AUTHENTICATED
U.S. GOVERNMENT
INFORMATION
GPO

EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION OUTREACH EFFORTS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

SECOND SESSION

MAY 22, 2008

Serial No. 110–89

Printed for the use of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

43–055 WASHINGTON : 2009

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512–1800; DC area (202) 512–1800
Fax: (202) 512–2104 Mail: Stop IDCC, Washington, DC 20402–0001

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

BOB FILNER, California, *Chairman*

CORRINE BROWN, Florida
VIC SNYDER, Arkansas
MICHAEL H. MICHAUD, Maine
STEPHANIE HERSETH SANDLIN, South Dakota
HARRY E. MITCHELL, Arizona
JOHN J. HALL, New York
PHIL HARE, Illinois
MICHAEL F. DOYLE, Pennsylvania
SHELLEY BERKLEY, Nevada
JOHN T. SALAZAR, Colorado
CIRO D. RODRIGUEZ, Texas
JOE DONNELLY, Indiana
JERRY McNERNEY, California
ZACHARY T. SPACE, Ohio
TIMOTHY J. WALZ, Minnesota

STEVE BUYER, Indiana, *Ranking*
CLIFF STEARNS, Florida
JERRY MORAN, Kansas
HENRY E. BROWN, JR., South Carolina
JEFF MILLER, Florida
JOHN BOOZMAN, Arkansas
GINNY BROWN-WAITE, Florida
MICHAEL R. TURNER, Ohio
BRIAN P. BILBRAY, California
DOUG LAMBORN, Colorado
GUS M. BILIRAKIS, Florida
VERN BUCHANAN, Florida
STEVE SCALISE, Louisiana

MALCOM A. SHORTER, *Staff Director*

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS

JOHN J. HALL, New York, *Chairman*

CIRO D. RODRIGUEZ, Texas
PHIL HARE, Illinois
SHELLEY BERKLEY, Nevada

DOUG LAMBORN, Colorado, *Ranking*
MICHAEL R. TURNER, Ohio
GUS M. BILIRAKIS, Florida

Pursuant to clause 2(e)(4) of Rule XI of the Rules of the House, public hearing records of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs are also published in electronic form. **The printed hearing record remains the official version.** Because electronic submissions are used to prepare both printed and electronic versions of the hearing record, the process of converting between various electronic formats may introduce unintentional errors or omissions. Such occurrences are inherent in the current publication process and should diminish as the process is further refined.

CONTENTS

May 22, 2008

Page

Examining the Effectiveness of Veterans Benefits Administration Outreach Efforts 1

OPENING STATEMENTS

Chairman John J. Hall 1
Prepared statement of Chairman Hall 45
Hon. Doug Lamborn, Ranking Republican Member 4
Prepared statement of Congressman Lamborn 46
Hon. Phil Hare 4

WITNESSES

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Diana M. Rubens, Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations, Veterans Benefits Administration 30
Prepared statement of Ms. Rubens 74
U.S. Department of Defense: .....
Leslye Arsht, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, Military Community and Family Policy 31
Prepared statement of Ms. Arsht 78
Kevin Crowley, Deputy Director, Manpower and Personnel, National Guard Bureau 33
Prepared statement of Mr. Crowley 83

Advertising Council, Kate Emanuel, Senior Vice President, Non-Profit and Government Affairs 21
Prepared statement of Ms. Emanuel 63
American Legion, Jacob B. Gadd, Assistant Director, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission 20
Prepared statement of Mr. Gadd 60
Disabled American Veterans, Kerry Baker, Associate National Legislative Director 18
Prepared statement of Mr. Baker 55
Gold Star Wives of America, Inc., Kathryn A. Witt, Member, Government Relations Committee 11
Prepared statement of Ms. Witt 53
National Association for Uniformed Services, Richard A. "Rick" Jones, Legislative Director 9
Prepared statement of Mr. Jones 50
National Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Darlene McMartin, President 7
Prepared statement of Ms. McMartin 48
National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, Tammy Duckworth, Member, and Director, Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs . 5
Prepared statement of Ms. Duckworth 47

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Hon. John J. Hall, Chairman, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, to Diana M. Rubens, Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations, Veterans Benefits Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, letter dated June 2, 2008, and VA responses 85

Page

Hon. John J. Hall, Chairman, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, to Leslye Arsht, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, Military Community and Family Policy, U.S. Department of Defense, letter dated June 2, 2008, and DoD responses 88

Hon. John J. Hall, Chairman, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Committee on Veterans' Affairs, to Kevin Crowley, Deputy Director, Manpower and Personnel, National Guard Bureau, U.S. Department of Defense, letter dated June 2, 2008, and DoD responses 91

EXAMINING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION OUTREACH EFFORTS

THURSDAY, MAY 22, 2008

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON DISABILITY ASSISTANCE
AND MEMORIAL AFFAIRS, COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 1:45 p.m., in Room 340, Cannon House Office Building, Hon. John J. Hall [Chairman of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Hall, Hare, and Lamborn.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN HALL

Mr. HALL. The Veterans' Affairs Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs Subcommittee hearing on Examining the Effectiveness of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Outreach Efforts will now come to order.

I would ask everyone to rise for the Pledge of Allegiance. The flags are located in the front.

[Pledge of Allegiance.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you and welcome, and thank you for your patience.

Over the last number of months, we have had a series of hearings on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) claims processing system, which resulted in the full Committee passing H.R. 5892, the "Veterans Disability Benefits Claims Modernization Act of 2008." I am very pleased with the bill's progress, and am grateful that we have over 30 cosponsors already.

However, during the course of those hearings, I have often heard words like confusing, misinformed, stigmatizing and overwhelmed to describe the way that veterans felt about accessing their duly-earned VA benefits.

It occurred to me that there was a secondary problem that was not internal to VA operations, but was indicative of its outreach to the veterans they were supposed to be serving. Benefits information was not getting out in clear, simple language that was consistent and easy to use.

As many of you know, the House recently passed H.R. 3681, the "Veterans Benefits Awareness Act of 2007," which authorizes the VA to advertise.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) knows how to advertise. Congress gave DoD that authority in the fifties, and since then

they have inspired many to join, "The Few, The Proud;" or to "Be All That You Can Be." Today, DoD even uses TV commercials to educate the military community about its Military OneSource support program.

But beyond the issue with advertising that I hope H.R. 3681 will address, I felt we needed this oversight hearing to examine the effectiveness of all of VBA's outreach efforts, and asked the staff to further investigate.

During that process it became evident that there were inconsistencies and gaps in how VA is informing the public about its benefits and services. Committee staff found that it was difficult to readily ascertain what, in fact, official VA information was, and what was incorrect.

Even with all of the joint councils between the VA and DoD, there is no clear ability to correctly find VA through DoD sources. For instance, the DoD has three Web sites that offer servicemembers transition assistance, but none that connects with VA. When calling the DoD Military OneSource toll-free line, the operator gives the incorrect call line for VBA. It took our staff almost 30 minutes, three phone calls and six menu options to get to the right VBA operator to get claims questions answered. At what point would a disabled veteran have quit, stressed, frustrated, or worst of all, unassisted?

Veterans service organizations (VSOs) and other nonprofits, which are doing their best to assist veterans and their families and survivors, are left on their own to create veterans benefits messages and lines of assistance which sometimes link to VA and sometimes do not.

I believe that it is VA's responsibility to create promotional and educational materials that these organizations can use so that VA is readily recognizable and available, no matter how the veteran finds it.

There have been inconsistencies reported in how VA conducts in-person outreach. VA is a primary component of the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP, briefings that take place for separating active duty servicemembers, National Guard and Reserves.

VA reports that it attends these briefings when it knows they are taking place, but they are not always notified by the military commands when a briefing is scheduled, and not everyone eligible attends. DoD in turn has been reluctant to mandate TAP because it does not control all of those resources also. VA representatives have been reported to not show up for their portion of the briefing.

TAP and the Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) Program are not as readily available to the National Guard, Reserves or medical hold patients. VA has dismantled its Office of Seamless Transition and replaced it with the Federal Recovery Care Coordinators who primarily operate out of Veterans Health Administration (VHA), not the VBA. The VBA began a call center program to contact veterans about their benefits, but only after suicide rates became known.

It seems clear that the VA needs a more proactive outreach approach. Each area of our country has its own unique challenges of meeting the population needs and its veterans population needs. That is why I am glad we have veterans service organizations,

State and county representatives with us today, who can address the issues associated with reaching rural and urban communities, women and minorities, younger or older veterans, and those living in impoverished conditions.

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses and to hearing about their innovative practices and the outreach gaps that they have identified.

I also look forward to the Ad Council testimony to hear what they can teach us about advertising veterans benefits. They have helped other Federal agencies to teach us that "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires." or how to "Take a Bite Out of Crime" or that "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" or that "Loose Lips Sink Ships." The genesis, of course, was with the War Department, which immortalized Rosie the Riveter, and later a more well-known one, "This is Your Brain, This is Your Brain on Drugs" and the frying pan with the eggs in it.

Different branches of Government, including DoD, have advertised effectively enough to permanently implant these images into everyone's mind, not just veterans' minds, and hopefully we can do a similar type of outreach and advertising program that will make VA benefits or the way to access them so firmly implanted in everybody's mind that a veteran might be able to turn to somebody else on the street who is not a veteran and say where do I go to get my benefits and, just like I remembered, "This is Your Brain" or "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires," all citizens can be educated where those services can be accessed.

Family members, caregivers, and survivors new to the VA's lingo, jargon and acronyms need materials and briefings that are user friendly with personnel dedicated to assisting them.

On April 24, of this year, I held a roundtable discussion with organizations that assist survivors, and they brought up the need for a VA Survivor Affairs Office, so I have developed a draft bill that would create such an office and we will be asking the organizations for their feedback shortly.

Finally, I am hopeful that the Departments will be able to provide insights into their joint efforts in cooperation with each other, to provide materials, briefings, and Internet and telephonic assistance that is accurate and consistent and readily available. Web links are simple, and it is a shame that such an obvious outreach tool has eluded the Departments so far and needs Congressional oversight.

Bringing our men and women home is a responsibility that we all share in caring for them as best we can once they are home. It is great to see the efforts being made by the communities all around the Nation to support our veterans, especially those with disabling conditions. Hopefully, these efforts can be augmented with the efforts of the Departments of both the VA and Defense, and I hope that the message that the VA gets from us today is a friendly, cooperative and helpful offer of assistance to help to do better messaging, create better outreach materials, announcements, and Web resources tailored to different audiences and reaches the veterans, their families and survivors in clear and simple language that will make them all see the VA as a user friendly resource truly there for their benefit.

I now recognize Ranking Member Lamborn for his opening statement.

[The prepared statement of Chairman Hall appears on p. 45.]

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. DOUG LAMBORN

Mr. LAMBORN. Mr. Chairman, thank you for yielding.

I am pleased to have this opportunity for a collective discussion on the Department of Veterans Affairs outreach efforts. I believe the VA is doing a much better job of reaching Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) veterans now than it was at the beginning of the Global War on Terror. This is a commendable development, and I hope that a comparable improvement can be achieved in VA's effort to reach older veterans. Veterans cannot obtain the benefits they have earned if they don't know they are eligible to receive them.

I am concerned that despite millions of dollars spent on outreach every year, we have not effectively reached many veterans of earlier conflicts. It is for this reason I was proud to join with my colleagues in supporting H.R. 3681, the "Veterans Benefits Awareness Act of 2007," which passed the full House this week.

This measure, introduced by my good friend and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, John Boozman of Arkansas, authorizes the VA to conduct national advertising campaigns for benefits outreach.

I believe that with the enactment of this bill and help from groups like the Ad Council, VA will be able to create public service announcements that will provide effective outreach for all veterans.

The Department of Defense spends billions each year on recruitment ads, and I believe if VA spent just a fraction of this amount, it would be very effective for outreach purpose.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to recognize and thank veterans service organizations for their outreach efforts to veterans, and I encourage them to continue their excellent work.

I look forward to our witnesses' testimony and a productive discussion on ways to improve VA outreach.

I yield back the balance of my time.

[The prepared statement of Congressman Lamborn appears on p. 46.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn, and thank you for mentioning Mr. Boozman, who was the originator of the bill that we passed this week.

I would like to remind the panelists that your complete written statements have been made a part of the hearing record so you can limit your remarks to 5 minutes each. We have the clock system here. That way we will have sufficient time for followup questions once everybody has provided their testimony.

Now I recognize Mr. Hare so he may introduce our first panelist.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. PHIL HARE

Mr. HARE. Thank you, Chairman Hall.

Mr. Chairman, today I have the privilege and the honor of introducing one of the members of our first panel, the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA), Tammy Duckworth.

Director Duckworth was appointed to the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs by Governor Rob Blagojevich on November 1, 2006, and has brought a high level of leadership, dedication and ingenuity to the IDVA ever since her appointment.

Along with Governor Blagojevich, Director Duckworth worked tirelessly to help establish the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program. This first-in-the-Nation program requires that all returning Illinois National Guard members are screened for traumatic brain injuries, also known as TBIs, while offering other Illinois veterans that same opportunity.

It also created a 24-hour toll-free psychological help line for veterans suffering from symptoms associated with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

As a member of the military, Director Duckworth is currently a Major with the Illinois National Guard. She served in Iraq as the Battle Captain and Assistant Operations Officer for a 500-soldier aviation task force and flew combat missions as a Black Hawk pilot.

On November 12, 2004, Duckworth was co-piloting a Black Hawk helicopter north of Baghdad when a rocket-propelled grenade struck the cockpit of the aircraft and exploded. Director Duckworth lost her right leg and most of her left as a result of the attack.

Director Duckworth has received the Purple Heart, the Air Medal, along with other decorations, citations, and badges.

Director Duckworth speaks four languages. I have trouble speaking English. She has a BA in political science from the University of Hawaii and an MA from the George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs.

I am pleased and honored to have her testify today on the importance of veterans outreach programs.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Hare, and welcome, Director Duckworth, and thank you for your service to our country and veterans.

Joining you on the first panel is Ms. Darlene McMartin, President of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers; Rick Jones, Legislative Director of the National Association for Uniformed Services (NAUS); and Kathryn Witt, member of Gold Star Wives (GSW). Welcome all.

Director Duckworth, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF TAMMY DUCKWORTH, DIRECTOR, ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, AND MEMBER, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; DARLENE MCMARTIN, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICERS; RICHARD A. "RICK" JONES, LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR UNIFORMED SERVICES; AND KATHRYN A. WITT, MEMBER, GOVERNMENT RELATIONS COMMITTEE, GOLD STAR WIVES OF AMERICA, INC.

STATEMENT OF TAMMY DUCKWORTH

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Lamborn and Congressman Hare. I would like to thank the Sub-

committee for holding this hearing today and providing the opportunity to testify on this extremely important issue.

I am here on behalf of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, of which I am a member. Each year, State Governments spend more than $4 billion to support our Nation's veterans and their families. In Army terms, we are a force multiplier for the Federal VA. Collectively, we are second only to the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs in providing benefits and services to the men and women who defended our Nation.

Although each State is unique with its own traditions, programs and resources, we are united by our common goal to make a difference in the lives of our veterans.

We all know that at this point in the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a need to increase awareness among veterans about the benefits that are available to them. These are benefits that they have rightfully earned and deserve. We need to use every tool possible to ensure that they know about what benefits are available to them and their family members. Outreach is absolutely the key, especially with returning veterans of OIF and OEF. Educating them about their benefits through outreach and reaching them right now is essential to their future well-being.

As the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, I can assure you that we are in dire need of additional resources at the State level to reach the new generation of veterans who are coming home, and to maintain communications with previous generations, specifically our aging Vietnam veterans who are retiring or reaching retirement age and have increased healthcare needs, many of whom are turning to the VA for the first time in 35 years.

Most of the States have the capability and infrastructure to increase outreach but need the resources to do it. The members of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs would like Congress to pass a Federal grant program to provide outreach to veterans regarding the available benefits.

Let me explain how this would work. In Illinois, Governor Blagojevich responded to the increased needs of our veterans by actually more than doubling the number of our veterans service officers. We now have 73 veterans service officers in 51 offices across the State of Illinois. These are all State of Illinois employees. They are trained and certified by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to assist veterans, their families and their survivors in completing applications for both State and Federal benefits.

These service officers are part of the communities, and have lived in those communities and they have the ability to reach veterans in a way that the Federal Government cannot. They also work very closely with the county Veterans Assistance Commission, and together we form a partnership in researching not just Federal, but State and sometimes municipal benefits as well.

Increased funding for outreach through the States would give veterans an opportunity to find out about and take advantage of both their State and Federal benefits after they have made it home.

You know when I was in Iraq and when we received our briefings prior to being sent home, a lot of times your spouse is sitting in the parking lot with the engine of the car running as you are

getting your TAP briefing, and our service men and women just want to hop in the car and go home. They are not paying that much attention, and it is important to get back to them 45 days later after they have had time to reconnect with their wives and their family. It is really important that maybe 6 months, maybe a year later, when they start to show some symptoms, to let them know of these benefits.

At this point in time they are out of the reach of the Federal VA and the DoD. Many of them are going home to small towns, population 2,000, places like Anna, Illinois, El Paso, Illinois, you have similar towns in your own States, and that is why as a State entity we, living in these States, have that unique ability to reach out and provide services to veterans in their local communities.

We also firmly believe that when a servicemember returns home from Iraq and Afghanistan, they need that extra time to reintegrate into their community, which is why Governor Blagojevich, at the 45-day mark, after our National Guard has come off of Federal order, he then uses Executive Order and has made the PTSD and TBI counseling mandatory for all Illinois National Guardsmen. It is an example of a way we are delivering services to our servicemembers.

Unfortunately, we don't have similar access to the active-duty forces. As a matter of fact, we don't get any information from the Federal VA or the DoD when a servicemember leaves active duty and comes home.

When a young man from El Paso, Illinois, joins the Army, enlists, goes off, he does his tour, he comes home and nobody tells me that he is coming home, and the first time I hear about it is oftentimes from the State police because he has been self-medicating and has been drinking because he is trying to deal with his PTSD and ends up with a DUI.

The first call I get should not be from the State police. The first call I should get should be from the VA or the DoD. We are inspected by the Federal VA. We are certified by the Federal VA, and we have information agreements. We need to know when our servicemembers are coming home to Illinois so that we can deliver the services that they deserve.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Duckworth appears on p. 47.]

Mr. HALL. Ms. McMartin

STATEMENT OF DARLENE McMARTIN

Ms. McMARTIN. Chairman Hall, Members of the Subcommittee, it is truly my honor to be able to present this testimony to you. As President of the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers, I am commenting on the National Association's views on the effectiveness of the Veterans Benefits Administration outreach efforts.

The National Association of County Veteran Service Officers is an organization of local Government employees. Our members are tasked with assisting veterans in developing and processing their claims. A large percentage of the claims presented to the Veterans Administration each year originate in a county veterans service office.

Each day our members sit across from those men and women who wish to file a claim for benefits. They are our friends, our neighbors, they are members of our community, with whom we see often daily.

We exist to serve the veterans and partner with national service organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Our association focuses on outreach, standardized quality training, claims development, and advocacy. We are an extension or arm of Government, not unlike the VA itself in service to the Nation's veterans and their dependents.

In this changing world, there is a need for multiple approaches to outreach. Today we have our Nation's veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and those just returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Veterans Benefits Administration has a monumental task of reaching each of those veterans and making sure they understand the benefits available to them. In the realm of veterans outreach improvements, there is a clear need that the veterans being discharged from active duty, especially during a time of war, have access to information concerning veterans' benefits entitlement.

Often, to reiterate what Ms. Duckworth said, often the veterans are just glad to be going home and they are not concerned about what benefits may be available to them. The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers proposes a partnership of the local county veterans service officers, VA, DoD, to reach out and assist returning veterans in their local areas.

A first step would be to provide county veterans service officers a copy of the DD–214 and adding to that DD–214 a section where it has the veteran's cell phone number and the mailing address. This would provide the county veterans service officer a ready tool for reaching out to the veteran.

Additionally, the National Association subscribes to Chairman Filner's solution to the problem of veteran suicide that requires the military to use qualified psychiatrists to interview every member before separation and determine who is in need of treatment while still on active duty. It has merit and is probably the only way to reach every soldier being discharged.

Additionally, we believe that anyone found to be suicidal should be retained and retransferred to the VA for treatment, just as a soldier with a serious physical injury is being taken care of. Those who are in need of treatment for less serious diagnosis should be given a fee-basis card for use in the local community with a five-year renewal with VA approval.

These veterans live 60, 70 miles away from a VA facility, and it is very difficult for them to get into a VA hospital without having transportation, and the cost of gas right now makes it very difficult for them to get to a VA hospital.

Across the Nation there are veterans who still do not think they are a veteran because they didn't lose a limb or they didn't get injured in any way. They came home and started to work to support their families. They have never looked for any help from the Government. When the veteran dies, their family still does not know that they are entitled to benefits just because their husband or father served this country.

These are people that need outreach. They are mostly lower income, have never heard or reached out to the VA, and therefore, don't think they are entitled to this help.

I look at rural and urban America and see the great need to make these veterans aware of the benefits that they deserve. They earned entitlement, not welfare. These veterans have never made use of the VA Medical Centers, the GI bill, home loans, pensions or compensation benefits. They just served our country and they come home.

It is so rewarding when we meet one of these veterans and tell them that they may be entitled, and see hope on their faces. It sometimes means the difference between eating or buying medicine. I am sure if a study was completed you would see a large number of these rural veterans have never used the VA for any services, and they didn't know they could.

It is our responsibility to make sure that each of these veterans are getting their benefits. We do outreach to veterans and widows in nursing facilities, and everything we possibly can as a county office. In the State of Iowa, we just instituted legislation to where they are giving $10,000 to every county veterans service office, mandating that 99 counties will have funds from the State to do outreach services. So in Iowa next year in 2009, there will be 99 county veterans service officers available and ready, and there are several more. We have thousands of them ready and willing to help with outreach benefits to our Nation's veterans.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Ms. McMartin appears on p. 48.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Ms. McMartin.

Mr. Jones, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF RICHARD A. "RICK" JONES

Mr. JONES. Mr. Chairman, Mr. Lamborn, Mr. Hare, as we head toward Memorial Day, your Subcommittee takes a good and very well traveled road. It is critically important that our young men and women who defend us know what our great and generous country provides them following their service.

Regarding VA outreach, it is clear to us that veterans are generally more aware about the availability of services today than they were say 4 or 6 years ago. Not everything of course is perfect and we can do better, but things are improved.

Let me give you a quick comparative analysis.

Six years ago, for instance, the administration was deeply opposed to spending resources aimed at making veterans aware of the benefits and services, and facilities were in decline. At one point in that past period we had a Secretary of Veterans Affairs who told the Nation, told Congress that the Department was fully budgeted, needed not one penny more. Only months following that announcement was the revelation of a $1.5 billion shortfall in VA resources needed to provide those benefits to veterans.

