budget request for the U.S.**  
**Department of Veterans Affairs**

**April 30, 2019**

*(As prepared for delivery)*

Good afternoon and thank you for coming today to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' FY 2020 and FY 2021 budget requests. I would like to begin by recognizing today's panel. The Honorable Robert Wilkie, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs

He is accompanied by VA leadership including the Honorable Dr. Paul Lawrence, the Under Secretary for Benefits of the Veterans Benefits Administration; the Honorable Randy Reeves, the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs; the Honorable Jon Rychalski, the Assistant Secretary for Management and Chief Financial Officer; and Dr. Richard Stone, Executive in Charge of the Veterans Health Administration. Welcome.

The Budget requests \$220 billion in FY 2020 for the Department of Veterans Affairs, including medical care collections. This includes \$93 billion in discretionary funds, a \$6.5 billion or 7.5 percent increase over FY 2019. The Budget also requests a total of \$221 billion in advance appropriations for FY 2021.

Although the large FY 2020 increase highlights the importance of programs for veterans, it also reflects creation of the Veterans Community Care Program, which consolidated multiple community care programs through the MISSION Act. VA estimates the FY 2020 cost of the MISSION Act-related programs is \$8.9 billion – an amount that in past years would have been funded through mandatory appropriations, but now must be covered by discretionary funds.

Members of this subcommittee remain committed to providing VA with the resources needed to care for our veterans. However, to do that we must have accurate cost and execution estimates from the Department. None of us want to repeat the experience of past budget shortfalls.

In addition, the Budget requests \$1.6 billion for Electronic Health Record Modernization. This includes funds for the third year of a ten-year contract with Cerner. As I have previously noted, many of us on this committee have long advocated for a single, joint medical record that will follow a servicemember throughout their career in the military and into their time as a veteran. We remain hopeful that the collaboration between VA, DOD, and Cerner can deliver on this vision.

Timely and effective implementation of the Veterans Community Care Program and the Electronic Health Record Modernization efforts pose significant challenges for the Department in FY 2020. As VA addresses interoperability of both legacy and community health systems and programs, it is essential that its community – including staff, providers and veterans – are educated on the changes in policy and processes.

In addition to updates on those programs, we look forward to hearing details about the Department's request for mental health services, including efforts to combat opioid use disorder and prevent veteran suicide, initiatives to prevent veteran homelessness, and efforts to improve care for our rural veterans,

including through telehealth. We also appreciate VA's efforts to reduce the appeals backlog and address the implementation challenges of the Forever GI Bill, including ensuring veterans receive the benefits required under law. Finally, we are aware the Justice Department requested an extension on the deadline to appeal the Federal Circuit Court decision regarding benefits for Blue Water Navy Veterans. We would like to hear more about the expected costs associated with this case and what, if any, additional resources VBA may need as a result.

We look forward to discussing these and other issues this afternoon.

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