

**Chairman Richard Shelby Opening Statement
Committee on Appropriations**

**Markup of the FY2019 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related
Appropriations Act**

**Markup of the FY2019 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies
Appropriations Bill**

June 7, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

The Committee on Appropriations will come to order.

This morning the Committee continues its work to complete all 12 appropriations bills before the July 4th recess.

Over the next four weeks, we will markup the Committee's remaining 10 spending bills and position the Senate for a return to regular order in the appropriations process.

This progress is being made possible by the good work of our subcommittees. They have heeded the call to work together to produce bipartisan bills that can move quickly through the Senate and, ultimately, to the President's desk.

I appreciate the support of leadership on both sides of the aisle and the continued dedication of all my colleagues to this process.

I also want to express my appreciation that my colleagues are continuing to focus their efforts on appropriating versus authorizing. As I have repeatedly said, the more we can focus on the job at hand and allow our authorizing committees to do their job, the better positioned we will be to continue with a bipartisan process.

Today's agenda includes two bills: the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies bill and the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies bill for fiscal year 2019.

Chairs Collins and Boozman and Ranking Members Reed and Schatz have put strong bills before the Committee today.

Thank you all for your efforts.

The fiscal year 2019 Transportation, HUD, and Related Agencies bill provides \$71.4 billion in funding, which is in keeping with the subcommittee's 302(b) allocation.

Consistent with the Bipartisan Budget Agreement, the bill provides \$10 billion in much needed infrastructure funding.

This includes \$5.3 billion for highways, \$1.1 billion for public transportation, \$750 million for airports, and \$500 million for BUILD grants, among other important provisions.

This funding is critical to our nation's continued economic growth.

I look forward to supporting the bill and urge my colleagues to do the same.

I offer the same support for the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs bill.

The MilCon/VA bill supports investments that will ensure maximum readiness and warfighting capability for our troops.

It also invests an additional \$5 billion over fiscal year 2018 levels to fund improvements and innovations at the VA. This is a good and balanced bill.

Before I turn it over to Vice Chairman Leahy, I want to make one note regarding veterans' health care that I believe cannot be overlooked as we consider this bill today.

The MISSION Act, which made much-needed reforms to veterans' health care programs, was signed into law by the President yesterday.

The new, streamlined program created by the MISSION Act has the potential to provide veterans with the quality care they deserve.

However, the MISSION Act has a problem - it does not have a dedicated funding source, unlike the current VA CHOICE program.

Instead, the MISSION Act relies on the annual appropriations process to fund veteran's health care by shifting costs from the mandatory side of the ledger to the discretionary side of the ledger.

In short, the MISSION Act requires the Appropriations Committee to provide funding annually for all veterans health care costs in the MilCon/VA bill.

The current budget agreement, however, does not account for this expense, which is estimated to cost approximately \$50 billion over the next five years.

Even more troubling is the return to sequestration levels in 2020 and the committee's ability to adequately fund the new program under those fiscal constraints.

I believe that our veterans deserve better. Their care should not be subject to the whims of Congressional budget negotiations. The care they need and have earned, should not be held hostage when Congress reaches a funding impasse.

In passing the VA MISSION Act, Congress promised its veterans improved, quality health care. But that promise will be hollow unless we act.

Along with Senators Isakson and Tester – the Chairman and Ranking Member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee – Vice Chairman Leahy and I are committed to ensuring that Congress makes good on the promises it made in the VA MISSION Act.

As we move forward with consideration of this bill on the floor, I urge my colleagues to support us in that effort.

I now recognize the Vice Chairman of the Committee for any remarks he may have and to make a motion.

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