And prior to that revelation, our association and many other associations had pleaded with Congress for adequate funding, and told them if we did not have funding addressed, there would be cuts in services and healthcare, in education benefits, backlogs and claims, and all of these sorts of problems we face today.

During that period, things were in fact so bad that there was a memorandum sent out by the Deputy Under Secretary for Operations and Management, this was in July of 2002, that actually directed all of its healthcare providers to stop marketing VA programs to veterans. Basically the July 2002 memo said too many veterans were coming in for services and the VA was spending too much money. It directed VA officials across the country to stop outreach to veterans. VA employees were directed to stop participating in health fairs and standdowns and related outreach projects all across the country. Medical facilities were prohibited even from putting out newsletters informing veterans about the services that they were legally entitled to receive.

We are thankful that we no longer face that deeply troubling period. If such heartless, shameful, incompetence were in place today, our OEF/OIF folks would struggle virtually alone because we have a couple of reports that indicate a great number of folks face enormous stress, personal stress from their experiences in combat.

The Defense Department shows that more than 1 in 4 of its commissioned officers on their third or fourth tour have symptoms commonly referred to as PTSD. That figure is of course higher than the roughly 12 percent who show those same symptoms after one tour and the 18.5 percent who show it after their second tour.

Another recent report, this one from RAND, shows that almost half of those returning troops, who number nearly 500,000, both reserve and active duty, will not seek treatment. Many of these veterans simply believe they are not at risk. They fear that the mental situation might be stigmatizing.

We need to assure these folks that the VA is open and accessible for their benefit, and it is available. If not addressed, these symptoms can compound and the costs will be greater.

Secretary Peake's recent announcement on outreach presents an opportunity for veterans to become more aware of VA's accessibility and in some cases these outreach efforts can be a matter of life and death for a veteran.

They need to hear not only that the system is open and available to them, they need to hear that the system can tackle their stress.

And believe me, we remain attentive that these most recent efforts, as optimistic as they are, actually take root. We have concerns, because residue from the previous attitude remains within the system. Take, for example, reports out of Temple, Texas, just a week or so ago that remind us that sometimes the cost of care takes precedence over the care of our greatest asset, the men and women who serve to protect us.

There was an e-mail that simply said we need to have less time taken to examine these veterans coming in for PTSD exams and to give them less of an effort because it costs too much money—and takes too much time.

We are very fortunate to have the Secretary come out and repudiate that e-mail and do it immediately and indicate that is just one small e-mail that doesn't show the system-wide efforts to serve our veterans.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you very much for this opportunity. Hopefully we have reached a turning point, and we appreciate your overview of this operation.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jones appears on p. 50.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Jones. I too was glad to see Mr. Peake repudiate that e-mail in the strongest possible terms.

Next is Mrs. Kathryn Witt from Gold Star Wives.

STATEMENT OF KATHRYN A. WITT

Ms. WITT. Thank you for allowing me to testify today. Most of my testimony was about a survivor's office and the need for a survivor's office, but you have already addressed that and said you have drafted legislation on the issue. So I will just skip over that.

The one thing I would like to mention is that the Army has an excellent long-term family care office, and that would make a great model for a VA survivors office. We would like to see our national service officers trained by the VA in survivor affairs, have a specific module of their training on survivor benefits.

We would also like to see that training available to the survivor representatives of other veterans organizations, including GSW.

We have had some problems. There is a rather obscure benefit where a lot of the survivors of veterans, as opposed to those killed on active duty or are in retired status, are entitled to military ID cards. It seems to me to be obscure and very hard to get the information on this. You have to have a letter from the VA, and they are not always aware that this benefit is available or what the person is talking about. And then you go to the military service, the ID card lab, and they don't quite know what to do with it. We would like to see some outreach on that and some clarification.

Another thing we would like to see some outreach and clarification on is the State property tax exemptions. It is very difficult to find information about these property tax exemptions and reductions. Some of the ladies receive a letter from the VA, and they don't even know why they are receiving this. It is a VA Form 2. Others can't find anybody that knows what they are talking about. It seems to depend on the State. Some of these are substantial reductions and very important. It seems to depend on the State that the VA is located in. It is the Federal VA that is sending these letters out, and then in some States they don't even seem to know what it is all about.

We would also like to see an online newsletter perhaps e-mailed out specifically to survivors that could include any new programs, discuss old benefits. You have a recurring cycle of people needing to understand what their benefits are and how they obtain them.

I would like to see an online newsletter on the VA Web site e-mailed out encouraging people to forward it. I think that would probably reach a whole lot of people.

I think we have made a whole lot of improvements in outreach, and thank you for letting me testify.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Witt appears on p. 53.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you very much, Mrs. Witt, and all our witnesses.

I will recognize myself now for 5 minutes or so.

Director Duckworth, in your testimony you suggested that the VA or DoD notify the States when a veteran returns to his or her home of record, but the Joint Executive Committee reported that it began a State Seamless Transition Initiative in 2007, and now

43 States and Territories have asked to be notified of returning servicemembers. Is the association aware of this initiative and why have not all of the States asked to participate?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Yes, we are aware. Illinois has signed up for it, and we have received seven notices, and that is it. We have been told about seven veterans. The way that the procedure works, and there are two procedures, one with the VA and one with the DoD. When the servicemember leaves the VA and they are injured, such as myself, you are then told, Would you like your information to be released to your State? You have to actually say "yes" and fill out a form that gets faxed to the State.

That is the Seamless Transition Initiative. It is very cumbersome, it doesn't happen, and it only applies to those who are severely injured, like myself, who are actually some place in the VA system upon their discharge.

Illinois has received seven faxes.

Mr. HALL. That would be seven out of how many veterans returning?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Tens of thousands.

The other aspect is the DD–214. When a servicemember leaves active duty, at the very bottom of the form they are given the option, would you like this sent to your State. When the servicemember takes the time to sign that, we get that. But most servicemembers are not told why it is important for them to do that, and the additional benefits they will be able to find out about. We get about 15 percent of the total number of servicemembers. So we do not get the information, and we cannot get to the veterans.

Mr. HALL. The VA and the DoD have worked together with the National Guard Bureau to create 57 Transition Assistant Advisors in the last 2 years. Feedback on the TAA seems to be positive. Why can't these positions be utilized instead of creating another grant program for the States?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. The difference between what happens with the National Guard, you are talking about one or two positions at the National Guard Bureau. I have 73 service officers, and we have all of the county service officers.

The difference is we will go to someone's home and sit at their kitchen table. I have sent my service officers into hospital rooms for Vietnam veterans dying from leukemia from Agent Orange to fill out forms so that the survivor, his wife, will get the benefits. That is the difference.

These folks are dealing with so many people they cannot provide that personalized service that we can from the State level and the county level. We actually will go and follow up and keep calling you until you get the benefits that you deserve. And we are federally certified.

Mr. HALL. Thank you for that explanation and for the work that you do.

Ms. McMartin, you mentioned a proposed partnership between your organization and VA and DoD. What has been the response from the Departments to this proposal?

Ms. MCMARTIN. Basically what we have gotten, several of our service organizations are also certified. We have gone through the accreditation process, the TRIP training. We actually have access

to virtual VA on a pilot program so we can get into the computer system to know. So we have had some good positive. It is only a pilot program, it is not out to all of our members.

They don't recognize us as an arm of Government. We still have to do power of attorneys (POAs) and we still have to do all of the steps to make sure that we can get the benefits for the veterans. The veteran can't sign a release and we can't assist the veteran without that power of attorney that is necessary.

But we are out there with the veteran trying to help them, and we still have another barrier that is very difficult to get through. We have to call the 800 number just like every veteran to get the information.

So when the veteran comes in and he is 80 years old and we are trying to call an 800 number for them, we are still bound by the same unfortunate problems that they have. Virtual VA has helped that. We can go in and access the information if the file has already been generated or information is already in.

But a new claim that is just processing and going through, it is difficult to get the discharge from the State office. We have to call them. If they don't have it, we send down to St. Louis to try to get their DD–214s. Older veterans are being billed to get a copy of their DD–214. We received a copy. We sent down to St. Louis to get a copy of his DD–214 for an 80-year-old veteran. He received a statement stating he had to pay $15 to get that because it has been archived. So that is a barrier.

Mr. HALL. That is a shame and a mistake that perhaps we can do something about.

Rural veterans have been a concern of this Subcommittee for some time, and although most people might not think of New York State as rural, I know that we do have sections of the State that are, and where we have a challenge in reaching all of our veterans. I am curious what are some of the outreach tools the counties have found to be effective to inform rural veterans about their benefits?

Ms. MCMARTIN. Well, you are talking to a good person. I live in Iowa in a rural community. I have a population of 200 people that live in my community where I live. We are 50 to 60 miles from the closest VA facility. My county is 45 miles long, so what we have done is I have an outreach office out in the rural part of my community so the veterans can come into that office 1 day out of the week.

I also do outreach to nursing facilities. We have seven nursing facilities in our community, and we contact those facilities on a daily basis as to new admits, new discharges, to make sure that every widow and veteran that is going into a nursing facility or an assisted-living facility is given a call, a letter, contacting the family member to apply for those benefits.

We assist with supermarkets of veterans benefits out in a lot of our areas to make sure that certain populations of veterans can go in. We go where the veterans live. If a veteran calls, we go out to that community.

You were talking about the National Guard. They have that one individual. Well, we have 99 individuals that can help. We live with those veterans. We know them. They are our neighbors. We know when somebody gets sick. They call me at home when some-

one in our community is ill and needs to use a VA facility. We partner and work together. We know the resources.

That is the other thing. We know what other resources are out there in the communities. We know what the Department of Health and Human Services offers and what Community Action Agency offers. Those partnerships in doing outreach with those, we go to those meetings and we go to the service organization meetings. That is what local community advocacy is all about. We can sit down with that veteran across the table at their table, at their convenience, not at ours, and we are accessible to them.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. And thank you for the work that you are doing.

Mr. Jones, you make an interesting comparison to the healthcare outreach efforts conducted by VHA, and pointed out the horribly misguided steps some VA employees took to try to limit services when the system became overloaded. What does NAUS see as the lesson learned from the VHA outreach experience, and how can the VBA be better positioned to respond to an increase in workload demand?

Mr. JONES. One might ascribe VA's change in attitude as simply a change in attitude, but that might not reach the real reason for VA's changed approach toward outreach. It might really be more a factor of a successful lawsuit brought against the VA some years ago, and that lawsuit was initiated on two fronts, one by a former Member of Congress, currently Governor of Ohio, Ted Strickland, and also a sister organization of ours, the Vietnam Veterans of America brought lawsuit following that memo I spoke of in testimony. They were successful in that suit and the court ordered VA to begin this outreach.

So what might be learned is that veterans need always to be on guard for the rights and privileges and entitlements they earned while defending this country. And that advocacy groups in this State of affairs need always to be on the alert as well to guard against any retreat of these benefits due to a loss of funds or a lessening of priority.

I think that is the lesson to be learned. Advocacy groups play an important role, and serve an important role with Members of Congress who champion veterans issues and understand that the freedoms we have today are directly a result of service given by generations of Americans.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Jones. I am going to ask one question of Mrs. Witt before turning it over to the Ranking Member, Mr. Lamborn, for his questions.

I am interested in your suggestion for a VA survivor newsletter. Has the Gold Star Wives made that suggestion to VA previously?

Ms. WITT. No, they have not made it to the VA previously.

Mr. HALL. Do you have any idea how far into the survivor community an electronic or e-mail newsletter would work? In some of the meetings I have had with veterans in my district, some of the older veterans or survivors of veterans are not as computer literate or don't have a computer that they have access to.

Ms. WITT. I think it would go pretty deeply into our GSW community, and they tend to pass it on to other survivor communities.

Many, many of our ladies can receive e-mail. Some of them can't respond to it, but they can receive it. And they tend to share the information by telephone. So I think it would penetrate very well.

Mr. HALL. Good, and I am glad to hear that. Of course they can print it out and pass it on in printed form, and maybe the Web site could suggest that. If you know someone who doesn't have a computer and needs this information, please print it out and pass it on.

I recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Ms. Duckworth, and thank you and all of you for testifying today.

How much do your current veterans service officers spend on outreach?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. It is their everyday job, sir. We actually have itinerant offices. In each of our 51 field offices, we man office hours. But all of our service officers spend at least some part of every day going to a community, visiting people's homes, or actually holding similar things, benefit fairs. We are everywhere.

That is the benefit of going down to the State and county level, is, as I said before, we are force multiplier and we know about their State benefits. We are part of those communities. We are not being resourced by the Federal VA. They are not giving us information we need so we can conduct the outreach. We do outreach on a mass basis, but we can't actually pick up the phone and call a recently discharged soldier because we don't know that he has come home. Nobody tells us. The DoD just gives him a plane ticket home, and nobody tells us that he has come home.

The first call should not be when the State police calls me and says I have one of yours. He has a DUI. Or when a sister agency, a homeless shelter calls me and says, hey, we have a guy. We can't do the person-to-person outreach, which we want to do and can do.

Mr. LAMBORN. Kind of a followup, if additional funding was provided to States for veteran outreach, how would the States use this funding and what type of outreach would they provide to veterans that the VA is not currently doing?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Definitely more staff so we can do more in-home visits and hospital visits, actually getting out into people's homes, especially with the case of the younger veterans, sir. Many of them do not think that they need these benefits or don't know about them, and so they don't initiate.

The way the system works now, if they initiate and contact us, then we can tell them about the benefits. But if they don't know about them, we can't help them. If they don't apply, we can't help them. So additional funding would actually allow us to visit the veterans, pick up the phone and call them. It would allow us to go into their homes and get even deeper into the community and follow up on a repeated basis.

Even though we have 73 service officers, it is still not enough when I have 1.2 million veterans.

Mr. LAMBORN. They are doing that right now?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. We are doing that to the best of our ability.

Mr. LAMBORN. So it would be more quantity, but not any qualitative difference?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. The quality would be more one on one, actually going into their homes. Right now we run offices and visit homes when we get the request. But this would actually allow us to penetrate even deeper and do more of the bringing ourselves more into the local communities than just the offices in that community.

Mr. LAMBORN. Ms. McMartin, if additional funding was provided to counties for veterans outreach, how would they use that funding and what would they do differently compared to what the VA is doing now?

Ms. MCMARTIN. Currently now a lot of our counties have limited budgets. Word of mouth is our outreach. We go to the service organization meetings and do those. The funding that we would get to do outreach would be to have, to host more veteran fairs, host more PSA news releases, news articles, the funding that the counties can't afford to do at this point in time.

In my local community if I got a grant, $1 per veteran, I can send out flyers on a monthly basis to the veterans in the community.

We can host different programs that are at nursing facilities. We do these things, but we can do these with funding. Right now we are doing them on such bare bone funds that our funds are paying for the staff. It is not for a billboard. It is not for PSAs. Those things when we get funds coming in from an organization or donated, then we can do those outreach efforts.

But right now the counties don't need to—like you said, quantity, we need quality. We need quality outreach efforts. Plus we need the referrals from the VA. If we don't get the referrals from the VA, piggybacking on them. If we can get a DD–214 that knows that veteran is coming home, we can send him a welcome-home letter.

It is so disheartening to have a veteran come into my office and say I didn't know you were here. We do news releases. We do those things that our newspapers give, but it is disheartening to not get that information out into the community. And we would try and get as much information out there as we possibly can.

If the VA has this money now to do outreach, the referral down to the local level is very important. Just putting out an 800 number is not outreach. Putting out a flyer saying you are eligible, you have got to know where to go to get the assistance. And telling them that they can go to the State or local offices, that is very important.

Mr. LAMBORN. With the permission of the Chairman, one more question.

Along those lines, how much time do county veterans service officers spend on outreach right now, and what types of outreach do they provide currently?

Ms. MCMARTIN. Right now we spend, like she said, it is our day-to-day job. When they don't walk in, we seek them out. We try to find a way of doing that.

In Iowa, our Governor just passed a bill to mandate 20 hours a week in every county employee. No matter if they have a thousand or 500 veterans, a minimum of 20 hours, and it is based on population. So outreach is very important.

What we do on a day-to-day basis is outreach. It is calling different organizations, finding out what services that we can provide,

sending out flyers or putting up things in newspapers or going to the local libraries to tell them that we are available and ready.

We don't have time to go out to every organization meeting, but we could. I mean, with additional funding to assist with that, then we could go out and just meet the veterans when they come home. The active-duty soldier that comes back to my local community I don't know until they need us. They don't automatically come into the office.

If DoD would say you need to go see a local county service officer and there was one available in every county, that would help.

Record their DD–214. We get referrals on a database. The recorder sends them over to our office to see if they might be eligible for benefits. That also piggybacks on military tax exemption to make sure that they apply for all benefits that they are entitled to.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you for your answer, and I thank you all again for testifying today.

Mr. HALL. I have a couple of quick questions.

Director Duckworth, what would you think of having more VA benefits counselors located throughout the State, such as co-located in Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, or CBOCs, or at Vet Centers, for example? And in addition to that, what would you think of extended hours or weekend hours like a Medical Center at such places?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. I think that is good, sir, but the problem with the VA representative is that they do not know about the State benefits, and there are so many State benefits.

Illinois has a $350,000 mortgage loan program, as an example, for each veteran of OEF/OIF. We give you 20 percent, zero percent interest, and the other 80 percent is the lowest rate, and we give a grant for the closing cost. The Federal VA rep does not know about that.

There may be grants at the county level. We know about them. I think it is great and we certainly need more and extended hours. But on top of that, we need representation at the State and municipal level.

Mr. HALL. What we need is to connect the Federal, the State, and the county levels?

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Yes, sir.

Mr. HALL. So if there are links electronically or by mail to let people know through whatever media.

Mrs. Witt, do you think it would be beneficial if the VA processed all survivor claims at one location rather than at all of the 57 regional offices so there can be specialized training for those types of claims?

Ms. WITT. Yes, sir, that is in writing that we would like to see a survivor's office that also processed claims and that could then expedite the routine claims.

Mr. HALL. Thank you very much.

Anything else, Mr. Lamborn?

Mr. LAMBORN. I have one final question I would like to ask Mrs. Witt.

When you talked to the VBA about the need for a survivor's office, what was their response?

Ms. WITT. It requires Congressional action, basically.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn.

I thank all of our witnesses on panel one. You have been most helpful. You are now excused, and we are going to ask, as the guard changes, our second panel to join us, which includes Mr. Kerry Baker, Associate National Legislative Director of Disabled American Veterans (DAV); Mr. Jacob B. Gadd, Assistant Director for Management, National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission for the American Legion; and Kate Emanuel, Senior Vice President of Non-Profit and Government Affairs at The Advertising Counsel (The Ad Council).

Welcome to our panelists. I remind you that your written statements are already entered into the record so you can feel free to summarize them and that will leave time for questions.

Mr. Baker, we will start with you. You are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF KERRY BAKER, ASSOCIATE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE DIRECTOR, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS; JACOB B. GADD, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION, AMERICAN LEGION; AND KATE EMANUEL, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, NON–PROFIT AND GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS, THE ADVERTISING COUNCIL

STATEMENT OF KERRY BAKER

Mr. BAKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member. We appreciate your invitation to testify today.

The VA has proven successful in ensuring that new veterans receive outreach that truly sets high standards. As some of its initiatives pertaining to OEF/OIF veterans, VA has reduced claim processing time to an average of 110 days, hired 100 new outreach coordinators specifically for new veterans, now employs its own casualty assistance officers, and has entered in a joint VA/DoD effort to ensure VA is notified of members referred to the Physical Evaluation Board followed by a VA-initiated contact to all those who have not yet applied for benefits.

There are also numerous other ongoing outreach efforts that target new veterans, such as transition and disabled transition assistance programs, the Veterans Assistance at Discharge Program, the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, and the Coming Home to Work Program.

In addition to the foregoing, VA recently announced that beginning in May 2008, it would begin contacting nearly 570,000 veterans by telephone to ensure they know about VA benefits.

These efforts are unprecedented. It is uncertain, but they may be in part the result of the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2004 or Public Law 108–454.

This Public Law required the Secretary to submit a report to Congress setting forth a detailed description of: (1) VA's outreach efforts to inform veterans of the current benefits to which they are entitled; and (2) the current level of awareness of such benefits.

Congress required this report to include the following: (1) a description of VA's outreach activities; (2) the result of a national survey of veterans to determine their level of awareness of benefits

and whether they know how to access those benefits; and (3) recommendations on how to improve those outreach and awareness activities.

The VA was required to include in the survey a valid sample of veterans from the following groups: World War II, Korean conflict era, Vietnam era, Persian Gulf era, and family members and survivors as well as other groups.

In response, VA published a report in December 2006. VA claimed that its report complied with the first and third requirement of the Public Law. However, VA failed to comply with the second requirement of reporting to Congress the results on a national survey to determine the level of awareness of benefits.

To address this deficiency, the report indicated that VA is planning to develop awareness measures in the next national survey scheduled for 2008, which is 4 years after the law's enactment and 3 years after the deadline given by Congress. VA simply determined that the data on hand at the time did not comply with the Congress' mandate. Moreover, VA could not have complied with the third requirement that it recommend how to improve outreach activities before it was able to understand the true results of the second requirement. Nonetheless, the DAV commends VA's outreach efforts for the newest generation, but we can and do condemn the VA for ignoring all other groups.

Congress made clear in the 2004 legislation its intention for VA to locate and reach out to older groups and younger groups, and we commend it for such. In turn, VA failed to honor Congress' mandate and is poised to continue such failure. We believe that outreach efforts should be uniformly distributed across the veteran population, which includes the newest generation, the greatest generation and everyone in between. The reasons for this are obvious. Approximately 10 percent of World War II veterans, 5 percent of Korean war veterans, and 12 percent of Vietnam war veterans are service connected for disabilities incurred during their military service. Yet by the end of 2007, over 25 percent of discharged OEF/OIF veterans were receiving benefits for service-connected disabilities.

These figures do not show that the new veterans are disabled at more than twice the rate of older veterans, but that they are receiving benefits over twice the rate, five times the rate of Korean War veterans. However, do not interpret DAV's position as disagreeing with enhanced outreach for the Nation's newest veterans. Rather, we feel the degree of outreach to the newest veterans in comparison to the outreach offered the oldest veterans is very lopsided.

World War II veterans are still receiving benefits by the tens of thousands for the first time in their entire lives. The same group is dying at a thousand per day. Many have and will continue to die without ever receiving the benefits they have earned, not because VA refuses to grant such, but because they simply never knew they were entitled to the benefits.

Many lessons have been learned through past mistakes and older veterans have paid a high price for that knowledge. With respect to outreach, we left those older veterans behind. Now in a rush not

to repeat those mistakes with the newest generation, we are leaving them behind once again.

