

Department of Veterans Affairs FY 2015 Budget Hearing
Senator Tim Johnson
Opening Statement
March 25, 2014

Good morning. This hearing will come to order. We meet today to review the President's FY 2015 budget request for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Secretary Shinseki, I welcome you and your colleagues, and I thank you for your appearance before this subcommittee.

I am also pleased to welcome Chairwoman Mikulski to this hearing. She is a strong and tireless advocate of America's vets, and we welcome her support of the work of this subcommittee.

Before I turn to my opening statement, I want to recognize the Chairwoman for any opening remarks she may have.

Chairwoman Mikulski.

(Mikulski remarks)

Thank you Madam Chairwoman.

Mr. Secretary, as you know, this is my last year of chairing this subcommittee, as I relinquish my chairmanship when I retire

from the Senate. I have enjoyed my time as chairman and will miss working on these important issues.

The VA is our first and last line of defense in meeting the changing needs of our Nation's vets from current and past conflicts, and I appreciate the leadership you have shown in moving the VA forward to find 21st Century solutions to address the most critical needs facing our vets.

I note that your priorities have not wavered from the first time you appeared before this subcommittee: to end homelessness among vets, to increase access to care, and to speed claims processing.

I think you have made great progress in the first two categories over the past six years, and I believe you are beginning to make progress in recovering from significant setbacks in claims processing.

But I am sure you will agree with me that there is much more to be done. The progress you have made in addressing homelessness, access to care and claims processing will need to be sustained for the long term. That will require a sustainable

funding commitment and an agile management model that is proactive, not reactive.

And so I ask you today to reflect on the long view of the future of the VA. Medical care costs are going to continue to rise. Compensation and pension costs are going to continue to rise. Homelessness among vets will continue to be a chronic problem. Access to care will pose new challenges as the current generation of vets, many of them from the Guard and Reserve, disperses throughout the country, often in rural areas that pose unique challenges to accessing medical care. And timely claims processing will be a continuing challenge as new and more complex claims flood a system that can sustain a surge capacity for only so long.

There are also looming problems that are not reflected in your priority initiatives, headlined by VA facility sustainment. Quality VA medical care cannot be provided in substandard facilities, and yet the VA's investment in major and minor construction and non-recurring maintenance is woefully

inadequate and falling further behind every year. If these shortfalls are not addressed soon, patient care will suffer.

It was not that long ago that VA health care was decried as being substandard. That has changed dramatically to the point that VA health care is now viewed as a model of excellence. That must not be allowed to deteriorate. Facility replacement, repair and maintenance are key to maintaining the quality of VA medical care, but the VA budget request for these essential investments is nowhere near adequate to maintaining these facilities.

I look forward to discussing these and other long term challenges facing the VA. I now ask my Ranking Member for any opening remarks he cares to make.

(Senator Kirk)

Thank you, Senator Kirk. Again, Mr. Secretary, welcome and thank you for appearing before this subcommittee. I understand that yours will be the only opening statement. Your full statement will be included in the record, so please feel free to summarize your remarks.

(Secretary Shinseki gives his testimony – Following the completion of the Secretary’s testimony)

Thank you. For the information of my colleagues, we will limit questions to six minute rounds to ensure that everyone has a chance to be heard. If needed, we will have a second round.

I would now defer to the Chairwoman for any questions she may have.

(Chairwoman Mikulski)

Thank you.

Chairman Johnson questions