That concludes my statement, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Baker appears on p. 55.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Baker. And Mr. Gadd, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JACOB B. GADD

Mr. GADD. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for this opportunity to present the American Legion's view on the effectiveness of VBA outreach efforts. The American Legion commends the Subcommittee for holding a hearing to discuss the importance of benefit outreach to veterans.

VA in the last several years has improved its outreach efforts, especially its efforts to reach and inform active-duty servicemembers preparing to leave the military. The American Legion remains concerned, however, that many transitioning OEF and OIF veterans are not being adequately advised of the benefits and services available to them from VA and other Federal and State agencies.

This is especially true of Reserve and National Guard units that are often demobilized in hometown reserve centers and National Guard armories rather than active-duty demobilization centers.

VA and DoD have made strides toward improved outreach. The number of TAP programs and other military service briefings conducted by VBA has suddenly increased since 2003, as has the number of servicemembers attending the briefings.

Unfortunately, VA's efforts regarding TAP are hampered by the fact that only one of the services, the Marine Corps, requires that separating servicemembers attend these briefings. This flaw in the system did not escape the Veterans Disability Benefits Commission and resulted in the recommendation that Congress mandate TAP briefings and attendance throughout DoD.

The American Legion strongly agrees with this recommendation as well. In order for all separating servicemembers to be properly advised of all their benefits, it is crucial that Congress adequately fund and mandate both TAP availability and attendance in all of the military services.

VA also affords separating servicemembers the opportunity to start the disability claims process, at least 6 months prior to separation from active duty, through its Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program. Unfortunately, this program is not available to all separating servicemembers, and it is only at 140 military installation. Necessary measures, including adequate funding, should be taken to ensure that all separating servicemembers, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, have the opportunity to participate in the BDD process if they so desire.

An overall weakness in VA's outreach program is that its efforts to target veterans already in the VA system. Oftentimes various mailings discussing changes in law, new benefit entitlements and other pressing issues are only sent to individuals currently receiving those benefits, or those that are participating in one of VA's registry programs, such as Gulf War or Agent Orange.

Unfortunately, this method drastically limits the number of veterans reached since many are not currently receiving VA benefits or being treated at a VA medical facility. In fact, there are many veterans that have never even applied for VA benefits. These are the veterans who fall through the cracks, especially when it comes to being advised to changes in the law or a regulation.

For example, it is not unusual for American Legion service officers to encounter in-country Vietnam veterans diagnosed with Type II diabetes that were not aware they were eligible to receive disability compensation and free VA healthcare for their condition despite the fact that the disability was recognized as an Agent Orange presumptive disability 7 years ago.

In most, if not all of these cases, the veteran was not currently in the VA system. It is very apparent that VA needs to expand its outreaches to reach these veterans. Some of the American Legion outreach programs are conducted by department service officers who have specialized training and experience with VA regulations and are familiar with the many VA programs and services.

Heroes to Hometowns Program. In an effort to increase cooperation between DoD and the American people, the American Legion entered a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Secretary of Defense's Office of Military Community and Family Policy to assist in outreach and assistance efforts to transitioning severely injured servicemembers.

Heroes to Hometowns is a program that focuses on reintegration back into the community with networks established at the National and State levels to better identify the extraordinary needs of returning servicemembers and families.

In 2007, the Heroes to Hometowns Program expanded its vision to the National Guard and Reserve components. This hard to reach population lives in rural America, disconnected from the traditional services provided by DoD or VA. The American Legion, with its 2.7 million members and 14,000 posts, reaches into these communities to convey strong support for America's military personnel. With the Heroes to Hometowns Program, the American Legion reaches out to provide support long after the deployment is over.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for allowing the American Legion to present comments on these important matters. As always, the American Legion welcomes the opportunity to work closely with you and your colleagues to reach solutions to an array of problems discussed here today.

Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Gadd appears on p. 60.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Gadd. Thank you for your service. And now we will recognize Ms. Emanuel for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF KATE EMANUEL

Ms. EMANUEL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for asking the Ad Council to testify today. We have a long and proud history of working with the Federal Government.

As the Chairman alluded to, we were founded in 1942 when President Roosevelt asked the leading ad execs of the day to help with World War II efforts. We created campaigns such as Buy War Bonds, Rosie the Riveter, and Loose Lips Sink Ships. And 65 years

later we are still tackling the country's most pressing social issues and remain the Nation's leader of public service announcements (PSAs).

We represent a unique collaboration between the advertising and media companies. Ad agencies throughout the country lend us their top creative teams pro bono, and media donate their time and space to our PSAs to deliver our messages to the public.

Presently we have about 22 campaigns with the Federal Government that represents 50 percent of our docket. We work with many Federal departments and agencies, including the U.S. Departments of Transportation, Agriculture, Homeland Security, Justice, Energy, Treasury, Health and Human Services (HHS), the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Library of Congress. We address a host of social issues with these Federal partners, obesity prevention, gun violence, energy efficiency and financial literacy, just to name a few.

While most of our campaigns tend to raise awareness or change behaviors, we do have some prior campaigns on Federal benefits. In 2003, we partnered with the National Women Infants and Children (WIC) Association to generate awareness of the WIC Program. We also partnered with HHS on a campaign to raise awareness on the State Children's Health Insurance Plan (SCHIP) program in the 1990s.

Whether it is promoting awareness about a social issue or a Federal benefit, the Ad Council recommends the following best practices for creating successful campaigns. One—know your audience. This is one of the golden rules of advertising and PSAs are no exception. This entails gathering existing information about your target audience, conducting focus groups, and figuring out what they think about the issue.

Also, a good PSA should stick to one target audience, don't try to be all things to all people.

Two, know the PSA proposition. A good PSA is one that takes a complex issue and drills it down to an individual action that is achievable. There are lots of important social issues out there, but not all of them lend themselves to a PSA campaign.

Three, stick to one idea. An effective PSA, whether it is a TV spot, newspaper ad or billboard, should say one thing. Your message has to have a laser focus. This is perhaps the hardest thing for many of our nonprofit and Federal Government sponsors to embrace.

Four, let your Web site do the heavy lifting. All PSAs should have a concise and easy to remember uniform resource locators (URLs) that links to a Web site that is easy to navigate and entertaining yet constructive. At the same time, the Web site should keep to the campaign's message and not overwhelm the user.

Typically we create separate campaign Web sites for our Federal Government partners so that the public is directed to a very user friendly Web site. In my written testimony, I have submitted samples of our home pages of several of our Federal Government campaigns.

Beyond Web sites, it is also really important to have multiple fulfillment sources, such as a 1–800 number, materials and brochures. I just want to add too, just listening to the prior testimony, having

a very strong and credible fulfillment is very important. If services aren't there through a 1–800 number or if people can't really explain the process, national PSAs aren't really going to do you any help and maybe frustrate people even more.

Five, strive for creative excellence. We can all recall a TV ad or PSA that was poignant or powerful or funny. It can really strike a cord and motivate people to do something. It will also motivate your average PSA director or radio station to run your PSA.

Six, think long term. It is not surprising that the Ad Council's most effective campaigns are our longest running— Smokey Bear, McGruff the Crime Dog, Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk. In our experience, PSA effort should be at least three years in duration to truly make a difference.

Seven, venture outside the PSA box. In today's cluttered media environment, PSAs must be part of an integrated comprehensive program that relies on public relations, grass roots marketing, community events and cause marketing. You have to think beyond the 30-second TV PSA.

One last tip is to establish clear metrics for success. No matter how clever a PSA is, it needs to work. That is, you need to motivate people to do something or think differently. Therefore, you should establish clear metrics to evaluate your efforts such as tracking donated media, tracking visits to the Web site, and tracking attitudinal shifts among your target audience. That is what we do for all of our campaigns.

Lastly, one campaign I would like to briefly mention today is in an effort we are doing in partnership with the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America ((IAVA). As you may be aware, IAVA is the Nation's first and largest group dedicated to the troops and vets in these two wars. The goal of the campaign is to decrease the depression and PTSD-related outcomes among returning vets. A separate and complimentary effort will create overall support for vets among the general public.

As this Subcommittee well knows, as many as 50 percent of the 1.64 million vets returning from Iraq and Afghanistan will struggle with serious mental health issues, and unfortunately many of them not getting treatment, and many don't seek help because of stigma or isolation.

So, in addition to the PSAs we created, we are also creating a very comprehensive Web site with links to resources and an online community exclusively for these vets. The on-line community will allow them to simply listen in and share their experiences in a judgment-free environment. Topics discussed may include jobs, reconnecting with family, PTSD benefits and more.

As we develop this Web site, we would welcome any guidance from the VA. We would be very open to working with them to jointly raise awareness to the benefits and services the VBA provides.

Thank you again for asking us to be here today. I am happy to provide additional expertise as the Subcommittee looks at this issue..

[The prepared statement of Ms. Emanuel appears on p. 63.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you very much, all three of our panelists.

I would start out by asking Mr. Baker, in your testimony the DAV provided a recap of VBA's requirements to report outreach ef-

forts which they have not sufficiently done. What other steps should we in Congress take to ensure more consistent and detailed reporting?

Mr. BAKER. Well, I believe the law that was passed in 2004 is a very good one. How you could provide oversight to VA to ensure they actually comply with that, I am not sure of your oversight abilities. But that law required VA to conduct a study of all veterans from World War II up to the present, including survivors, and gauge their knowledge of benefits.

Now as I stated in my testimony, they concluded that they come forth with ideas on how to improve those outreach activities. I don't see how they could have done that if they didn't do the second requirement.

Congress went a little further in 2006 when it passed another similar law that required VA to put out a plan of exactly what it was going to do to reach out to those veterans. That plan was due in 2007, October 1st, 2007. To my knowledge, that has not been completed either. And that is in my written testimony.

So potentially some oversight hearings as to why these things have not been done, I believe Congress took the right steps and the right directions to ensure that the outreach that we want for all of our veterans were done. I can't tell you why VA has not complied with those. Maybe they can. But I believe some outreach activities to find out, or oversight activities to find out exactly how and why they are going to comply could be a good starting point for the Committee.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. You also pointed out that VBA has not done a good job in reaching out to previous generations of veterans. DAV has a lot of experience in outreach with its program and outreach plans. What do you suggest VA do to reach different generations of veterans and other minority groups?

Mr. BAKER. Well, I can tell you some of the things that DAV does. We get assistance from the VA to do some of these things. We have mobile service offices that are basically two-person vans that are pretty large rolling offices. We have numerous of these throughout the country. I was in the field when this program got rolled out for the first time. And we would get names and addresses from VA, and we would tell them which zip codes we are going to be in. And we would get addresses from those individuals from the VA. And we would send a letter out to every single one that was identified as a veteran or survivor in those zip codes and we would advertise that that rolling service office was going to be at a specific location.

I remember one of the first times I took it out, I had about 70 some people show up in one day, almost more than one or two people can handle. And a lot of these people were World War II veterans, Korean war veterans. And they never knew about VA benefits or they didn't know what they were entitled to. They were filing claims for the first time. And this is not a very difficult procedure.

Now I don't know exactly how VA obtains that information, but they have had it. It may be a mix of DoD and VA information. I can certainly find out for you if you would like. But that is one place to start. They have a lot of contact information. It is just a

matter of sending out material to let these people know what they might be entitled to and where to go to go get that.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. This question could be for both DAV and the American Legion. Mr. Gadd, the Subcommittee staff noticed there was very inconsistent information about VA benefits on several of the VSO home pages, and that they often did not link directly to the VA with the exception of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, who did a commendable job of creating resources and links. I see this, however, as primarily VA's responsibility. If the VA gave you Web materials and links, would your organizations use them?

Mr. BAKER. Absolutely. If VA gave them to us?

Mr. HALL. Yes.

Mr. BAKER. We would certainly use them.

Mr. HALL. I assume the Legion also?

Mr. GADD. Yes, sir.

Mr. HALL. Mr. Gadd, it sounds like the Heroes to Hometowns Program enjoys a positive relationship with DoD and the States, and it has just begun a pilot program with VA. Why has VA's involvement only just begun and why is it on such a limited basis?

Mr. GADD. Great question. Recently we decided that with Heroes to Hometowns, since it is a community program and VA is in that community, that the transitioning servicemembers were going back to their communities and by utilizing VA in their hospital to access veterans and see who needs assistance as far as personal—you know, with transportation, other services that VA doesn't provide, by having someone from Heroes to Hometowns in the hospital it is a win-win for the VA and also for our program because VA can't solicit donations or community support because it is a Federal agency. Whereas, our robust volunteer program was able to realize that we can look in the community and pinpoint those resources that the veteran needs with the community resources.

Mr. HALL. Good. Thank you. About the Heroes to Hometowns Program, do you know about how many disabled veterans have been assisted since the program began and what type of services they have needed? And what is your referral percentage to VA?

Mr. GADD. Sir, I don't have those statistics with me, but I know we have helped out over 5,000. It varies so much by State.

Just recently, as of last week, I found out that there was a veteran who just got back home from Iraq and he had spent 18 months at Walter Reed. And while he was there, his basement flooded in his home back in Cleveland. And with our resources and the Heroes to Hometowns Program, this servicemember was able to be given $8,000 in one week from community resources to fix his home. And this is just an example of how different each of those requests are. They don't really come through VA.

We have our flyer that we pass out at military treatment facilities. We also have a very good Web site. So those are some of the different ways that we outreach to them.

Mr. HALL. And very laudable ones. That sounds like great work.

Based on your experience with outreach, which VA efforts would you say are the most successful? Outreach efforts, which ones would you say are the best?

Mr. GADD. The American Legion just started supporting the VA Welcome Home celebrations. That was a big improvement that we noticed. It started here at the DC VA Medical Center. We supported it last year and will again this year on June 14th. It is a great event to bring in veterans in the catchment area of each VA Medical Center. It has been mandated that each VA Medical Center have a welcome home for every OEF/OIF veteran. It gives an opportunity for those veterans coming back and their family members to understand their benefits. That is one of the newest things that we support.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

Mr. GADD. And certainly recognize.

Mr. HALL. I agree. That is very promising.

Ms. Emanuel, the Ad Council has had an impressive 60-year history while finding new ways to communicate proactive and timely messages to the American people on behalf of our Government. Can you briefly tell me what is the Ad Council's process in working with Federal agencies? Do you approach them or do they approach you?

Ms. EMANUEL. Both.

Mr. HALL. Has VA ever asked you for your assistance in educating veterans about benefits or services?

Ms. EMANUEL. No.

Mr. HALL. Have they assisted with the IAVA mental health outreach project that you were talking about?

Ms. EMANUEL. Not yet, but I know that IAVA had a very good meeting with the VA about 2 weeks ago and they left that meeting with an agreement to work together and see about possible collaborations.

Mr. HALL. That is good. The number of volunteer organizations and free media that you work with are impressive and commendable. And I, from my previous life, know a little bit about advertising and radio and TV and the power that it wields. You did mention hard costs. Can you explain that more and who incurs those costs?

Ms. EMANUEL. Sure, the sponsoring organization incurs those costs, so the Federal Government or a nonprofit sponsor. So while the ad agencies donate their creative services pro bono, there are certain hard costs to develop a PSA campaign such as TV production, radio production, and distribution. We send out Beta tapes to 28,000 media outlets throughout the country. It pays for tracking the media where it is played and it pays for any travel for the ad agency. It is mostly the production and the tracking, the hard costs.

Mr. HALL. Do you find that the PSAs that the Ad Council produces are played during broadcasts on TV or radio at good times or what you consider to be high viewership times or do they get shunted off into the middle of the night when they can count toward the licensee's requirements to play them without interfering with their income?

Ms. EMANUEL. That is a great question. Actually there is no real requirement for stations to play PSAs. In the '70s it was deregulated. But what we found, we look at this really closely—we monitor all our PSAs. And globally what we have found is about 60 to 75 percent of our PSAs play in favorable day parts so they are not

at that 12:00 midnight to 5:00 a.m. time slot. They are actually playing in very, good times.

Mr. HALL. Prime time?

Ms. EMANUEL. It is not prime time necessarily. It depends on the media. We get a lot more support from radio versus TV, there are just more radio stations—it is cheaper for them to donate their air time. We have been very pleased. You have to do it right. I think you have to have the right components and appeal to stations. They want to do what is right and they would want to run something that they think is appropriate and match it with a demographic, too. So if it is a kid targeted message we really try and target for example Nickelodeon.

Mr. HALL. Right. I am just wondering if the service time on the *Super Bowl* for instance to advertise, you know, "Be All You Can Be or the Marine The Strong and Proud," the lightning bolts, the images that are manly and you see during the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) playoffs. I am sure that they are buying, I would guess, this time?

Ms. EMANUEL. Absolutely.

Mr. HALL. You talk about prime income generating time for the networks or cable channels. Is it realistic to expect that they will play a PSA during those types of events?

Ms. EMANUEL. Probably not, but I know that the Kaiser Foundation has a very prominent campaign on HIV/AIDS awareness with Viacom, and they got a spot donated during American Idol. So it just depends on your relationship with the media.

We have a campaign with HHS on preventive health. It is to get older men to go to their doctor. We did a partnership with ESPN to play those spots during ESPN's prime time. So it depends on your relationships with the media basically.

Mr. HALL. Well, that is good. Maybe we need to have a better relationship. Maybe the Committee should ask some of the broadcast company executives to come in here and talk to them about a patriotic gift of broadcast time for these PSAs.

Ms. EMANUEL. Sure.

Mr. HALL. In describing the PSA proposition, you noted that some issues don't work well with PSAs. Do you think a message about veterans benefits would work?

Ms. EMANUEL. Absolutely, I think that is a very PSA-able proposition. You are trying to raise awareness about a specific benefit. I think the challenge here would be it might not lend itself to a donated media model. We rely strictly on donated media. VA may want to consider paid media as well or do a combo of the two. If you are trying to target Korean and World War II vets, and Vietnam vets, as well as newly returned vets, those would be a much different feel and look to the campaign. So if it is a smaller population you are talking about, World War II vets, a mass national PSA campaign probably wouldn't make sense. You might want to do direct mail or something very specific.

Mr. HALL. I believe that the VA should spend some money and not just expect to get everything free in terms of broadcast time. I gather from the Ranking Member's remarks that he would agree with that. I think he said a couple percent or something, but that is still significant compared with what is happening now.

What is your opinion of the VA's Web site? Is it entertaining, instructive or easy to navigate? And how does it compare to other agencies that you work with?

Ms. EMANUEL. Well, I did go to the Web site. I would say that the VA Web site is typical of most Federal Web sites, and no offense to any Federal Government or agency or department in the room. Most Federal Government Web sites are not user friendly. That is not what they were built for. They kind of appeal to everybody. So I know the VA had a kids page. And you have your executive staff bios. And I think that is true of most Federal agency Web sites. If you look at HHS's it has got everything on there, same with the National Institutes of Health, Department of Transportation. And that is no criticism of those Federal agencies. I think they are trying to do what they know and have a mass appeal. And that is why we really always create separate URLs with the Federal Government. I think the VA would probably be well-suited to do the same.

Mr. HALL. Do you believe that the VA could utilize some of the other multimedia outlets that you mentioned?

Ms. EMANUEL. Sure. I think you have to be at all places where everyone is. So if it is newspaper, billboards, new media. You asked a question about on-line, I think it is really important that you recognize that older folks or low income folks are not on-line as much. So maybe a 1–800 number or collateral materials are more important. But really there are children of veterans who are on-line, so you really should be everywhere. We don't really stick to one media outlet when we take on a campaign look at one media, we usually do a multimedia approach and do it all.

Mr. HALL. Thank you. I am going to ask Minority Counsel to ask a question for Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAWRENCE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Baker, Ranking Member Lamborn wanted me to let you know that he had high commendation for the DAV Mobile Service Officer (MSO) Program. In fact he was so impressed by it that he introduced a bill that the House passed, H.R. 1863, which would create a VA pilot program that basically models the VA program after what DAV has done.

Do you have the stats with you on what type of claims the DAV is continuing to get from its service program? How many claims are open and how many are granted? That type of information.

Mr. BAKER. I don't have the stats specific to the mobile service office. I can get those for you rather easily. As you know, in addition to the mobile service office we do presentations that are just at a specific location out in the field, not much different than the mobile service office. We sometimes utilize the same type of method. We will send out flyers to people in a certain zip code.

So you probably want it to be accurate, you want to have both of those stats.

I do have in my—I don't know if this really goes to your question in my written statement, in the past 17, 16 months if you count the World War II claims and the Vietnam war claims and Korean war claims, DAV represented well over 30,000 of those just to receive brandnew service connections ever. I couldn't get the VA's numbers up for that amount. Now, some of those are from the

MSO and some are from people coming into our office. The fact is those are brandnew claims.

Mr. LAWRENCE. 30,000 service connections?

Mr. BAKER. Over 30,000 service connections just in the past 16 months just for those three groups. Using VA's own numbers, veterans over 56 years old, for 2006 there were 67,000 brand new claims that have never been in the system before. And in 2005, there were 68,000 that had never been in the system before. Those numbers undoubtedly show that there are countless numbers of veterans out there from these old wars and simply had never been in the system. And there are not laws being passed that grant a lot of new presumptive service connections that would get these guys in the door. These are benefits that they have always been entitled to, that they are just not getting. They are now through various outreach efforts, but this simply isn't enough.

I can get you those numbers if you would like to have them. We do track the new service connections and the increases and the survivor claims. So I could probably track pretty much whatever numbers you need to get.

[DAV provided information to Minority Counsel.]

Mr. HALL. Mr. Lamborn is here himself, and I recognize him for the rest of his questions.

Mr. LAMBORN. Yes, let me follow on to what the staff was asking you a moment ago, but we do commend you for your efforts and the outreach that you have done. I know we are talking about further and better outreach, but some of your organizations do a great job. And you in particular, I just want to say you have done a great job in that connection, so thank you.

Mr. BAKER. Thank you.

Mr. GADD. Thank you.

Mr. LAMBORN. Yes, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn. Mr. Baker, Mr. Gadd and Ms. Emanuel, thank you for your testimony. You have been very helpful and given us a lot to work with. So you are now excused and thanks for your testimony and for your dedication to our Nation's servicemembers and veterans.

And now I will ask our third panel to step forward and join us at the table. Ms. Diana Rubens, Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations of the Veterans Benefits Administration for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Ms. Leslye Arsht, Deputy Under Secretary for the Department of Defense; and Mr. Kevin Crowley, Deputy Director of Manpower Personnel for the National Guard Bureau for the U.S. Department of Defense.

Welcome, all of you and as usual your statements are entered in full. The written statements have been entered into the record, so feel free to abridge them if you wish.

Ms. Rubens, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENTS OF DIANA M. RUBENS, ASSOCIATE DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY FOR FIELD OPERATIONS, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; LESLYE ARSHT, DEPUTY UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, MILITARY COMMUNITY AND FAMILY POLICY, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE; AND KEVIN CROWLEY, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, MANPOWER AND PERSONNEL, NATIONAL GUARD BUREAU, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

STATEMENT OF DIANA M. RUBENS

Ms. RUBENS. Thank you, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today and provide you some information on what Veterans Benefits Administration has been doing for outreach activities designed to address the needs of our brave men and women who are still actively serving our country and our distinguished veterans.

I believe that the VBA outreach programs exemplify our pursuit of providing the best possible service to our Nation's heroes. VA and DoD work through joint initiatives to assure the wide dissemination of information on the array of benefits and services available to servicemembers, including healthcare, educational assistance, home loans, vocational rehabilitation, employment, disability compensation, pension insurance, burial and memorial services. For example, VA distributes the summary of VA benefits in pamphlets to new recruits at military entrance processing stations and the graduating cadets at the military academies as well today.

In conjunction with DoD, Homeland Security, and the Department of Labor (DOL), VBA personnel are located at benefits delivery at discharge intake sites, where we conduct Transitional Assistance Program briefings to retiring and discharging servicemembers, and their spouses, and Disability Transition Assistance briefings for servicemembers who have applied for or anticipate applying for service-connected compensation from VA.

These briefings are presented to both regular active-duty servicemembers and pre- and post-deployment Reserve and National Guard members. It is generally followed by an opportunity for personal interview and assistance with the submission of claims for benefits.

Last year, VA conducted over 8,000 briefings to almost 300,000 attendees. In the TAP briefings we introduced attendees to VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program and used this opportunity to present information on innovative VR&E Programs, such as our Coming Home to Work Initiative, a collaborative partnership between VR&E and Federal agencies to provide civilian work experiences to interested servicemembers who are interested in a medical hold status at a medical treatment facility.

In 2006, transition assistance advisers were hired by the National Guard and trained by the VA to provide outreach services to servicemembers returning from OEF/OIF. The primary function is to serve as the statewide point of contact and coordinator, as well as provide information regarding VA benefits and services to Guard members and their families, and assist in resolving any problems they may have with VA healthcare, benefits, or TRICARE.

Using our Veterans Assistance at Discharge system, we send welcome home packages for recently separated servicemembers, including the Reserve and National Guard members, containing a letter from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs along with pamphlets describing the benefits available.

These mailings are sent to the address provided to VBA by the Department of Defense at the time of separation. To ensure a seamless transition, in 2003 VA began to assign permanent and full-time representatives to all key military treatment facilities. We also began hiring recovery care coordinators. These VA employees monitor patient progress and coordinate submission of claims for benefits.

In our regional offices, case managers ensure that the claims of the most seriously injured are expedited. VA and DoD jointly sponsor our Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program. At over 150 military facilities we accept disability claims within 60 to 180 days prior to release from active duty, collecting service treatment records, conducting physical exams, and completing disability rating decisions. We try to do that just prior to or just after separation so that disability benefits will commence as quickly as possible.

VA and DoD are also piloting a single disability evaluation system with a rating decision that forms the basis for both the Military Medical Evaluation Board process and the VA disability rating process. In the event of an in-service casualty, the VA regional office Casualty Assistance Officers visit family members and assist them in applying for VA death benefits. We coordinate these visits with the Military Casualty Assistance Officers.

In order to ensure that the surviving spouse and dependent children are aware of all benefits, the VA has established a special survivor benefits Web site and mails a 6-month followup letter to surviving spouses reminding them of benefits and services available.

Outreach to other targeted veteran constituencies and their dependents, such as homeless, Gulf War, Vietnam, elderly, women, and POW veterans is often accomplished through cooperation and a personalized outreach.

Mr. Chairman, we at VA are proud of our continuing role in the transition of servicemembers from military civilian life and continue to improve our quality and breadth of outreach efforts to all servicemembers and veterans.

Thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions from you or Mr. Lamborn.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Rubens appears on p. 74.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you so much for your testimony, and for finishing in record time. And we now have the whole full-length version and the abridged version. Thank you.

Ms. Arsht, you are recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF LESLYE ARSHT

Ms. ARSHT. Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Lamborn. Thank you for this opportunity to express the Department of Defense's commitment to facilitating successful transitions from military to civilian life, for military members, and to support for families as these transitions occur.

Collaboration between DoD, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Labor, and the National Guard Bureau is more complete than ever before. My written testimony outlines our groundbreaking approaches and a renewed spirit of collaboration to deliver support to our military community members, whether they live near or far from an installation.

Today I will concentrate on just a few of those programs that feature improved information and service delivery. You have heard about some of these programs and will hear about other from other participants on these panels.

One of our newest outreach and benefits awareness initiatives, the Joint Family Assistance Program, was originally started in 15 States and is now, with Governors' agreements, projected to expand to all 50 States and the 4 Territories by the end of 2008. This program facilitates partnerships among Federal, State and local organizations; builds benefits and transition assistance outreach for deploying units; and provides a vital State-by-State database for around the clock family assistance.

Another initiative comes from a paradigm shift that recognizes the continuum of financial readiness, military and veterans benefits, and transition assistance. In March 2008, we created a new directorate, the Office of Personal Finance and Transition. This directorate offers a new approach that will ensure 24/7 global access to educational resources and individualized financial and transition plans using the latest technology and multiple delivery methodologies throughout the servicemembers and their families' life cycles.

In creating this office, we have addressed the needs of National Guard and Reserve members and their families which differ from those of the active duty servicemembers. Building on the traditional Transition Assistance Program, we launched TurboTAP, a dynamic, automated, Web-based system for delivery of transition assistance and related information. It allows each National Guard and Reserve member to obtain a lifelong account and a tailored individual transition plan that can also connect them to information on military and veterans benefits, many of which have significant cash value. This is a 21st century approach to delivering individualized information and benefits to servicemembers and families.

We have created multiple high-tech, high-touch initiatives, both online and in person, which exist to better serve our troops and families with their transition, financial readiness, and benefits awareness needs. To augment the online system, in the fall of 2007, we established the DoD TurboTAP mobile training teams to support the National Guard and Reserve.

By the end of 2009, our goal is to have the TurboTAP mobile training teams fully integrated and the deployment support transition assistance in financial awareness programs in all 50 States. We will expand and enhance our new network of financial professionals to provide financial counseling and planning services ranging from budgeting and debt consolidation to advanced financial planning.

Two other online resources we sponsor that would serve the total force throughout their careers, as well as during transitions, are Military OneSource and MilitaryHOMEFRONT, our "Google" for quality of life information. Military OneSource is the hub of our on-

line support services. It is available 24/7, for all troops and families, with a friendly voice to help solve problems. It offers free, convenient access to confidential resources and referrals support. Military OneSource is especially beneficial to those geographically separated from installation services. Additionally, Military OneSource offers in-person counseling and now also features telephonic counseling.

In conclusion, our servicemembers and their families have sacrificed much in support of the global war on terror. It is our duty to provide our troops with the decisionmaking tools they need to help them with the key financial and transition decision points in their lives. On behalf of the men and women in the military today and their families, I thank you and the other Members of the Subcommittee for your steadfast support during these demanding times.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Arsht appears on p. 78.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Ms. Arsht. Mr. Crowley, you are now recognized for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF KEVIN CROWLEY

Mr. CROWLEY. Chairman Hall, Ranking Member Lamborn, I am here on behalf of the Chief, National Guard Bureau, Lieutenant General H. Steven Blum to testify about the Veterans Benefits Administration's outreach efforts. I am grateful for the chance to testify regarding veterans outreach for the National Guard.

In the National Guard we know that our people are our most valuable resource. Accordingly, we understand the importance of assuring that our soldiers and airmen returning from deployment receive the support they need to serve the National Guard and are federally transitioned to civilian life.

We are proud of our relationship with the Department of Veterans Affairs, and specifically the Veterans Benefits Administration. In 2004, Lieutenant General Blum met with the Department of Veterans Affairs to develop a strategy to support National Guard members who will have been deployed. As a result, General Blum signed a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Veterans Affairs and Under Secretary of Benefits and Under Secretary of Health. Forty-eight States and Territories have signed local MOUs with regional Veteran Benefits Administration offices.

Since May 2005, 62 National Guard Transition Assistance Advisers have been jointly trained by the National Guard and Department of Veterans Affairs. Transition Assistance Advisers are responsible for educating National Guard members and their families on veteran benefits. Transition Assistance Advisers also act as a conduit to the National Guard and the local Veterans Affairs personnel.

Of the 62 Transition Assistance Advisers, 57 are veterans, 30 of which are disabled, and the remaining transition advisers are spouses of active National Guard members.

The Transition Assistance Adviser initial training was held in February 2006 at the Veterans Benefits Administration training academy in Baltimore. Since that initial training, the National Guard and the Veterans Affairs conducted annual refresher training that included representatives for the Veterans Benefit Adminis-

tration. This training is further supported by a jointly written and published Transition Assistance Adviser quarterly newsletter that includes up-to-date information on Veteran Benefit Administration issues.

When National Guard members return from overseas deployment, they learn about veteran benefits available to them through various means. We believe the most effective briefings are those delivered locally. They allow National Guard members to follow up with the same individuals who brief them and allows family members to be present. We find that the Guard families play a pivotal role in the application for benefits by and for our airmen and soldiers.

In April 2008, the National Guard Bureau published our First Warrior Support newsletter that was specifically directed at the benefits of National Guard members. This newsletter is distributed to the local transition advisers who add local contact information.

Transition Assistance Advisers submit a monthly report to the Veterans Affairs beginning this year. The report is modified to include referral information to the Veterans Benefit Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and Vet Centers. The National Guard Bureau and Veterans Affairs will use this data to measure the effectiveness of our education outreach programs to make modification improvements where necessary.

Additionally, we believe Congressional initiatives like the inclusion of Beyond the Yellow Ribbon in the 2008 National Defense Authorization Act will continue to improve our collective outreach activities to provide airmen and soldiers the education and counsel available to them as they transition back into communities and civilian lives.

The two key pieces are, one, that educational meetings are scheduled to be conducted at the 30-, 60-, and 90-day mark. And two, that the education is being conducted locally and harnessing available resources at that level. We appreciate that the Office of the Secretary of Defense Reserve Affairs is working with us to provide the guidance to meet Congressional intent.

As Ms. Arsht acknowledges, our close relationship with the Office of the Secretary of Defense's Military Community and Family Policy is another example of their partnering with us to provide the needed support services and outreach for our geographically disbursed servicemembers and their families. The collaborative nature of our relationship with the Office of the Secretary of Defense has allowed them, through the Joint Family Support Assistance Program, to be able to effectively outsource the resources to all 54 States and Territories to address the needs for all Reserve component members.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these important matters with Congress and with the National Guard Bureau, and look forward to working with your Committee to ensure these programs remain robust. I would like to thank the Committee for its continued support of the men and women of the Armed Forces. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Crowley appears on p. 83.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Crowley. And thank you all for your testimony and for your work on behalf of our Nation's veterans. It is good to hear about all the progress you are making and the new

things you are trying. And one thing that is for sure is that we are all moving on these issues and on trying to solve some these problems.

Ms. Rubens, I wanted to start by asking you why with Joint Executive Council (JEC), Benefits Executive Council, Health Executive Council (HEC), and the Senior Oversight Committee, no one has figured out that there should be links to the VA home page on the DoD Web site.

Ms. RUBENS. I will tell you I made a note during the earlier testimony to pursue that opportunity. It doesn't make sense to me that we are not connected. It is an opportunity where those servicemembers are going in to look at that current information as they are part of DoD and what might be available to them when they are discharged. And so I will pursue that as I go back to the office.

[The VA response is included in the response to Question #1 in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 85.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you, that was easy. Well, sometimes in business or governmental affairs, the obvious eludes us, but that would be great.

In earlier testimony from the DAV they mentioned the biannual plan for outreach activities due to Congress on October 1, 2007. What has happened to that report?

Ms. RUBENS. I have to be honest with you I am embarrassed to tell you that I am not certain, but I will go back and look into that and get back to you and follow up.

[The VA response is included in the response to Question #2 in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 85.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you. They also mention 2008's National Veterans Survey. Do you know if that process has begun?

Ms. RUBENS. I believe that has begun. I also will tell you that we have begun, under the guidance of Secretary Peake, to do real hands-on outreach with telephone calls being made currently to over 17,000 veterans that are currently being care managed as well as over 500,000 OEF/OIF returnees to ensure that they are aware that we are still here. If they need us, we are available.

We have a variety of benefits available that are going to be presented to them from the healthcare and benefits side as well as to ensure that if they hadn't taken advantage of us when they first were discharged we are still available, ready to talk to them and provide any services that we can.

Mr. HALL. And I want to thank you also for providing the 5-year breakdown on TAP attendance. Can you also tell us how many of those briefed were active duty, Guard, Reserve, survivors, or other family members?

Ms. RUBENS. I don't have those numbers right in front of me, but yes, we can give you the breakdown on how many of those were active duty. 300,000, if I am not mistaken, was actually just last fiscal year.

[The VA response is included in the response to Question #3(a) in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 86.]

Mr. HALL. Do you know or could you guess why the numbers have gone down significantly between 2006 and 2007?

Ms. RUBENS. I don't have the breakdown with me, but I will look at that. If there is something that we can develop that will give us an explanation as to why, I will absolutely provide that for you.

[The VA response is included in the response to Question #3(b) in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 86.]

Mr. HALL. This probably falls in the same category, but why are the numbers that you reported for briefings attendees about double of those reported by DOL to DoD for the same time periods?

Ms. RUBENS. I have not seen their numbers, but we will look into that.

Mr. HALL. If you can find information about that, I would appreciate it.

[The VA response is included in the response to Question #3(c) in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 86.]

Mr. HALL. In examining the TAP Program it was brought to the Subcommittee's attention that one of the major problems with conducting TAP briefings is the VBA personnel don't always show up for their portion of the briefing. How do the regional officers ensure that they are present at all of the TAP briefings? And how do you handle it when your staff are no shows or cancel?

Ms. RUBENS. To be honest with you, that is the first time I had heard that. If you have specific examples, I would like to pursue that. I think there is an issue of accountability there. Our regional offices are working very closely with their nearby military partners in an effort to be there. We have worked very hard to ensure there is a consistent presentation, no matter what facility whether it is Pendleton or Fort Lewis or any of the other facilities, and so we will pursue this.

[The VA response is included in the response to Question #4 in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 86.]

Mr. HALL. We will provide you with some examples.

Do you provide unique benefits briefings to survivors or for caregivers of the severely injured who will need assistance in accessing the additional supportive resources such as aid and attendance or housing adaptation?

Ms. RUBENS. If I am tracking your question, we have an array of benefits that are available, you are correct. When it comes to the caregivers, I know we are developing a process and program that will help support them. When it becomes an issue of home adaptation or of vocational rehabilitation, if a veteran is expressing interest to us or has a need, for instance, for that home adaptation, we have folks that are in that business line that will make themselves available to provide that specific information.

[Additional information was provided by VA in the response to Question #5 in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 87.]

Mr. HALL. Ms. Rubens, what would you think of the VA creating an Office of Survivor Affairs?

Ms. RUBENS. You know, I thought I did make a note when the Gold Star Wives mentioned that and looked at it in their testimony, and I will go back and pursue that. To be honest with you,

I don't know that it is something that requires legislation, and so I think it is something for VBA to pursue.

We have under the previous Under Secretary made it a priority and elevated it, if you will, as to maintain and track how long and how well we are doing specifically on that Dependency and Indemnity Compensation claim from those widows and widowers, and we continue to be aware of the fact that for those family members it is critical for us to be there. It is a difficult time for them.

[Additional information was provided by VA in the response to *Question #7* in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 87.]

Mr. HALL. In your experience or during your tenure, has VA ever tried to develop PSAs of its own or worked with the Ad Council as other Federal agencies have done?

Ms. RUBENS. I will tell you that I have actually already asked Ms. Emanuel for her card so we can become the next Smokey Bear ad campaign.

Mr. HALL. I suppose I will ask each of you, if you have any ideas for what the pitch should be, the slogan or whatever, that is something that I am sure a lot of us would like to know.

Do you track the response rate generated from Veterans Assistance Discharge System mailings that the VA sends out?

Ms. RUBENS. I do not know the answer to that, but I will find out for you.

[The VA response is included in the response to Question #6 in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 87.]

Mr. HALL. The number of BDD sites you reported, 142, does not match the number that VA and DoD report in their annual JEC report, which was 130 sites. Can you explain the discrepancy? And why are only 40 regional offices BDD participants and not all of them?

Ms. RUBENS. I believe that all of our regional offices are available to provide BDD, but I will also tell you that we have some very concentrated separation points where we work with DoD and have permanent full-time employees at those facilities.

As to the rationale for why my numbers don't match, no, I will have to go back and figure out where we added some.

Ms. ARSHT. I might be able to answer this. I think it may be determined by the number of MOUs that have actually been signed. I am on the EC Working Group on BDD.

Mr. HALL. Ms. Arsht, the Subcommittee reviewed three of DoD Web sites that offer supportive services to servicemembers and the families and found that they don't easily link to the VA home page. This is sort of the same question again. Would that be problematic?

Ms. ARSHT. I actually was a little surprised to hear that, too. TurboTAP, for instance, was designed to connect DoD, Department of Labor, and VA and to make it easy in the transition venue to use a zipcode and go directly to the office that would be serving you. That is especially designed for Guard and Reserve members, of course. I am glad to go back and look at that as well.

[The DoD response is included in the response to Question #1 in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 89.]

Mr. HALL. Thank you. And when the Subcommittee staff called the Military OneSource toll free line and asked about veterans ben-

efits, we were told we had to contact VA for any information. Then we were given another toll free line, but that was the number for VA's health revenue facility, which was the wrong number.

Does DoD or VA train Military OneSource operators on VA benefits? And what kind of quality checks do you do on referrals done by Military OneSource?

Ms. ARSHT. Again, this was a very surprising comment that you made in your opening. We do train Military OneSource consultants. The stakeholder is usually responsible for helping us with that training, and we have for some period of time had VA reps who assist us. This is one of those things we have to go back and see. It would be great if we had an actual case that we could go back and try to understand what actually happened when the call came in and get the whole case history on it.

Mr. HALL. Okay, we can provide you with that. Could there be more information on VA benefits integrated into Military OneSource or does the VA need to have a Veteran OneSource counterpart?

Ms. ARSHT. The important thing to remember about Military OneSource's concept is that it is a referral system. There are certain things that we provide that are DoD-centric, but, as it builds out it becomes more and more a central information delivery system. It is important that there be expertise that backs up the question and answering process. So it is better when the people who are preparing the answers and the protocols to respond to a series of questions actually know what questions will likely come up and get prepared in that way. The deeper their understanding is, the better the performance is going to be. You would want VA to be deeply involved in the creation of such a thing.

Mr. HALL. DoD has had a lot of successful experience since the fifties with advertising, especially in recruiting. The new Military OneSource commercials are commendable, and I am just wondering if you could suggest what the VA could be doing to match DoD's communications level or level of effort?

Ms. ARSHT. I really think the Ad Council is the expert in the room here on that.

Mr. HALL. Okay. TAP seems to be the best way to reach transitioning servicemembers and their families in person. However, I have heard that the VA does not consistently show up to provide their portion of the veterans benefits briefing. Conversely, I have also heard that the VA does not also always know when these briefings are taking place. So how can the process be improved? And where is the Joint Executive Council oversight on this issue? And why was TAP removed from its 2007 annual report?

Ms. ARSHT. TAP removed from whose annual report?

Mr. HALL. The JEC annual report.

Ms. ARSHT. Okay, well, I don't know. I will have to find out. But on the content of TAP, just yesterday I was at the quarterly meeting of the Advisory Committee for Veterans Employment Training and Employer Outreach. ACVETEO is what it goes by its acronym. It is co-chaired by the Departments of Labor, VA and DoD. All have ex officio positions on this Committee. It also has a number of employers, and they are devoting themselves to doing a review and an assessment of the current TAP program and curriculum to

establish even more consistency. We have been trying repeatedly over the years to get more and more consistency into the delivery of the 2½-day program. This is yet another effort to achieve that kind of uniformity in the content, the sequencing, and the delivery of the program.

So there is a concerted effort underway to have TAP be at the level that we need it to be in order to be effective.

It is important to say also, as other members of the panels have said, that we need more than one delivery system for getting information into the hands of our different populations, because we still do hear repeatedly that our servicemembers coming home, just want to go home, and what we are trying to do is get with the 21st century. You know, the young generation, does everything on-line, and we are trying to digitize and be 24/7 and make it available to them as they need it. That is different from sitting in a classroom for 2½ days.

[The following was subsequently received from DoD:]

The VA Office of Seamless Transition provided the information for the 2006 report on the Transition Assistance Program. Upon discontinuation of the VA Seamless Transition Office, the task to provide information was not passed to another entity for the 2007 report. The Department is working with the VA to include current information in the 2008 report.

Mr. HALL. What I am hearing is there are a lot of good programs and efforts being made, and what needs to happen is to complete the link and find the places and the things that are falling through the cracks. And if there are briefings taking place that the VA doesn't know about, there has to be a system where they are automatically notified of all of them.

I want to ask you one more question; and that is, can veterans come back and attend the TAP class after they are discharged? A TAP briefing?

Ms. ARSHT. I will find out. My guess is, yes, but I don't know for sure.

[The following was subsequently received from DoD:]

Yes, veterans can access the Transition Assistance Program after they are discharged. The Department's recent initiative, TURBOTAP, is a dynamic automated Web-based system that is the backbone of the Department of Defense's TAP process. It allows each servicemember to receive customize accounts of benefits prior to and after separation.

Additionally, separated servicemembers can be authorized to attend workshops up to 180 days after their date of separation. If more than 180 days have elapsed since their date of separation, and they are seeking employment assistance and counseling, they will be referred to the local One-Stop Career Center System where they can access an array of services, including those provided by a Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialist or Local Veterans' Employment representative.

Mr. HALL. It might be a good idea, especially, as you mentioned, when they first come home, they just want to go home.

Ms. ARSHT. I am certain that the answer is yes, because the Guard and Reserve do that. They have been doing that for a long time.

But one of the reasons that we want to have the online service is that we can provide more on-demand service. You don't have to go to class to learn. And in the curriculum, the TAP managers at the installations have the information available to them.

Mr. HALL. I am going to hold my questions to Mr. Crowley and defer to Mr. Lamborn.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

For Ms. Rubens, what type of outreach does the VA provide specifically for survivors? You have talked about different populations, but could you refer to again, if you didn't already do this, the survivor, such as the Gold Star widows?

Ms. RUBENS. DoD and VA's casualty assistance officers maybe visits together, and then we have 6-month followups. Those are for the individuals. For the survivors, it is part of our overall outreach. There is nothing specifically that I'm aware of that is targeted to survivors, although I will make sure that I am not telling you a tale and look at what else we can do to improve that outreach and target that group specifically.

Mr. LAMBORN. Good. Because for the Gold Star Wives, I think—you heard the testimony. I think maybe some kind of outreach there might be good and appropriate.

For Ms. Arsht, it is my understanding that in a hearing held by our colleagues on the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity last week in South Bend, Indiana, it became apparent that DoD is doing a much better job of reaching out to active duty and National Guard members, but, in contrast, it was clear that Reservists had a higher chance of falling through the cracks and on average did not receive the same type of transition support as their counterparts. And could you please comment on specific ways the DoD is trying to address this problem?

Ms. ARSHT. Well, our Joint Family Assistance Program, which is being established in the States—and Mr. Crowley can speak to this, also. We have 15 States currently in that program. The Reserve components, both Guard and Reserve, are actively engaged in the participation of those programs and they are obviously eligible for Military OneSource and many of the other things that I mentioned here, including transition assistance and so forth.

I am not sure where that impression came from. They are very much a part of our target audience, to reach what you would consider to be off-installation populations that are away from the normal delivery of services.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

Ms. Rubens, you have already commented briefly on this, but just as kind of a followup, what are your thoughts—do you have any further thoughts of working with the Ad Council and doing a national campaign? I noticed you got her business card.

Ms. RUBENS. It is something within VBA that we are focused on and concerns us greatly. We recognize that the World War II generation needs a different form of communication and a different message than today's discharging servicemember, and we are very interested in trying to figure it out.

If we pursue the Ad Council, while it has to be overarching, it needs to be specifically targeted so we are really speaking to that World War II generation and the Korean generation and those that are in the process of retiring, the Vietnam-era veteran, versus our newer generation.

As I was listening to Ms. Emanuel and her discussion about some of our Web site issues, the variations between the TV ads—

and the radio ads—and what about radio and the Internet? What about XM and Sirius? How do we plug into those as well for the different generations that are taking advantage of different public media, whether it is print or audio or television? It is something that I am excited about the opportunity to pursue.

Mr. LAMBORN. Thank you.

I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. HALL. Thank you, Mr. Lamborn.

Ms. Rubens, I would hope, because Congress gave the VA permission to advertise, that we don't have to require you to advertise. I know that may not be your decision, but I think we probably all up here feel that you can only do so much with PSAs, and it may be necessary, as DoD has found for recruiting purposes, to buy some time during prime advertising hours. In tight budgetary times, there is obviously a lot of demand for what dollars there are. I hope some of them go toward paid advertising if it seems that is the best way to reach a certain audience.

Mr. Crowley, previous witnesses have noted that it has been hard for the VA to reach into the Guard and Reserve. Is that the reason for creating the TAA positions? They are fairly new positions. You mentioned that the advisers submit a monthly report and have included VBA referral information. Do you know how many Guardsmen transitioned and how many were referred to VA?

Mr. CROWLEY. I would like to get that information and submit it for the record on the numbers.

[The following was subsequently received from DoD]

For the month of April 2008 (the first month will all States/territories reporting), there were 781 referrals from a National Guard transition assistance advisor (TAA) to the Veterans Benefits Administration. This number just represents the month of April 2008. Since this is a new report, we believe this number may be low. Some of our TAAs are new; however, reporting methodologies are in their infancy. We will continue to track these numbers.

Mr. CROWLEY. The answer to the original part of your question, the VA approached us back in the 2004 time frame, and the concern was look at their structure, access and eligibility to the facilities at the time, and that is what that partnership grew out of. It was a recognition on their part, with the numbers of National Guard that were redeploying back since the war started in 2003, what was in place. It really was VA approaching us. How can we partner out there better addressing those issues?

Mr. HALL. What are some of the challenges you have encountered in reaching out to your people, and are there special populations that should have different materials and outreach efforts to better target their needs?

Mr. CROWLEY. Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Lamborn acknowledged an issue about other, past veterans. What we are seeing, maybe it was an unintentional byproduct, but some States, like New Hampshire, for example, is very progressive. What we found as recently as two years ago, we are servicing Vietnam veterans through our traditional systems advisers. Not all of them are coming through.

But to get to the point of your question, we are relying on folks to self-identify. That is the key piece. So the outreach has to get beyond those folks who recognize that they have a problem or are

being referred to by somebody. So the question is, how do we appropriately get to that group? And that is that piece of iceberg that is below the waterline. These people don't think that they have a problem, and families don't know if they have an issue.

That is a key piece our program is addressing, not the very seriously injured like Director Duckworth. It is those folks who have come back and trying to beat the demobilization process and doing everything they can to get home. We are trying to address those issues post redeployment.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

Are the problems different for Guard and Reserve members when they are wounded or become ill?

Mr. CROWLEY. That is a good question, Mr. Chairman.

No, when all is said and done, I don't think the issues are different. But, obviously, there is an inherent difference in somebody being injured on active duty and somebody being injured in title 10 status but reverting back to their home State and territory.

For example, for Army installations, we have 23 Army installations in 21 States, yet we have 54 States and territories where our guardsmen redeployed back to. So, clearly, there are not enough active-duty installations for them to fall back into. And, obviously, we look at the VA as a piece as well and the community based health center organizations that are out there.

So, to answer your question, I am not sure that it is handled exactly the same. But the geographic dispersion, the availability of facilities, whether they are military facilities or whether they are VA facilities are a handicap for us.

Mr. HALL. Can you tell me more about the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon Initiative that you mentioned in your testimony?

Mr. CROWLEY. Beyond the Yellow Ribbon was an initiative in 2008. What it allowed for was mandatory, in our case, the National Guard, mandatory briefings. This was to provide education at the 30 day—and by that, Mr. Chairman, I mean 30 days from release from active duty, to come back in an organized training event at the 30-, 60- and 90-day mark.

Our belief is that we should capture all individuals that at least start to self-identify, but within a 90-day period we are visibly seeing every soldier, every airmen who is coming into that training event.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

I just have one more question for Ms. Arsht, which is, from one of our previous panels, we learned that the Marine Corps is the only service that is currently requiring members upon separation to attend TAP briefings. Is that accurate and can that or should that be changed?

Ms. ARSHT. It is a two-part answer.

The pre-separation counseling part of TAP is required for everyone. They can complete a form to opt out of the remainder, but pre-separation counseling is required for everyone. The Marines are the only ones who have required that everyone attend the complete TAP course.

What we have recommended and encourage is that commanders know and recognize that the TAP curriculum is important to servicemembers and that when they want to go, they should be al-

lowed to go. And that is the spirit in which we think TAP is being implemented.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

Ms. Rubens, if I may ask you a couple of more questions.

It seems like the VA was having success with the Office of Seamless Transition and establishing a better working relationship with the VBA, the VHA and the DoD. Why did the VA decide to close that office and how do the Federal Recovery Coordinators employed by VHA learn how to brief on VBA benefits?

Ms. RUBENS. I will tell you I am not sure why they decided to change the title from Seamless Transition. The Federal Recovery Coordinators have been trained through our cooperation. I will also tell you that VBA and VHA, at least at my level, are very focused on working together to ensure particularly our most seriously injured servicemembers and veterans are getting coordinated care.

[The VA response is included in the response to *Question #7* in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 87.]

There was cooperative training for half the country. It was tough duty in Palm Springs a couple of weeks ago, from the Federal Recovery Coordinators down through I think their Transition Advocates where they are also former patients, veterans that have gone through the system and are assigned to some of the seriously injured to help ensure that they are making their way through whatever the corridors might need to be made, whether it is from a military transition facility or a polytrauma center or a more convenient local Medical Center.

We have at each Regional Office an OEF/OIF coordinator. They jointly went to the training in Palm Springs. There will be followup training in Florida for the other half of the country where the Regional Office coordinators will join in an effort to, as a team, be cognizant of how we ensure we are not losing those folks through the cracks, that we are managing their care as they come out of the military and make their way through the VA system.

Mr. HALL. Thank you.

Lastly, in the JEC annual report, there are several special categories of veterans with exposure issues that VA notes it provides outreach to. This includes Agent Orange, Gulf War syndrome, SHAD and Edgewood. Why has VA not included the women from Fort McClellan in its efforts, knowing how much less likely women are to identify with VA programs?

Ms. RUBENS. I will have to get back to you on that.

[The VA response is included in the response to *Question #8* in the post-hearing questions for the record, which appears on p. 88.]

Ms. RUBENS. I will tell you that I think that we are working to ensure that women veterans are more well-informed. We have Women Veterans Coordinators in all of our regional offices. Obviously, as women take on larger roles in the military, they are a larger audience for us.

Mr. HALL. I appreciate that thought.

I also sit on the Board of Visitors for West Point, which is in my district; and we have been briefed recently on incidents of sexual harassment; and they are dealing with a change in the mentality and the culture of the Armed Forces and the Army, in particular, as women take on a larger role and men get used to it. And trying

to teach them that they protect each other, regardless of gender. Not to mention that today's officers have a very high standard that they need to live up to.

And I have heard some comments in those meetings that women who have been not just at the academies but in the services who experience unwanted sexual attention from male members of the force frequently come back suffering from mental health problems that are caused maybe in part by combat, that everybody, regardless of gender, experiences, but also that are caused by these episodes of harassment or whatever experiences they have gone through that are unique to being female.

As a result, they are reluctant to join a discussion group or a briefing or a meeting where they are sitting. They might be more likely to go to a nonmilitary women's support group than to go a veterans—an all-veterans group where they are sitting mostly with men.

I am just throwing that out there because I am sure you are aware of this, and I am interested in seeing what programs come out of the VA to try to help with that.

I want to thank you all for your testimony. It has been illuminating, and thank you for your work on behalf of our soldiers and our veterans and our Guard and Reserve.

We may have reason to hold a roundtable discussion, which, if we do, we will ask you to participate in and maybe bring some of our friends back from the Ad Council, from the advertising and communications fields, and maybe even some of the network broadcast executives who can tell us how patriotic they are and how much time they are going to give us. But that is for another day.

So thank you everybody for your patience, those of you who hung in for the whole long hearing. We value your insights and opinions, and we will try to do the best we can to put them to work.

This hearing stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 4:07 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

Prepared Statement of Hon. John J. Hall,
Chairman, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

Good Afternoon:

I would ask everyone to rise for the Pledge of Allegiance—flags are located in the front and in the rear of the room.

The last few months we have had a series of hearings on the VA claims processing system, which resulted in the Full Committee passing the Veterans Disability Benefits Claims Modernization Act of 2008, HR 5892. I have been very pleased with the bill's progress and am grateful that we have 30 cosponsors already.

However, during the course of those hearings, I often heard words like *"confusing," "misinformed," "stigmatizing,"* and *"overwhelmed"* to describe how veterans felt about accessing their duly earned VA benefits. It occurred to me that there was a secondary problem that was not internal to VA operations, but indicative of its outreach to the veterans they were supposed to be serving. Benefits information was not getting out in clear, simple language that was consistent and easy to use.

As many of you may know, the House recently passed the Veterans' Benefits Awareness Act of 2007, H.R. 3681, which authorizes VA to advertise. DoD knows how to advertise. Congress gave DoD that authority in the 1950s and since then they have inspired many to join "The few, the proud" or to "Be all that you can be." Today, DoD also even uses TV commercials to educate the military community about its Military OneSource support program.

But, beyond the issue with advertising that I hope H.R. 3681 will address, I felt we needed this oversight hearing to examine the effectiveness of all of the VBA's outreach efforts, and asked staff to further investigate. During that process, it became evident that there were a lot of inconsistencies and gaps in how VA is informing the public about its benefits and services.

Staff found it difficult to readily ascertain what—in fact—official VA information was, and what was incorrect. Even with all of the joint councils between VA and DoD, there is no clear ability to correctly find VA through DoD sources. For example, DoD has three websites that offer service members transition assistance, but none that connects with VA and when calling the DoD Military OneSource toll free line, the operator gives the incorrect call line for VBA. It took staff almost 30 minutes, three phone calls, and six menu options to get to the right VBA operator to get claims questions answered. At what point would a disabled veteran have quit—stressed, frustrated, and worst of all, unassisted?

Veteran Service Organizations and other nonprofits, which are doing their best to assist veterans, families, and survivors, are left on their own to create veterans' benefits messages and lines of assistance, which sometimes link to VA, but often do not. I believe it is VA's responsibility to create promotional and educational materials that these organizations could use, so that VA is readily recognizable and available no matter how the veteran finds it.

There have also been inconsistencies reported in how VA conducts in-person outreach. VA is a primary component of the Transition Assistance Program or TAP briefings that take place for separating active duty service members, National Guard, and Reserves. VA reports that it attends these briefings when it knows they are taking place. But, they are not always notified by the military commands when a briefing is scheduled, and that not everyone eligible attends. DoD, in turn, has been reluctant to mandate TAP because it does not control all of the resources. VA representatives have been known to not show up for their portion of the briefing. TAP and the Benefits Delivery at Discharge program are not as readily available to the National Guard, Reserves, or Medical Hold patients. VA dismantled its Office of Seamless Transition and replaced it with Federal Recovery Care Coordinators who primarily operate out of VHA, not VBA. VA began a Call Center program to contact veterans about their benefits, but only after suicide rates became known. It seems clear that VA needs a more proactive outreach approach.

Each area of the country has its own unique challenges in meeting its populations' needs. That is why I am glad that we have veteran service organizations and state and county representatives with us today who can address the issues associated with reaching rural or urban communities, women and minorities, younger and older veterans, or those living in impoverished conditions. I look forward to their testimony and hearing about their innovative practices and the outreach gaps that they have identified.

I also look forward to the Ad Council testimony to hear what they can teach us about advertising veterans' benefits. They have helped other Federal agencies teach us that "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires", how to "Take A Bite out of Crime," and that "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk". Interestingly, their genesis was with the War Department, which immortalized Rosie the Riveter and warned, "Lose lips sink ships." Currently, they are working on PSAs with the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America.

Furthermore, family members, caregivers, and survivors new to VA's lingo, jargon, and acronyms, need materials and briefings that are user-friendly with personnel dedicated to assisting them. On April 24th, I held a roundtable discussion with organizations that assist survivors. They brought the need for a VA Survivor Affairs Office to my attention. So, I have developed a draft bill that would create such an office and will be asking the organizations for their feedback shortly.

Finally, I am hopeful that the Departments will be able to provide insights regarding their joint efforts and cooperation with each other to provide materials, briefings, and Internet and telephonic assistance that is accurate, consistent, and readily available. Web links are simple—it is shameful that such an obvious outreach tool has eluded the Departments and needs congressional oversight.

Bringing our men and women home is a responsibility that we all share. It is great to see the efforts being made by the communities all around this Nation to support our veterans, especially those with disabling conditions. However, these efforts should be augmentations to the ones being provided by the Departments. I hope the message VA gets today is how to do better messaging—to create outreach materials, announcements, web resources and briefings that are tailored to its different audiences and can talk to veterans, families and survivors in clear, simple language that will make them see VA as a user-friendly resources and truly there for their benefit.

Prepared Statement of Hon. Doug Lamborn,
Ranking Republican Member,
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for yielding.

I am pleased to have this opportunity for a collective discussion on the Department of Veterans Affairs' outreach efforts.

I believe VA is doing a much better job of reaching OIF/OEF veterans now than it was at the beginning of the War on Terror.

This is a commendable development, and I hope that a comparable improvement can be achieved in VA's efforts to reach older veterans.

Veterans cannot obtain the benefits they have earned if they don't know they are eligible to receive them.

I am concerned that despite millions of dollars spent on outreach every year, we have not effectively reached many veterans of earlier conflicts.

It is for this reason, I was proud to join with my colleagues in supporting H.R. 3681, the Veterans' Benefits Awareness Act of 2007, which passed the full House this week.

This measure, introduced by my good friend and Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity John Boozman, authorizes VA to conduct national advertising campaigns for benefits outreach.

I believe that with the enactment of this bill and help from groups like the AD Council, VA will be able to create public service announcements that will provide effective outreach for all veterans.

The Department of Defense spends billions each year on recruitment ads, and I believe that if VA spent just a fraction of this amount it would be very effective for outreach purposes.

Mr. Chairman, I would also like to recognize and thank veterans' service organizations for their outreach efforts to veterans and I encourage them to continue their excellent work.

I look forward to our witnesses' testimony and a productive discussion on ways to improve VA outreach. I yield back.

Prepared Statement of Tammy Duckworth,
Director, Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, and Member, National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs

I would like to first thank the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs for holding this hearing today and providing the opportunity to testify on this extremely important issue. I'm here on behalf of the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs, of which I am a member.

Each year state Governments spend more than $4 Billion to support our nation's veterans and their families. Collectively, we are second only to the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs in providing benefits and services to the men and women who defended our Nation. Although each state is unique, with its own traditions, programs, and resources, we are united by our common goal to make a difference in the lives of our veterans.

The members of National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs bring together the best of all states and territories. We work together to find real solutions to the common problems we face, and the pooling of expertise and knowledge allows our organization to serve as a resource for each state, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and Congress.

We all know that at this point, over six years into the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a need to increase awareness among veterans about the benefits that are available to them. These are benefits that they have rightfully earned and deserve. We need to use every tool possible to ensure that they know about what benefits are available to them and their family members.

Outreach is the key, especially with the returning veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom who have young families and are facing plenty of challenges when they return home. Educating them about their benefits through outreach and reaching them right now is essential to their future wellbeing.

As a veteran of the Iraq war, an advocate for fellow veterans, and the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, I can assure you that we are in dire need of additional resources at the state level to reach the new generation of veterans and to maintain communication with previous generations. Specifically our aging Vietnam veterans who are retiring or are reaching retirement age and have increasing healthcare needs.

Most of the states have the capability and infrastructure to increase outreach but need the resources to do it. The members of National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs would like to Congress pass a Federal grant program to provide outreach to veterans regarding available benefits, programs, services. We strongly believe that outreach grants should be provided through the state veterans' agencies [S. 1314].

Let me explain how this would work. In Illinois, we have 73 Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) who are trained and certified by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to assist veterans, their families and their survivors in completing applications for state and Federal benefits. They are located in 51 offices throughout the state of Illinois. These Service Officers are a part of the community and in the communities already, so they have the ability to reach veterans in ways that the Federal Government cannot.

The Veteran Service Officers work in conjunction with the Federal Government because they are trained and certified to assist veterans in applying for Federal benefits. In addition, there are state benefits that they make veterans aware of that are especially helpful to them and their family members. So, increasing funding for outreach through the states would give veterans the opportunity to find out about and take advantage of their state and Federal benefits.

Like many states, Illinois is extremely generous in state benefits. These benefits include additional compensation, education, healthcare, housing, burial, employment, real estate, and permits. They also assist incarcerated veterans due for release. They do not, however, recruit veterans into any of the veterans' organizations.

If the Federal Government invested in that structure of veteran service officers currently existing in the states and in communities across the country, they could provide the successful outreach that is needed to assist these veterans. A Federal grant program can provide outreach to veterans regarding available benefits, programs and services. Again, we strongly believe that outreach grants should be provided through the state Veterans' agencies.

We also firmly believe that the states ability to educate veterans on Federal benefits would be greatly enhanced if the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense would share information with the states about when the veteran comes home. This information would allow states to better serve the veteran on their arrival or soon thereafter.

For example, when a service member returns from Iraq or Afghanistan, the State of Illinois does not know that he or she has returned to the state unless they enter one of our offices or we are contacted by another Government entity. It is often when a veteran has already had some type of issue that we hear from them instead of having the ability to reach out to them beforehand.

For example, if a recently returned veteran of the war in Iraq is having trouble dealing with the symptoms associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, he or she might self medicate with alcohol. If that veteran is drinking and driving and is pulled over for a DUI, we will hear from the State Police first, before we can tell that veteran about the assistance that might be available for symptoms of PTSD, like the VA helpline or the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program. That is a sign of a broken system.

If the Federal Government shared information about returning and existing veterans, it would greatly increase our collective outreach capabilities because the states can assist in getting these veterans their Federal benefits. As you know, states already have plenty of programs in different areas that allow for sharing of information with the Federal Government.

Currently, in cases of the veteran population, the Federal Government will share information when they are entering our veteran nursing homes. As part of that information sharing with the Federal Government, the states are regularly inspected and audited. These are procedures that states are already familiar with and complying with on a regular basis. This should reassure the Department of Veterans Affairs that the states are willing and capable to adhere to any Federal privacy of data regulations.

If the Federal Government shared information with the state when a veteran returns home, we would increase the outreach capabilities for the Federal Government and assist the veteran in making a smoother transition back to civilian life.

Again, I would like to thank the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs for holding this hearing today and the opportunity to testify on this extremely important issue. The members of National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs will continue to work together to assist our nation's veteran population in every way possible.

Thank you.

Statement of Darlene McMartin,
President, National Association of County Veterans Service Officers

Introduction:

Chairman Hall, members of the Subcommittee, it is truly my honor to be able to present this testimony before you. As President of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO), I am commenting on NACVSO's views on the effectiveness of Veterans Benefits Administration's Outreach Efforts.

The National Association of County Veterans Service Officers is an organization made up of local Government employees. Our members are tasked with assisting veterans in developing and processing their claims. A large percentage of the claims presented to the Veterans Administration each year originate in a county veterans office. Each day, our members sit across from those men and women who wish to file a claim each day. They are our friends and neighbors, members of our communities whom we see often daily. We exist to serve veterans and partner with the National Service Organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs to serve veterans. Our Association focuses on outreach, standardized quality training, and claims development and advocacy. We are an extension or arm of Government, not unlike the VA itself in service to the nation's veterans and their dependents.

In this changing world there is a need for multiple approaches to outreach. Today, we have in our Nation veterans of WW2, Korea, Vietnam and those just returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) has a monumental task of reaching each of these veterans and making sure they understand the benefits available to them.

Veterans' Outreach Improvements:

There is a clear need that veterans being discharged from active duty, especially during time of war, have access to information concerning VA benefits entitlement. Often veterans are just glad to be going home and are not concerned with what benefits may be available to them. NACVSO proposes a partnership of the local County Veterans Service Officers, VA and DoD to reach out and assist the returning veterans in their local area.

A first step would be providing the CVSO's a copy of the DD–214 and the addition of the veterans' cell phone number in the mailing address after separation block of the DD–214. This would provide the CVSO a ready tool for reaching out to the veteran. Additionally, NACVSO subscribes to Chairman Filner's solution to the problem of veterans suicides, that requires the military to use qualified physicians to interview every member before separation and determine who is in need of treatment while still on active duty, has merit and is probably the only way to reach every soldier. Additionally we believe that anyone found to be suicidal should be retained and transferred to the VA for treatment just as a soldier with a seriously physical injury. Those who are in need of treatment for a less serious diagnosis should be given a Fee Basic Card, for use in the local community with a five year renewal with VA approval.

Veterans Outreach Background:

Across our Nation there are veterans that do not think they are a veteran because they did not lose a limb or get injured in anyway. They came home and started to work to support their families. They have never looked for any help from the Government. When the veteran dies their families still do not know they are entitled to benefits just because their husband or father served his country. These are the people that need outreach. They are mostly lower income and have never reached out to the VA and therefore they don't think they are entitled to this help.

I look at rural and urban America and see the great need to make these veterans aware of the benefits that they deserve, that are earned entitlement not welfare. These veterans have never made use of the VAMCs, the GI Bill, Home Loan, Pension or Compensation Benefits. They just served their country and came home. It is so rewarding when you meet one of these veterans and tell them what they may be entitled to and see the hope on their face. It sometimes means the difference in eating or buying medicine. I am sure if a study was completed you would see a large number of rural veterans have never used the VA for any service and did not know they could. The VA has a responsibility to reach out and make everyone aware of their entitlement. One of the ways is for the County Veterans Service Officer to spread the word. To go into the communities with the message those veterans and their dependents have benefits due them. While many counties do fund a County Veteran Service Officer, the vast majority do not provide funding for outreach and other informational services.

Outreach efforts must be expanded in order to reach those veterans, dependents and survivors that are unaware of their benefits and to bring them into the system. Nearly 2 million poor Veterans or their impoverished widows are likely missing out on as much as $22 billion a year in pensions from the U.S. Government, but the Department of Veterans Affairs has had only limited success in finding them, according to the North Carolina Charlotte Observer.

Widows are hardest hit. According to the VA's own estimate, **only one in seven** of the survivors of the nation's deceased Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines who likely could qualify for the pension actually get the monthly checks. What's more, participation in the program is falling. **Veterans and widows are unaware that the program exists**. They simply don't know about it and the VA knows that many are missing out on the benefit. "We obviously are here for any veteran or survivor who qualifies," said a VA Pension official. **"But so many of these people—we don't know who they are, where they are.** "The VA's own report from late 2004 recommended that the agency "improve its outreach efforts" with public service announcements and other pilot programs. While it made limited efforts to reach veterans or their widows through existing channels, it is difficult to determine whether such efforts have been successful.

Of all those likely eligible, only 27 percent of veterans and 14 percent of widows receive the money. It is obvious that there is a great need for outreach to into the veteran's community and the local CVSO is the advocate closest to the veterans and widows and with minimal funding could reach the maximum number of eligible veterans and widows.

Therefore, NACVSO continues to support H.R. 67, introduced by Congressman Mike McIntyre of North Carolina, and S. 1315, by Feingold of California, both Outreach Bills that would allow Secretary Peake to provide Federal, state, local grants and assistance to state and county veteran's service officers to enhance outreach to veterans and their dependents. We are already present in most communities and stand ready to assist the Department of Veterans Affairs with this monumental task.

Conclusion:

This concludes my comments. I am ready to answer any questions the committee may have. Thank you.

Prepared Statement of Richard A. "Rick" Jones, Legislative Director, National Association for Uniformed Services

Chairman Hall, Ranking Member Lamborn, and members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the National Association for Uniformed Services (NAUS), I am pleased to be here today as you examine the effectiveness of VBA outreach efforts.

The National Association for Uniformed Services celebrates its 40th year in representing all ranks, branches and components of uniformed services personnel, their spouses and survivors. NAUS membership includes all personnel of the active, retired, Reserve and National Guard, disabled veterans, veterans community and their families. We also serve as the main contact for the Society of Military Widows. We support our troops, honor their service, and remember our veterans, their families and their survivors.

While much publicity is directed at VA outreach to health care, the question at hand for today's hearing is whether similar attention is being delivered to addressing the problems associated with VBA.

Clearly, the benefit programs under the jurisdiction of VBA, including the provision of disability compensation payments, fulfill a primary obligation to make up for the economic and quality of life losses veterans suffer as a result of service-connected diseases and injuries. While we can never fully repay those who have stood in harm's way, a grateful Nation has a duty and obligation to provide benefits and health care to its veterans as a measure of its share of the costs of war and national defense.

Understanding the benefits side of the Department, it must also be clearly understood that VBA is closely linked to the Health side of the VA. Both focus on securing appropriate attention to the relief of eligible veterans and serve in coordinating a veteran's earned benefits and services.

As the National Association for Uniformed Services assesses the effectiveness of VBA outreach, we believe it is important that we first have an understanding on the number of OEF/OIF troops using the Department's health care system.

At present, approximately 1.6 million troops have served in the two theatres of operation since the beginning of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. More than 837,000 Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans have left active duty and become eligible for VA health care since fiscal year 2002. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, approximately half these veterans are former active duty troops (414,588) and half are Reserve and National Guard members (422,870).

As is well known, advancement in battlefield medicine has improved the chances of survival in warfare. However, many of our present day wartime casualties suffer from multiple severe injuries such as amputation, traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Care for these individuals requires an intense management of treatment for their injuries and special consideration of their families who stand by these returning heroes.

Reports from VA indicate that from fiscal year 2002 through the current date 39 percent (325,000) of the total separated OIF/OEF veterans have obtained VA health care. Among this group, 96 percent were evaluated and been seen as outpatients only, not hospitalized. The remaining 4 percent (13,000) OIF/OEF patients have been hospitalized at least once in a VA health care facility.

VA informs the National Association for Uniformed Services that of the OIF/OEF veterans who have sought VA health care approximately 166,000 were former active duty troops and 159,000 were Reserve and National Guard members. Again, the population seeking care is nearly half active duty and half Reserve Component troops.

In total, over the last six years VA reports that 6 percent of the 5.5 million veterans in the VA medical care system are veterans of the most recent military conflict, OEF/OIF veterans.

The Department attributes the rate of VA health care used by recent veterans to two major factors. First, the department says that recent combat veterans have ready access to the VA system, which is free of charge for five years following separation. In addition, the Department attributes a high rate of veteran participation is due to an extensive outreach effort developed by VA to inform veterans of their benefits, including "a personal letter from the VA secretary to war veterans identi-

fied by DoD when they separate from active duty and become eligible for VA benefits."

The National Association for Uniformed Services applauds the recent, May 1, Department announcement of a dedicated outreach program directed at nearly 570,000 Afghanistan and Iraq combat veterans. The effort, according to VA, is to make sure these veterans are aware of "VA's medical services and other benefits for which they are entitled." In making the announcement, James B. Peake, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, said, "VA is committed to getting these veterans the help they need and deserve."

The newly initiated VA Outreach program is set out in two phases. Phase one will contact "the estimated 17,000" who are sick or injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. VA assures the public that each of these veterans will have "the opportunity" to have a care manager appointed to their case. It is not clear to NAUS how this choice will be presented, but we understand the faith with which it is being presented.

The second phase of VA's outreach program will target 550,000 OIF/OEF veterans who have been separated from military service but have not sought VA care or services. We are encouraged to hear Dr. Edward Huycke, chief of the VA-DoD coordination office, say, "We will leave no stone unturned to reach these veterans."

In examining the effectiveness of the outreach effort, it is important to recognize the stark difference in today's VA's language over that used in the recent past several years. We commend this change in expression and tone.

However, we remain attentive to see that the most recent effort and the improved tone it reflects does not fail. Clearly there are concerns. Residue from a previous attitude remains within the system.

We are seriously concerned, for instance, about reports at the Temple, Texas, VA Medical Center, which suggest that time and money could be saved if diagnosis of PTSD were stopped or deeply discounted.

A PTSD program coordinator and psychologist at the Olin E. Teague Veterans Center sent an email with the subject line "Suggestion" to several VA staffers working with PTSD cases. The email suggested that VA doctors and clinicians give altered diagnosis to patients exhibiting symptoms of PTSD in order to save time and money. In the email, the staffer said, "We really don't . . . have time to do the extensive testing that should be done to determine PTSD."

In a statement, however, VA Secretary Peake repudiated the email and said, "a single staff member, out of VA's 230,000 employees, in a single medical facility sent a single e-mail with suggestions that are inappropriate and have been repudiated at the highest level of our health care organization."

The National Association for Uniformed Services appreciates the Secretary's promise to see that VA gives "absolute accuracy in a diagnosis." His immediate response and public commitment to veterans is welcome and well received. Nevertheless, the incident is deeply troubling because veterans not only need to hear about the services they earned and deserve; they need to know that once they come to VA their exams are completed and their services are delivered.

Mr. Chairman, as we head into Memorial Day next week, your Subcommittee takes a good, well-traveled road. In sending young men and women to defend our Nation, it is important that we let them know what our great and generous country provides them following their service. Indeed, we have a strong moral obligation to do so because without American patriots in uniform freedom itself might well be extinguished.

It is clear to NAUS that veterans are generally more aware about the availability of benefits and services than they were four to six years ago. Not everything is perfect and we can do better. But things are improved.

Six years ago, for instance, the administration was deeply opposed to spending resources aimed at making veterans aware of the benefits and services available at the Veterans Department. And facilities were in decline.

At one point in that past period, a former Secretary of Veterans Affairs told the Nation that the Department budget was adequate. This announcement, made in April of that year, told Congress that VA did not need one-penny more. However, only a month later the Secretary reversed his statement to tell the Nation that his Department would fall $1.5 billion short of the resources needed to carry veterans services through the remainder of the year.

Prior to this revelation, NAUS and other associations had presented ample witness to deficiencies throughout the system. We pleaded with Congress and the Administration that funding levels were totally inadequate and, if not addressed, would lead to cuts in veterans health care services, reductions in veterans education benefits, and logjams in veterans disability claims for service connected injury or illness.

During that period, things were so bad that a memorandum sent out by the Deputy Under-Secretary for Operations and Management (July 19, 2002) actually directed all of its health care providers to stop marketing VA programs to veterans.

In basic, the July 2002 memo said too many veterans were coming in for services and VA was spending too much money. It directed VA officials across the country to "Stop Outreach to Veterans." VA employees were directed to stop participating in VA health fairs, Stand Downs and related outreach events that informed veterans about programs available to them. Medical facilities were prohibited even from putting out newsletters informing veterans about the services they were legally entitled to receive.

We are thankful that we no longer face that deeply troubling period. If such heartless, shameful incompetence were in place today, many of OEF/OIF would struggle alone.

Studies conducted by The Army surgeon general's Mental Health Advisory Team clearly show that our troops and their families face incredible stress today. According to the Department of Defense (DoD), 27 percent of noncommissioned officers on their third or fourth tour exhibited symptoms commonly referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder. That figure is far higher than the roughly 12 percent who show those symptoms after one tour and the 18.5 percent who demonstrate these disorders after a second tour.

And among the approximately half-million active-duty soldiers who have served in Iraq, more than 197,000 have deployed more than once, and more than 53,000 have deployed three or more times.

A recent Rand Corporation study suggests that almost half of these returning troops will not seek treatment. Many of these veterans do not believe they are at risk or they fear that admitting to a mental health problem will mean being stigmatized. Yet if these brave individuals and their families are made aware of access to VA facilities, to which they are entitled, they are likely to find a treatment therapy that leads to health.

If not addressed, stress symptoms can compound and lead to more serious health consequences in the future.

Secretary Peake's recent announcement presents an opportunity for veterans to become more aware of VA's accessibility and readiness to meet their health care needs. The Secretary's effort is commendable. In some cases, a successful outreach can be a matter life and death. Veterans need to hear that VA is part of our nation's commitment to them. They need to hear that with appropriate care, our veterans can tackle stress and get themselves back on track.

NAUS believes that Secretary Peake's announcement marks a turning point in outreach efforts. We are guardedly optimistic. But it is clear that more needs to be done, including follow-through throughout the VA system.

Of course, there is a financial cost to improved outreach. But as important is the fact that if we do not make veterans aware of the benefits and services available to them, there is a hidden cost in lives lost, families disrupted and long suffering in homelessness and related problems for decades to come.

We urge the Subcommittee to continue its excellent work with other champions in this Congress to ensure resources are ready not only for the provision of a veteran's earned benefits but for the veteran's awareness of these services as well. It is important that we do so. After all, these brave men and women shouldered a rifle and risked everything to accomplish their mission, to protect another people's freedom and our own country from harm.

As a Nation, we need to understand that the value of their service is far greater than the price we pay for their benefits and services.

Appreciation for Opportunity to Testify

As a staunch advocate for veterans, the National Association for Uniformed Services recognizes that these brave men and women did not fail us in their service to country. They did all our country asked and more. Our responsibility is clear. We must uphold our promises and provide the benefits they ***earned*** through honorable military service.

Mr. Chairman, you and the members of your Subcommittee are making progress. We thank you for your efforts and look forward to working with you to ensure that we continue to protect, strengthen, and improve veterans benefits and services.

Again, the National Association for Uniformed Services deeply appreciates the opportunity to examine with you outreach efforts to veterans, families and survivors on the benefits available to them.

Statement of Kathryn A. Witt,
Member, Government Relations Committee, Gold Star Wives of America, Inc.

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who has borne the battle, his widow and his orphan."

. . . . *President Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865*

Thank you for your invitation to testify before the Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs of the Committee on Veterans Affairs.

I am Kathryn Witt, and I am the widow of SGM Keith M. Witt, U.S. Army (Retired). I would like to say that my husband received excellent care and superb service from our local VA and VA Medical Center.

Gold Star Wives of America, Inc. (GSW) was founded in 1945 and is a Congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organization comprised of surviving spouses of military service members who died while on active duty or as a result of a service-connected disability. GSW currently has approximately 10,000 members who are surviving spouses of those who served in World War II, the Korean war, the Vietnam war, the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and other smaller conflicts.

Survivors Office

GSW would very much like to see a Survivors Office at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Ideally a Survivors Office would represent survivors at the Policy level as well as have personnel who are trained to assist survivors with claims and provide the necessary information on survivor benefits and how to apply for them.

Survivors are often referred to and thought of as family members, but survivors really are not family members. Survivors are a separate and distinct category of beneficiaries. The VA benefits survivors receive are very different from the benefits of other beneficiaries.

GSW has numerous reports of survivors who have called the VA Regional Offices and either been given erroneous information, incomplete information or no information. Apparently the personnel answering the phones have little or no training on survivor benefits and no readily accessible source for survivor benefit information.

Ideally claims for survivor benefits would also be handled exclusively by this office and routine, properly documented claims could be expedited.

We have numerous complaints from all categories of survivors who have filed for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and waited months and years for a routine, properly documented application to be processed. In some instances these spouses have lost their homes, ruined their credit ratings, had to file for bankruptcy, or had to defer needed medical care or go heavily in debt to obtain medical care. The spouses who suffer the most in this particular situation have been long term caregivers for their husbands who had a service connected disability and have therefore been unable to maintain a career or acquire personal resources.

Army Long Term Family Care

The Army Casualty and Mortuary Affairs office of the Human Resources Command in Alexandria, VA, provides training and Army certification on VA survivor benefits to every Army Casualty Assistance Officer (CAO). The Army Long Term Family Care office gives every survivor a loose leaf notebook that contains a copy of the VA handbook, "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents" and lists of mailing addresses, website addresses and phone numbers the survivor might need in addition to the necessary Army information. The Casualty Assistance Officer also assists the survivor in locating a VA office and filing the necessary VA claims. The Army Long Term Family Care office also offers assistance to surviving spouses and children for as long as they need assistance. Although the primary mission of the Army Long Term Family Care office is to assist survivors of Army personnel who died on Active duty, they will also assist survivors of other military services, retired survivors, and veterans when they are asked to do so. These folks do a tremendous job of assisting survivors and others in need of assistance. This program should be duplicated for all the military services. **This Army Long Term Family Care office would be an extremely good model for a VA Survivors Office.**

National Service Officers Trained on Survivor Benefits

Our recent surviving spouses are overwhelmed with grief and with everything that needs to be done when their military spouses die. Some are not even aware that they are entitled to VA benefits; others do not know the benefits to which they are entitled, let alone how to go about obtaining those benefits. They are confused about which benefits are from DoD and which benefits are from the VA. Some are unaware that they must file a claim for VA survivor benefits.

Training for the National Service Officers (NSO) from the Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) should include a substantial segment on survivor benefits. Training on survivor benefits should also be available to members of organizations like GSW.

ChampVA and Medicare Part B

ChampVA requires *disabled* surviving spouses under the age of 65 to purchase Medicare Part B at a cost of approximately $100 per month. Many disabled surviving spouses are not aware that ChampVA requires that they purchase Medicare Part B to retain their ChampVA benefits. The requirement for *disabled* surviving spouses to purchase Medicare Part B needs to be revoked, but at a minimum an outreach program needs to be established to ensure that disabled surviving spouses are aware of the need to purchase Medicare Part B in a timely manner.

In most cases they were not made aware of the requirement to purchase Medicare Part B until ChampVA denied coverage for medications or a claim was denied. When they discovered that they had to purchase Medicare Part B, they were also required to pay penalties and interest.

Only those receiving Social Security Disability payments **under** the age of 65 are required to purchase Medicare Part B. Enabled persons under the age of 65 entitled to ChampVA are not required to purchase other health insurance to receive ChampVA benefits. The Federal Employees Health Benefits Plan (FEHBP) does not require those under 65 to purchase additional health insurance to receive benefits from FEHBP. This ChampVA requirement not only discriminates against the disabled, but it is levied against those least able to pay.

GSW strongly recommends that all those entitled to Medicare Part B purchase it; however we believe that the ChampVA requirement to purchase it discriminates against the disabled and is just plain wrong.

Military ID Cards

GSW also has many members who are unaware that they are entitled to a military identification card for commissary and exchange privileges if their deceased spouse was a 100 percent disabled veteran, and they are eligible for DIC. These surviving spouses are not receiving the information or the required letter from the VA. Additionally, the personnel in the military who are supposed to issue the identification cards do not know how to get the information into the various computer systems as required and therefore cannot issue the identification cards. **Outreach to the surviving spouses who are eligible for the military ID card and more coordination with DoD would be very much appreciated.**

Property Taxes Exemptions and Reductions

Many of our surviving spouses are entitled to property or real estate tax exemptions on their homes. In some states the VA provides letters to these surviving spouses that are to be given to their local tax office to verify that they are entitled to this exemption or reduction. In some cases the surviving spouse receives the letter from the VA and has no idea what the letter is for or that he or she is entitled to a property tax exemption or reduction. In other states the surviving spouse is aware that she is entitled to the property tax exemption or reduction, but no one at the VA who is familiar with this issue and either can provide her with the appropriate letter or refer her to someone who can provide the letter. We need more outreach and clarification on this issue.

Newsletter

One way to increase outreach to survivors might be to have a newsletter for survivors.

As the cost of printing and mailing a newsletter would be prohibitive, I would suggest that a survivors' newsletter be attached to the VA website www.va.gov. The

website could contain a request that those who read the online newsletter pass a link to others in a similar situation. There should also have a subscriber list so that either copies of a new newsletter could be emailed to them or a notice that a new newsletter is available could be mailed to them.

The newsletter could contain information about changes in VA benefits, new benefits, COLAs, etc. Each addition could contain an article about an existing benefit, the criteria for receiving that benefit and how to apply for that benefit. It could include the email addresses and phone numbers a survivor might need to obtain information about different benefits. It could also contain a "contact us" link that would allow a survivor to ask questions and a database of prepared answers to frequently asked questions.

As we all know, improvements and new ideas are needed to make the VBA outreach efforts more effective.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today.

Statement of Kerry Baker,
Associate National Legislative Director, Disabled American Veterans

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the 1.3 million members of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), I am honored to appear before you today to discuss the effectiveness of the Veterans Benefits Administration's (VBA's) outreach efforts. In accordance with our congressional charter, the DAV's mission is to "advance the interests, and work for the betterment, of all wounded, injured, and disabled American veterans." Such a goal is not attainable for all disabled veterans without proper outreach efforts.

Outreach to service members, veterans, and their dependents is an integral part of the VBA. Outreach is a cooperative effort among the five VBA business lines (Compensation and Pension, Education, Loan Guaranty, Insurance, and Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment) and among VA elements including field organizations, VHA, NCA, and the Office of Public Affairs (OPA). This testimony will focus on VBA outreach centered in the field of compensation and pension.

In June 2006, Congress passed the "Veterans' Housing Opportunity and Benefits Improvement Act of 2006" (S. 1235). Pub. L. No. 109–233, Title IV, § 402(a), 120 Stat. 408 (codified at 38 U.S.C. chapter 63). Congress intended this legislation to, among other things, improve and extend outreach and benefits programs provided under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs (the "Secretary").

Congress declared in S. 1235 that the outreach services program is to ensure that all veterans ("especially those who have been recently discharged or released from active military, naval, or air service and those who are eligible for readjustment or other benefits and services under laws administered by the Department") are provided timely and appropriate assistance to aid and encourage them in applying for and obtaining benefits. Such benefits and services are to assist those veterans in achieving a rapid social and economic readjustment to civilian life, and to obtain a higher standard of living for themselves and their dependents. Specific to the outreach services program authorized by S. 1235, Congress charged the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) with "the affirmative duty of seeking out eligible veterans and eligible dependents and providing them with such services." 38 U.S.C.A. § 6301(a) (West 2002 & Supp 2007).

Under section 6302 of the forgoing statute, the Secretary must, during the first nine months of every odd-numbered year (2007 being the first odd-numbered year), prepare a biennial plan for the outreach activities of the VA for the two-fiscal-year period beginning on October 1 of that year—October 1, 2007, was the beginning of the current two-fiscal-year period. The statute requires the VA to include the efforts in each biennial plan utilized to identify eligible veterans and dependents who are not enrolled or registered for benefits or services under the programs administered by the VA. The report must also include plans for informing eligible veterans and dependents of modifications of the benefits and services under the programs administered by the VA. Based on DAV's research, we must conclude that the VA has failed to issue this report, despite its due date of October 1, 2007.

In carrying out the purposes of title 38, United States Code, Chapter 63, the VA is required to provide outreach services as follows:

> **(b) Individual notice to new veterans.** The Secretary shall by letter advise each veteran at the time of the veteran's discharge or release from active military, naval, or air service (or as soon as possible after such discharge or release) of all benefits and services under laws administered by the Department for which the veteran may be eligible. In carrying out this subsection, the Secretary shall ensure, through the use of veteran-student

services under [38 U.S.C.A. § 3485] that contact, in person or by telephone, is made with those veterans who, on the basis of their military service records, do not have a high school education or equivalent at the time of discharge or release.

(c) Distribution of information. (1) The Secretary—

(A) shall distribute full information to eligible veterans and eligible dependents regarding all benefits and services to which they may be entitled under laws administered by the Secretary; and

(B) may, to the extent feasible, distribute information on other Governmental programs (including manpower and training programs) which the Secretary determines would be beneficial to veterans.

(2) Whenever a veteran or dependent first applies for any benefit under laws administered by the Secretary (including a request for burial or related benefits or an application for life insurance proceeds), the Secretary shall provide to the veteran or dependent information concerning benefits and health care services under programs administered by the Secretary. Such information shall be provided not later than three months after the date of such application.

Through this Act, Congress also mandated that VA provide, "to the maximum extent possible, aid and assistance (including personal interviews) to members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and eligible dependents with respect to subsections (b) and (c) and in the preparation and presentation of claims under laws administered by the Department." 38 U.S.C.A. § 6303(d).

In December 2006, Congress passed another bill affecting, among other things, outreach to veterans concerning health care: The "Veterans Benefits, Health Care, and Information Technology Act of 2006" (S. 3421). Pub. L. No. 109–461, Title II, § 213(a), 120 Stat. 3422. Since health care is not the subject of this hearing, we are providing this for informational and persuasive purposes only. In the foregoing section of S. 3421, Congress mandated the following:

> The Secretary of Veterans Affairs shall conduct an extensive outreach program to identify and provide information to veterans who served in the theater of operations for Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom and who reside in rural communities in order to enroll those veterans in the health care system of the Department of Veterans Affairs during the period when they are eligible for such enrollment.

The foregoing provisions of law, and other existing provisions, have proven rather successful in ensuring that Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) veterans receive outreach that truly sets new standards for the very proposition. For example, According to VA Pamphlet 2–01–08, which briefly outlines the Department's strategic goals, OEF/OIF initiatives are reported as follows:

- In 2007, prioritized claim processing for OEF/OIF veterans, finalizing claims received in an average of 110 days.
- Hired 100 new outreach coordinators to provide services to returning OEF/OIF veterans.
- Created an Advisory Committee on OEF/OIF Veterans and Families to advise the Secretary.
- Coordinated 8,236 transfers of OEF/OIF service members and veterans from a military treatment facility to a VA medical facility.
- Received 39,000 referrals from the Post Deployment Health Reassessment (PDHRA) initiative.
- Participated in 805 PDHRA On-Site and 247 Call Center events since November 2005. A total of 32,321 referrals were made to VAMC and 15,842 to Vet Centers.
- Contacted 91% of severely injured or ill OEF/OIF service members/veterans, by a VA case manager, within 7 days of notification of transfer to the VA health care system.

In addition to the above, VBA employees conducted 8,154 Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefings in 2007 with 296,855 attendees, including 100,976 individual interviews. Through April of FY 2008, those numbers are 4,877; 195,037; and 47,909 respectively. The Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) works in conjunction with the TAP program for those members leaving service because of disability.

Under the Veterans Assistance at Discharge (VADS) program, VA generates the mailing of a "Welcome Home Package" that includes a letter from the Secretary, VA Pamphlet 21–00–1, *A Summary of VA Benefits,* and VA Form 21–0501, *Veterans*

Benefits Timetable, to all veterans recently separated or retired from active duty. A follow-up letter is mailed six months later.

The Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program is a program that provides transition assistance and continuity of care to service members who are separating from active duty. Under the BDD Program, service members may begin the disability claims process with VA up to 180 days prior to separation. As of December 2006, there were 140 BDD sites that actively process claims from separating service members. VA and DoD signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) in November 2004 which established a Cooperative Separation Process/Examination under the BDD program. The MOA stipulates that only one examination is to be conducted, using VA protocols, which meet the needs of VA and DoD.

Another program, Coming Home to Work (CHTW) is an early outreach effort with special emphasis on OEF/OIF service members at military treatment facilities who are pending medical separation from active duty. Participants work with a VA Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) to obtain unpaid work experiences at Government facilities to learn skills they may use to ease transition to civilian employment.

The VA and DoD are also collaborating to ensure VA is notified of service members referred to the Physical Examination Board (PEB) who may be medically separated or retired and transitioning to VA and civilian life. Under this initiative, DoD is providing VA with the names of service members entering the PEB process. The monthly list enables VBA to contact service members who have not yet applied for disability compensation to ensure that they are informed of potential benefits administered by VA.

The VA now employs Casualty Assistance Officers (CAOs) that visit family members of veterans who die on active duty and assist them in applying for benefits. The visits are coordinated with military CAOs to ensure that family members are aware of and linked with the necessary VA services.

In addition to the foregoing, the VA recently announced in an April 24, 2008, Department News Release that beginning May 1, 2008, VA would "begin contacting nearly 570,000 recent combat veterans to ensure they know about VA's medical services and other benefits." The News Release quoted the Secretary as stating: "We will reach out and touch every veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom to let them know we are here for them," and that "VA is committed to getting these veterans the help they need and deserve."

A contractor-operated "Combat Veteran Call Center" will telephone two distinct populations of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. In the first phase, calls will go to an estimated 17,000 veterans who were sick or injured while serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. The VA will offer these veterans a "care manager" to ensure they each receive appropriate care and know about their VA benefits.

The second phase will target 550,000 OEF/OIF veterans who have been discharged from active duty but have not contacted VA for services. Once contacted, these veterans will be informed about VA's benefits and services. VA employees will make follow-up calls if needed. The Chief of the joint VA and Department of Defense coordination office, Dr. Edward Huycke, was quoted in the News Releases stating: "We will leave no stone unturned to reach these veterans[.]"

These outreach efforts are truly unprecedented. They appear to be mainly the result of Congress' passage of S. 1235. However, these and other ongoing outreach efforts may be in part the result of the "Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2004" (S. 2486), passed in December 2004. Pub. L. No. 108–454 (*see* Title VIII, § 805).

Just as section 402 of S. 1235 requires VA to prepare a 2-year plan for outreach activities, for which it has not complied, section 805 of S. 2486 also requires a similar plan, but for which it has only partially complied. Specifically, section 805 of S. 2486 requires the Secretary to submit a report to Congress setting forth a detailed description of:

> (1) the outreach efforts of the [VA], as of the date of the enactment of this Act, to inform members of the uniformed services and veterans (and their family members and survivors) of the benefits and services to which they are entitled under laws administered by the Secretary, and (2) the current level of awareness of those members and veterans (and family members and survivors) of those benefits and services.

Congress required this report to include the following:

1. A description of the outreach activities conducted by the Secretary in each of the three Administrations of the [VA] and outreach activities conducted by other entities within the Department.

2. The results of a national survey, conducted as described in subsection (c), to ascertain service members' and veterans' level of awareness of benefits and services referred to in subsection (a) and whether service members and veterans know how to access those benefits and services.
3. Recommendations by the Secretary on how outreach and awareness activities to veterans and service members may be improved.

The national survey required by subsection (b)(2), is outlined in subsection (c), and must include a statistically valid sample of persons in each of the following groups:

1. World War II veterans;
2. Korean conflict era veterans;
3. Vietnam era veterans;
4. Persian Gulf era veterans;
5. Active duty service members;
6. National Guard and Reserve members activated under title 10, United States Code;
7. Family members and survivors

Public Law 108–454 prompted VA to publish an *Interim Report on Outreach Activities (Interim Report)* in December 2006, despite its due date to Congress of December 2005.

The VA claimed that its *Interim Report* complied with the first and third requirements of P.L. 108–454. However, as to the second requirement, that VA report on the results of a national survey of service members and veterans to determine their level of awareness of benefits and services available to them, the *Interim Report* states that "VA reviewed all available survey and program data, but none was able to provide us with a comprehensive or objective measure of awareness." The reason given by VA for its noncompliance with the second requirement of P.L. 108–454 was that "existing information was collected only from those veterans who were already receiving a VA service or benefit. This excluded the possibility of measuring awareness among all populations identified."

To address this deficiency, the *Interim Report* states that VA's Office of Policy and Planning (OPP) is planning a Department-wide effort to develop awareness measures and implement these measures in the conduct of the next national survey scheduled for 2008. Acknowledging this, the DAV senses a disconnect between Congress' mandate and the VA's resulting actions.

For example, P.L. 108–454 expressly requires VA to conduct a survey that includes a statistically valid sample of the following: (1) World War II veterans; (2) Korean conflict era veterans; (3) Vietnam era veterans; (4) Persian Gulf era veterans; (5) active-duty service members; (6) National Guard and Reserve members activated under title 10, United States Code; and, (7) family members and survivors. The VA is then required to use the results of that study to determine the collective awareness of benefits and services available to those groups under laws administered by the Secretary.

The VA's actions were nothing more than a review of available data on-hand, followed by a determination that the available data did not comply with Congress' mandate. Further, the VA's plan to utilize the previously scheduled 2008 national survey as its compliance with requirement two of P.L. 108–454 will continue to be in non-compliance with that requirement. Moreover, the DAV does not believe that the VA could have possibly complied with the third requirement of P.L. 108–454, that it recommend how to improve outreach and awareness activities, *before* it is able to understand the true results of the second requirement of P.L. 108–454.

The DAV can only commend VA's outreach efforts concerning the newest generation of veterans—efforts that are unprecedented in the entire history of the VA. These new veterans will not live a single year, much less multiple decades, ignorant of the benefits that they have earned. Their lives, shattered by disability and the unshakable memories of war, will be set forth on a path of improvement and rebuilding immediately upon discharge from service.

Nonetheless, we can and do condemn the VA for practically ignoring all other groups of veterans. In the 2004 legislation mentioned herein, Congress made clear its intentions for the VA to locate and reach out to those older groups of veterans, and we commend it for such. In turn, the VA failed to honor the mandate of Congress and it appears poised to continue such failure.

Congress' mandate in the 2006 legislation mentioned herein concerning older groups of veterans was much more discretionary, however. *See* 38 U.S.C.A. § 6301(a) (stating "purpose" of outreach services program as to ensure all veterans "especially those who have been recently discharged . . . and those who are eligible for readjustment or other benefits . . ." are provided assistance to aid and encourage them in

obtaining benefits). While the statute's language is not all-inclusive to the newest generation of veterans, it is certainly suggestive of such. Therefore, we fault Congress for allowing this slight discretion—we fault the VA for capitalizing on such discretion.

The DAV firmly believes that VBA's outreach efforts should be uniformly distributed across the veteran population, which includes the newest generation, the greatest generation, and everyone in-between. The reasons for this are obvious.

For example, according to the 2001 National Survey of Veterans (NSV), there were approximately 25,095,000 living veterans in 2001. Of those, veterans of World War II, the Korean Conflict, and the Vietnam War, made up 73.5 percent, or 18,444,825 of all living veterans as of 2001. Of those, 8,193,824 were reported as combat veterans. Yet, according to the survey, only 2.3 million *total* veterans were receiving compensation as of September 2000. In contrast; however, only 19,246 veterans 56 years old and older began receiving benefits for the first time in 2001.[1] In 2005, 68,195 veterans over the age of 56 began receiving benefits for the first time; 67,629 veterans over the age of 56 began receiving benefits for the first time during FY 2006.[2] The VA's ABR for FY 2007 has not yet been published. However, a recapitulation of DAV's monthly reporting system for the past 16 months reveals the DAV represented 2,611 World War II veterans, 3,391 Korean War veterans, and 26,869 Vietnam War veterans that received new awards for service-connected disabilities for the first time.

To put these numbers into a different perspective, approximately 10 percent of World War II veterans, 5 percent of Korean War veterans, and 12 percent of Vietnam War veterans are service-connected for disabilities incurred during military service. These numbers are scant when compared to the percentage of discharged OEF/OIF veterans already receiving benefits. By 2007, there was slightly more than 630,000 OEF/OIF veterans discharged from service.[3] Approximately 224,000 of these veterans filed disability compensation claims well before the end of 2007, which is over 35 percent. Approximately 70 percent of those claims, or 156,800, which is nearly 25 percent of the total number of discharged OEF/OIF veterans, resulted in a favorable decision.[4]

The above numbers do not show that OEF/OIF veterans are disabled at more than twice the rate of older veterans, but that they are receiving benefits at over twice the rate. The VA's current and unprecedented efforts of placing phone calls to nearly 600,000 OEF/OIF veterans will undeniably increase the rate of which the newest generation obtains benefits when compared to veterans of past wars, which is already, on average, an approximate 3 to 1 ratio.

Do not interpret the DAV's position as one of disagreement with enhanced outreach for the nation's newest veterans. Rather, we feel that the lopsided degree of outreach to these new veterans in comparison to the outreach offered to our oldest veterans, has now reached a level of absurdity. World War II veterans are still receiving benefits, by the tens of thousands, for the first times in their entire lives—between six and seven decades after their service. This same group continues to die at approximately 1,000 per day. Many have died and will continue to die without ever receiving the benefits to which they are lawfully entitled, not because VA refused to grant such benefits, but because many simply never knew they were ever entitled to any benefits.

In light of the laws passed in 2004 and 2006, it is apparent that the VA does not have any plans to reach out to the older groups of veterans in the same manner they are reaching out to the newest group of veterans. Congress can and should rectify this situation by removing the discretion provided to the VA in 38 U.S.C.A. § 6301(a), which allows it to place emphasis on newly discharged veterans by stating: "especially those who have been recently discharged or released from active military, naval, or air service and those who are eligible for readjustment or other benefits and services under laws administered by the Department." This change would require VA to focus on outreach efforts that would apply equally to veterans of all wars.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony and I will be pleased to consider any questions by you or other members of the Subcommittee.

---

[1] *VBA Annual Benefits Report Fiscal Year 2006* (ABR 2001 *et seq.*), Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Benefits Administration, p. 20.

[2] ABR 2005, 2006.

[3] Blimes, Linda. *Soldiers Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan: The Long-term Costs of Providing Veterans Medical Care and Disability Benefits.* John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Jan. 2007.

[4] VA Pamphlet 2–1–08.

Statement of Jacob B. Gadd,
Assistant Director, Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Commission,
American Legion

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present The American Legion's view on the effectiveness of Veterans Benefit Administration's (VBA's) outreach efforts. The American Legion commends the Subcommittee for holding a hearing to discuss the importance of benefit outreach to veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), in the last several years, has improved its outreach efforts, especially its efforts to reach and inform active duty service members preparing to leave the military. The American Legion remains concerned, however, that many transitioning service members, especially those returning from Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF) are not being adequately advised of the benefits and services available to them from VA and other Federal and state agencies. This is especially true of Reserve and National Guard Units that are often demobilized at hometown Reserve Centers and National Guard armories, rather than active duty demobilization centers.

VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) have made strides toward improved outreach. The number of Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) and other military services briefings conducted by VBA has steadily increased since 2003, as has the number of service members attending the briefings. VA also mails all recently separated or retired service members a "Welcome Home" package that includes both a pamphlet, summarizing available VA benefits, and a veterans' benefits timetable.

Unfortunately, VA's efforts regarding TAP are hampered by the fact that only one of the services, the Marine Corps, requires its separating members to attend these briefings. This flaw in the system did not escape the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission (VDBC) and resulted in the recommendation that Congress mandate TAP briefings and attendance throughout DoD. The American Legion strongly agrees with that recommendation. In order for all separating service members to be properly advised of all VA benefits to which they may be entitled, it is crucial that Congress adequately fund and mandate both TAP availability and attendance in all of the military services.

VA also affords separating service members the opportunity to start the disability claims process, at least 6 months prior to separation from active duty, through its Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) program. Unfortunately, this program is not available to all separating service members with service-related medical conditions as the program is only available at 140 military installations. Necessary measures, including adequate funding, should be taken to ensure that all separating service members, including members of the National Guard and Reserve, have the opportunity to participate in the BDD process, if they so desire.

Vet Centers

The American Legion believes that VA needs to ensure that future Vet Centers are positioned to reach as many rural veterans as possible. Although Vet Centers have extensive outreach plans, more outreach is needed to reach other groups of veterans who may not know they are eligible to use Vet Centers or those who may not be familiar with the program in general. Many veterans learn of Vet Centers by word of mouth. Reaching veterans residing in rural areas will be a challenge. Surely, the 100 new Vet Center GWOT outreach coordinators that will be hired will also enhance outreach to eligible veterans. VA's plan to create 23 new Vet Centers by the end of 2008 will bring the number of Vet Centers to 232. This will improve access to readjustment services for many combat veterans and their families, some of which reside in underserved areas.

Other Outreach Efforts

An overall weakness in VA's outreach program is that its efforts to target veterans already in the VA system. Often times, various informational mailings discussing changes in law, new benefit entitlements, and other pressing issues are only sent to individuals who are currently receiving VA benefits, or those who participated in one of VA's various registry programs, such as Gulf War or Agent Orange. VA also makes such information available at its medical centers and outpatient clinics. We realize that it may be easier to locate and contact veterans that are already being served by VA or have been in the past. Unfortunately, this method drastically limits the number of veterans reached since many are not currently receiving VA benefits or being treated at a VA medical facility. In fact, there are many veterans that have never even applied for VA benefits.

These are the veterans who fall through the cracks, especially when it comes to being advised of changes in law or regulation, or the addition of new benefits to various presumptive categories, that could directly affect their eligibility to receive various benefits. For example, it is not unusual for American Legion Service Officers to encounter "in-country" Vietnam veterans diagnosed with type II diabetes that are not aware they are eligible to receive disability compensation and free VA health care for the condition, despite the fact the disability was recognized as an Agent Orange/herbicide presumptive disability 7 years ago. In most, if not all, of these cases the veteran was not currently in the VA system. It is very apparent that VA needs to expand its outreach efforts to reach these veterans.

VA should expand its use and distribution of public service announcements, press releases and other media tools, especially in instances where the information affects a large number of veterans, in order to reach veterans that do not have any current or past affiliation with VA. The American Legion also encourages VA to enhance its outreach efforts by working closer with Veterans' Service Organizations (VSO), utilizing VSO publications to reach veterans VA may not otherwise be able to reach.

American Legion Outreach Programs

Department (State) Service Officers

Department Service Officers have specialized training and experience with VA regulations and are familiar with the many VA programs and services. They provide an invaluable service to veterans as this service is free and the veteran does not have to be member. When a veteran contacts The American Legion National Headquarters, views our website, or speaks to a Legion member, they are referred to that state's Department Service Officer. A Post Service Officer's Guide is distributed to 14,000 posts nationwide to help answer benefit questions which also serves as a referral source for veterans wishing to file claims.

Heroes to Hometowns

In an effort to increase transparency and cooperation between DoD and the American people, The American Legion entered into an understanding with the Office of the Secretary of Defense's (OSD) Office of Military Community and Family Policy (MCFP) under the authority of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy, Leslye A. Arsht, to assist in outreach and assistance efforts to transitioning severely injured service members. The American Legion agreed to provide outreach support to the military community's severely injured as they transitioned home through a program known as Heroes to Hometowns. This program embodies The American Legion's long standing history of caring for those ". . . who have borne the battle . . ." and their families.

Heroes to Hometowns is designed to welcome home service members who no longer serve in the military. The American public's strong support for our troops is especially evident in their willingness to help service members who are severely injured in the war, and their ever-supportive families, as they transition from the hospital environment and return to civilian life. Heroes to Hometowns is a program that focuses on reintegration back into the community, with networks established at the national and state levels to better identify the extraordinary needs of retuning families before they return home and the local community to coordinate Government and non-Government resources as necessary for as long as needed.

There are three charter members in each State's Heroes to Hometowns Executive Committee, each uniquely able to contribute to overall support with the ability to tap into their national, state, and local support systems to provide essential links to Government, corporate, and non-profit resources at all levels and to garner the all important hometown support.

State Heroes to Hometowns Committees are the link between the Military Treatment Facilities and the community. The charter members consist of the State Office of Veterans Affairs, the State Transition Assistance Office and the State's veterans community represented by The American Legion. Heroes to Hometowns is a collaborative effort and The American Legion leads communities in preparation to support returning service member in areas such as:

- Financial Assistance;
- Finding suitable homes and adapting as needed;
- Home and Vehicle repairs;
- Transportation for veterans to medical appointments;
- Employment and educational assistance;
- Child care support;
- Arrange Welcome home celebrations;
- Sports and recreation opportunities

When transitioning veterans request assistance via a web-form or brochure available through The American Legion, the veteran's contact information is shared with the State Executive Committee. The American Legion State offices refer the veteran's request to the local Post, which connects with the veteran to provide assistance. The American Legion focuses on those needs not provided by Federal and state agencies.

To assist in the coordination of community resources, The American Legion supports OSD's Military Homefront Online Support Network for military personnel and community organizations to connect and collaborate. Located at www.homefrontconnections.mhf.dod.mil, this online network is dedicated to citizens and organizations that support America's service men and women. Through the support network, veterans can easily identify and quickly connect with national, state and community support programs.

In 2007, the Heroes to Hometowns program expanded its vision to include all transitioning service members, to include the underserved National Guard and Reserve components. Currently, the National Guard and Reserve do not have mandated TAP briefings when demobilizing. This hard to reach population primarily lives in rural America, disconnected from the traditional services provided by DoD or VA. The American Legion, with its 2.7 million members and 14,000 posts, reaches into these rural communities conveying a consistent message of strong support for America's military personnel; the veteran who return home; care for the veteran's family; and a patriotic pride in America. With the Heroes to Hometowns program, The American Legion reaches out to provide support long-after the deployment is over.

Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Program

The American Legion is a staunch supporter of VA's Voluntary Service (VAVS) program. In fiscal year 2007, some 7,527 regularly scheduled Legionnaires volunteered 909,137 hours at 167 VA facilities. Legionnaires volunteer at VA Medical Centers (VAMCs), Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, Vet Centers, and many other locations in support of hospitalized veterans.

The American Legion recently entered into a pilot program with VA in creating Heroes to Hometowns VA Volunteer Coordinators at 10 VAMCs. These coordinators will work with the VAMC Social Work offices and identify transitioning service members' needs with community resources. Currently, The American Legion is working with the VAVS program to increase the level of community support at VAMCs. By providing volunteer outreach training and resources to support a sustained outreach program, The American Legion is working to prepare the American Homefront for the return of our fighting men and women.

Department of Veterans Affairs OEF/OIF Welcome Home Celebration

The American Legion is an active participant in the annual OIF/OEF "Welcome Home" Celebration Event held at VAMCs nationwide. This event is designed to provide outreach services and offer valuable information, education and support to transitioning service members and their families. Legionnaires answer questions about veterans' benefits, filing claims and military discharge review requests. Here in Washington, D.C., during the Welcome Home event held at the DC VAMC, medical staff enrolled transitioning Marines into the VA medical system for their five years of free medical services, while community volunteers provided an environment of support with live music, food and valuable information about veterans' benefits and local community resources.

The American Legion Magazine

The American Legion uses a multimedia approach to its outreach. The American Legion Magazine has historically provided valuable and timely information on the issues facing America's veterans. This tradition is carried on into the 21st century via The American Legion website, www.legion.org, a hub for information, resources and specific points of contact for local assistance. A full library of informative brochures, outline the leading issues facing America's veterans today to the furthest reaches of the American landscape. At any point, a transitioning veteran may receive assistance from The American Legion via informational brochures, printed media, web-based request forms, a 1–800 call center, state veterans' service officers and most importantly, the local American Legion post.

The American Legion Local Post

The American Legion Post is important in providing direct outreach as it provides a common meeting place for veterans and their families. The local Post may be the first place a veteran stops when returning home. It may be the first place where the community as a whole thanks a returning veteran for their service and sacrifice.

Department of Virginia American Legion Post 270 is a leading example of the support provided by The American Legion family. Each year the food manufacturer "Newman's Own" awards financial grants to organizations that support the military. In 2004, Post 270 was awarded the Newman's Own "Best Volunteer Program in the Country Supporting Our Active Duty Military and their Families" for the post's outreach to Walter Reed Medical Center. All across America, American Legion Posts have partnered with businesses to assist returning veterans find gainful employment. Most notably, The American Legion has partnered with Military.com and Recruit Military on veteran-targeted job fairs.

Within the past month, The American Legion worked with Walter Reed Medical Center to host a career and benefits fair for the injured service members in outpatient care. Employers, many veterans themselves, meet with injured servicemembers and their supporting family member in a relaxed atmosphere. Servicemembers and family members were able to have dinner and meet with employers from all across the nation.

The American Legion works closely with the DoD, VA and the Department of Labor (DOL) to assist transitioning veterans in accessing their benefits and resources in order to reach their fullest potential, regardless of location or disabilities. The American Legion believes that more emphasis should be placed on Heroes to Hometowns and programs that allow transparency within the Government and utilizes the established resources with communities to fulfill the unmet needs of transitioning servicemembers. The American Legion has a proud history of securing and protecting the earned benefits of America's veterans. The American Legion stands ready to continue this legacy today by caring for those veterans returning from the current conflicts.

Conclusion

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for allowing The American Legion to present comments on these important matters. As always, The American Legion welcomes the opportunity to work closely with you and your colleagues to reach solutions to the array of problems discussed here today that are in the best interest of America's veterans and their families.

Statement of Kate Emanuel, Senior Vice President, Non-Profit and Government Affairs, The Advertising Council

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for asking the Ad Council to testify today. My name is Kate Emanuel and I oversee nonprofit and Government affairs for the Ad Council.

Background about the Ad Council

The Ad Council was founded in 1942 when the leading advertising executives of the day were asked to rally both funds and moral support necessary for America to win WWII. Working in tandem with the Office or War Information, the Ad Council created campaigns such as Buy War Bonds, Plant Victory Gardens, Rosie the Riveter's "We Can Do it" and "Loose Lips Sink Ships." After the war, the Ad Council's leadership decided to carry on their mission and help the country tackle peacetime issues. More than sixty-five years—and thousands of campaigns—later, the Ad Council remains America's leading producer of public service communications.

The nonprofit Ad Council represents a unique collaboration between the advertising, media, and business communities. Advertising agencies throughout the country lend us their best and brightest talent to develop our campaigns pro bono and the media generously donate their advertising time and space to deliver our messages to the American people. Their collective donation of volunteer labor and free media is extraordinary: Last year, the Ad Council received over $2 billion in donated media on behalf of our fifty-plus PSA campaigns.

Through the years, taglines like "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires", "A Mind is A Terrible Thing to Waste" and "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" have become part of our society's vernacular. And as society has changed, so too has the Ad Council. Whether it was polio in the '50s, the Peace Corps or racial discrimination in the '60s, pollution in the '70s, AIDS in the '80s, recycling in the '90s, the Ad Council continues to address the most pressing social issues of the day. Today, the Ad Council's docket includes campaigns addressing childhood obesity, autism, global warming, Internet safety, financial literacy, and cyberbullying to name just a few.

Although most Americans can assuredly recite Ad Council slogans, Ad Council PSAs are not just memorized—they mobilize. For example:

—Since its launch, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' **Adoption** campaign has received $150 million in donated media and more than 13,000 new families have started the adoption process with the hope of giving a child from foster care a permanent home.

—The **Ready** campaign—which encourages Americans to prepare for all kinds of emergencies—has garnered more than $676 million in donated media over the last 4½ years. The Ready.gov website has received more than 27 million unique visitors and 2.1 billion hits.

—In just the first six months of the Big Brothers Big Sisters' **Mentoring** campaign, calls to the hotline increased by more than 2,000%. Mentoring applications soared from 90,000 a year to 620,000 in nine months, a sevenfold increase.

—The first year of NHTSA's **"Buzzed Driving"** campaign generated nearly $80 million worth of donated media support, leading to campaign awareness of at least 4 in 10 members of the target audience nationwide.

Ad Council's partnership with the Federal Government

The Ad Council is an organization with a rich history of partnering with the Federal Government and stepping in when the country is facing a crisis. Just as the Ad Council created ads shortly after the attacks on Pearl Harbor, the organization created its "I am an American" campaign within days of the 9/11 attacks, providing inspiration, hope and healing to all Americans. Additionally, PSAs addressing the flu vaccine shortage sought to encourage Americans who weren't at risk to give others "a shot". The Ad Council also joined with former Presidents Bush and Clinton to urge Americans to support the tsunami relief efforts and later, Hurricane Katrina.

Presently, we have 22 campaigns with the Federal Government which comprise approximately 50% of our docket. We work with many of the Federal departments and agencies, including Transportation, Justice, Energy, Treasury, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Homeland Security, EPA and the Library of Congress. We address a host of social issues in tandem with these Federal partners, including obesity, gun violence, financial literacy, energy efficiency, wildfire prevention, drunk driving, disaster preparedness and literacy. A full list of our campaigns and summaries are attached.

The way we work is that our "sponsor"—either the Federal Government or a nonprofit organization—pays for hard costs to produce the PSA campaign. They also serve as the issue expert. The Ad Council brings on a pro bono ad agency to develop the creative work and we then distribute the PSAs to the media, via a nationwide network of over 33,000 media outlets (TV, radio, print, outdoor, out-of-home, and Internet).

While most of our campaigns attempt to raise awareness, inspire action or change behaviors, we do have some historic campaigns that were created to promote awareness of Federal benefits. For example, in 2003, we partnered with the National WIC association to generate awareness of the WIC program and communicate its benefits to women and children who are in need of assistance. We also partnered with HHS on a campaign to raise awareness about the SCHIP program in the early 1990's.

Somewhat related, we partnered with the Department of Defense's Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) on a campaign that targeted employers to continue their support for their employees in the Guard and Reserve during training or active duty periods. This nine-year campaign encouraged employees to learn their rights and responsibilities for their active duty employees.

Ad Council's Best Practices

Whether it is promoting awareness about a social issue or a Federal benefit, the Ad Council recommends the following best practices for creating effective, sustainable and motivating PSA campaigns.

- ***Identify a Core Target Audience:*** In the world of advertising, there is nothing more important than knowing your audience and public service advertising is no exception. A successful media campaign must know what the target audience thinks about the issue and the most effective way to communicate its message. In addition, a PSA should stick to one target audience and not try to be all things to all people. This entails gathering all credible and existing research about the campaign subject matter and obtaining new information through focus group research. This research will guide strategic development, help determine breakthrough language, and ensure the creation of a message that resonates with the target audience. In addition, target-audience attitudes and be-

haviors should be tracked before and throughout the course of any campaign to measure its impact.

- ***Know the PSA Proposition:*** A good PSA is one that takes a complex issue and drills it down to an individual action that is achievable. So, for example, we know that a PSA campaign can't eliminate health disparities, discrimination, poverty or global warming. But, if done right, a motivating and simplified campaign can encourage someone to speak out against racism, lead a healthy lifestyle, reduce their carbon footprint or mentor a child. And recognize when a PSA campaign is not the best way to go. Some issues simply don't work well with PSAs—messages that only affect a small percentage of the population, are time sensitive or messages that advocate.
- ***Stick to One Idea:*** An effective PSA—whether it's a TV or radio spot, newspaper or print ad, web banner or billboard—should say one thing. The most reliable way to ensure focused advertising is to start with a single-minded creative brief which serves as the strategic blueprint for your campaign. It should address these core elements: 1) background (why are we advertising?); 2) target audience (who are we talking to?), 3) strategic insight (what will get their attention?); 4) main message (what should the advertising say?); 5) support (why should they believe us?); 6) call to action (what do we want them to do?)
- ***Let your website do the heavy lifting:*** Keep your PSA message single-minded and let your "back end" (i.e. your website and collateral materials) convey in-depth information about your issue. All PSAs should include a concise and easy to remember url that links to a website that is easy to navigate and entertaining yet instructive. Make sure the website keeps to the campaign's message and doesn't overwhelm the user. Typically, the Ad Council creates separate campaign websites for our Federal Government partners so that the public is directed to a very user-friendly website. Please find attached screen grabs of the homepages of a handful of the Ad Council's campaigns with the Federal Government, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (www.smallstep.gov), U.S. Army (www.boostup.org), U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (www.inventnow.org), EPA (www.noattacks.org), USDA (www.mypyramid.gov), U.S. Forest Service (www.smokeybear.com), SAMHSA (www.whatadifference.org) and U.S. Department of Homeland Security (www.ready.gov).

Finally, allocate the proper resources for site updates and maintenance and refresh the content as often as you can.

- ***Think beyond your website:*** Once a PSA has been seen, heard, read or clicked, it needs to provide information so that the public can find out where to get help or offer their support. Depending on your target audience, you may want to go beyond just a website and have a comprehensive fulfillment program (i.e 1–800 number, collateral materials, curriculum, posters, etc.)
- ***Strive for Creative Excellence:*** Great creativity can strike a chord and motivate people to change. When creating PSAs, keep in mind these general creative themes:
  - Talk to the audience as you would a friend
  - If possible, entertain them
  - If needed, make them uncomfortable . . . to a point
  - Once you've got them, don't ask for too much (i.e. "Visit a website to learn more", "Speak to your kids about their friends", "Take the keys from a drunk driver")

Highly motivational and creative advertising not only inspires consumers, but it's more likely to motivate the media (i.e. a PSA or community affairs manager) to donate their time or space. Establishing a review panel of experts from the advertising industry can help ensure first-rate creative messages. For example, to maintain its top quality creative work, the Ad Council has an advisory group comprised of the top creative minds in the advertising industry that reviews each campaign at specific points in the campaign development cycle (strategic development, concept development and rough cuts) in order to ensure the best execution of the research-based strategy.

- ***Think Long Term:*** Effective public service media campaigns require a sustained level of advertising—over the long term—to effect change. In the Ad Council's experience, in order for any campaign to penetrate the American collective consciousness and change overall behaviors, a PSA effort must be at least three years in duration and is most effective over five years or more. In fact, the Ad Council's most effective PSA campaigns are the longest running:

"Smokey Bear", "McGruff the Crime Dog", "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk", "A Mind is A Terrible Thing to Waste", and "Vince and Larry, the Crash Test Dummies".

- ***Seek regular and frequent exposure:*** The most compelling PSA is powerless without regular public exposure, which is increasingly challenging in today's cluttered media PSA environment. Thus, creating a media outreach strategy and forming innovative partnerships with media outlets are critical to maximizing a PSA's exposure. In addition, conducting local and community media outreach greatly enhances a campaign's media support.

  Another factor contributing to high levels of donated media support is the number of options provided to media outlets. Ideally, PSAs should be produced in as many lengths or sizes as possible. This gives the PSA Directors the flexibility to run spots that target their specific audiences, and fit within their programming schedule needs.
- ***Rely on Multi-Media outlets:*** A PSA campaigns must be able to mold its message to the current media and remain flexible for change. Campaign messages should be produced and distributed in multiple media formats for maximum success, such as broadcast television, cable, radio, magazine, newspaper, outdoor, Internet and theater and other "new" media opportunities. Therefore, understanding the ongoing changes to the media landscape is essential to communicating effectively.

  In fact, some of the Ad Council's campaigns that target youth—such as our campaign with the U.S. Army on high school drop out prevention—actually lead with interactive components, not traditional PSAs. For example, the "Boost up" campaign consists of a virtual community of support for any teen struggling to make it to graduation. The campaign relies heavily on user-generated content and mobile messaging in addition to the most popular social networking sites—MySpace, YouTube and Facebook. The website (www.boostup.org) serves as a hub, facilitating conversations and aggregating support, in addition to serving as a resource to parents and teens. All of these elements are designed to work together to encourage peer discussion about the importance of graduating from high school.
- ***Venture Outside the PSA Box:*** In today's cluttered media environment, you need to think beyond the PSA and employ a host of elements to make sure your message reaches your target audience. PSAs should therefore be part of an integrated, comprehensive approach that relies on all forms of media as well as new media, public relations, grassroots marketing, community events, cause marketing, etc. You should also stay on top of innovative communications tools such as podcasting, taxi cab tops, in-school programming and other emerging media outlets such as PDAs, video email, satellite radio and interactive television.
- ***Find experienced and well-regarded sponsors:*** Partnering with a reputable non-profit or Government sponsor, with a strong national grass-roots and community presence, can help secure donated media and further the reach of your campaign.
- ***Establish clear metrics for success:*** No matter how much donated media a PSA campaign receives, its true success should be measured by behavior change and awareness building. Establish realistic measures before your campaign launches, including:
  - Donated media support
  - Press coverage
  - Visits to the website Calls to the toll-free number
  - Changes in awareness levels
  - Changes in behavior

  The Ad Council conducts extensive research and surveys to measure the impact of all of our campaigns. Success of a campaign is measured by tracking donated media (via quarterly reports), tracking visits to the campaign's website or calls to a toll-free number, and conducting pre- and post-campaign launch tracking studies that measure attitudinal, behavioral and awareness shifts among the campaign's target audience.
- ***Be Flexible and Proactive:*** Stay on top of consumer trends and evolve your message over time to maintain relevance. If possible, work with community-based groups and coalitions to amplify your message and give it a local face.
- ***Be Patient:*** Social change is not an overnight phenomenon. In nearly all instances, changing social norm from a behavior that is acceptable to unacceptable, or vice versa, takes time, dedication and continued funding.

Ad Council & IAVA campaign on Veteran Support:

One campaign I'd like to briefly mention today is an effort we're doing in partnership with the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America or IAVA.

As you may know, IAVA, founded in 2004, is the nation's first and largest group dedicated to the troops and veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A non-profit and non-partisan organization, IAVA represents more than 90,000 veteran members and civilian supporters in all 50 states.

The goal of this campaign, which will include TV, radio, print, outdoor and Internet PSAs, is to decrease the depression and PTSD-related outcomes among returning veterans. A separate and complementary effort will create overall support for veterans among the general public.

As this Subcommittee well knows, as many as 50% of the 1.64 million veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan will struggle with serious mental health issues. Unfortunately, less than 40% of those with mental health issues are being treated. Many avoid seeking help because of the stigmas around seeking treatment or being diagnosed with a mental illness. Additionally, since Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans make up less than 1% of the U.S. population, this contributes to the isolation they feel once they are back in the U.S. and makes connecting with other vets challenging.

The campaign's advertising objectives will be twofold:

—To increase the number of veterans who seek treatment for their mental health issues by connecting them with other veterans as they all readjust to civilian life.

—To encourage the families of these vets—relatives, friends and loved ones—to initiate a discussion about the mental health issues these vets may be facing. This is important because we know that veterans who have received help often cite their family as the catalyst. However, most families don't know how to broach the subject constructively. The campaign will provide resources and tips on how to start this oftentimes difficult conversation.

IAVA and the Ad Council will create a very comprehensive campaign-specific website with links to resources and an online community exclusive to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. The online community will allow vets to simply listen in or share their experiences in a judgment-free environment. Topics discussed might include jobs, re-connecting with family, PTSD, benefits, and more. As we develop the campaign website, we would welcome any guidance the VA wishes to provide in terms of connecting veterans with the resources available to them through the VA.

Conclusion

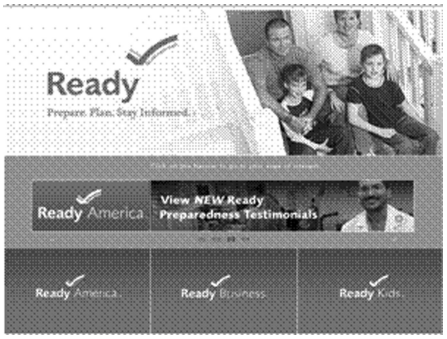
If done right, PSA campaigns can raise awareness, change behaviors and inspire action. Thank you again for the opportunity to share our best practices. The Ad Council is happy to provide additional expertise or assistance as the Subcommittee looks at ways to help our country's veterans obtain their Federal benefits.

Sample of homepages of Ad Council's Federal Government-sponsored campaigns:

EPA & childhood asthma (www.noattacks.org):

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & adult and childhood obesity (www.smallstep.gov):

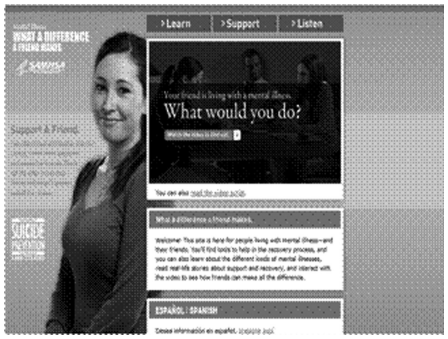
U.S. Department of Homeland Security & citizen preparedness (www.ready.gov):



U.S. Department of Agriculture & nutrition education (www.mypyramid.gov):

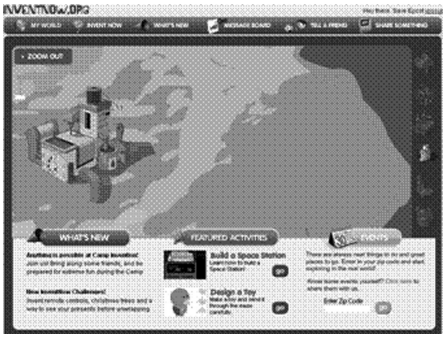
U.S. Forest Service & wildfire prevention (www.smokeybear.com):

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration & mental health anti-stigma (www.whatadifference.samhsa.gov):



U.S. Army & high school drop-out prevention (www.boostup.org):

U.S. Patent and Trademark Office & inspiring invention (www.inventnow.org):



Ad Council's

Federal Government-sponsored campaigns

Presently, the Ad Council has 22 campaigns in partnership with the Federal Government:

- **Adoption,** Department of Health and Human Services
- **Booster Seat Education,** Department of Transportation
- **Childhood Asthma,** Environmental Protection Agency
- **Drunk Driving Prevention,** Department of Transportation
- **Emergency Preparedness,** Department of Homeland Security
- **Fatherhood Involvement,** Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Family Assistance
- **Energy Efficiency,** Department of Energy
- **Financial Literacy,** Department of Treasury
- **High School Drop-out Prevention,** U.S. Army
- **Inspiring Invention,** Department of Commerce/U.S. Patent Office
- **Lifelong Literacy,** Library of Congress
- **Lupus Awareness,** Office of Women's Health/HHS
- **Mental Health Anti-Stigma,** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration/HHS
- **Nutrition Education,** Department of Agriculture
- **Obesity (adult and childhood) Prevention,** Department of Health and Human Services
- **Patient Involvement,** Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality/HHS
- **Reducing Gun Violence,** Department of Justice
- **Suicide Prevention,** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration/HHS
- **Teen Dating Violence,** Department of Justice
- **Underage Drinking prevention,** Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration/HHS
- **Wildfire Prevention,** Department of Agriculture

Campaign Summaries:

Adoption

The campaign aims to significantly increase awareness of the urgent need for parents to provide loving, permanent homes for foster children. The campaign is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, the Adoption Exchange Association and the Collaboration to AdoptUSKids.

Booster Seat Education

This campaign, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Transportation's NHTSA, addresses the importance of having your child in a booster seat if they are under 4′9″. The goal of this campaign is to educate parents that a booster seat is a life-saving transition to an adult safety belt. This campaign is a continuation of

another historic campaign on seat belt education featuring the Crash Test Dummies, Vince and Larry.

Childhood Asthma

In partnership with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, this campaign addresses the pervasiveness of asthma in children affecting one out of 13 kids under 15, or 5.5 million. The campaign highlights some unexpected items that can trigger asthma attacks and simple ways to take care of these items so that they are safer for a child with asthma. The PSAs direct parents to call 1–866–NO-ATTACKS or visit ***www.noattacks.org*** to learn how to stop asthma attacks before they start.

Drunk Driving Prevention

This historic partnership with the U.S. Department of Transportation/NHTSA has saved thousands of lives with its iconic tagline *Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk.* Recently, the objective of the campaign shifted to inspire dialogue and recognition of the dangers of "buzzed" driving and subsequently motivate people to stop driving buzzed. The campaign hopes to educate people that consuming even a few drinks can impair driving and that *Buzzed Driving is Drunk Driving.*

Emergency Preparedness

In order to encourage more Americans to prepare themselves, their families and their communities, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has sponsored this campaign to educate and empower Americans to prepare for and respond to all kinds of emergencies. While 91% of Americans believe it's important to be prepared for emergencies. However, only 55% of households report having taken any steps at all to prepare. The PSAs direct audiences to www.ready.gov, a comprehensive and easy-to-use site that gives Americans the information and tools they need to prepare for and respond to potential emergencies. The campaign also has a Spanish language component as well as kid and business targeted PSAs.

Energy Efficiency

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, the objective of the Energy Efficiency campaign is to redefine how consumers approach energy efficiency. The campaign, still underdevelopment, targets grade school children and their parents to promote a lifelong interest in pursuing energy efficient behaviors.

Fatherhood Involvement

In an effort to show dads the critical role they play in their children's lives, the Ad Council has partnered with U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Family Assistance on a campaign that communicates to fathers how essential they are to their children's well-being. The ads conclude with the tagline, "Take time to be a dad today" and encourage fathers to visit www.fatherhood.gov or call 1–877–4DAD411 to learn how to be more involved dads.

Financial Literacy

Currently in development, this campaign sponsored by the U.S. Department of Treasury, will target 18–24 year olds with providing awareness of financial literacy by educating and shaping their behaviors toward money management and credit before or as bad credit habits are forming.

High School Drop out Prevention

The *Boost* campaign gives parents and at-risk teens (who might be at risk of dropping out of school), a boost to stay in school and graduate. The PSAs, in both Spanish and English, direct audiences to visit www.boostup.org for guidance on a range of teen issues, and how to help teens achieve their full potential and graduate high school.

Inspiring Invention

In an effort to help inspire a new generation of inventors, the Ad Council has partnered with the United States Patent and Trademark Office and the National Inventors Hall of Fame Foundation to launch the Inspiring Invention campaign. The PSAs aim to help children realize that there is a role for every kind of unique curiosity and imaginative idea as it relates to invention. The ads urge children ages 8–11 to make innovation, invention and the development of new ideas an integral part of their lives and to visit www.InventNow.org, to recognize that "Anything's Possible. Keep Thinking."

Lifelong Literacy

The objective of the Lifelong Literacy campaign, in partnership with the Library of Congress, is to inspire fun and promote literacy in all types of learning, especially

reading. From books to magazines to comics, reading gives kids the opportunity to explore their imaginations. The PSAs encourage youth to log on to www.literacy.gov to discover, learn and explore.

Lupus Awareness, Office of Women's Health/HHS

This campaign, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Women's Health, strives to increase awareness of lupus, its symptoms and health effects. The objective is to help women, especially minority women who are at greatest risk, decide whether professional medical evaluation and treatment is warranted. (Due to the low profile of lupus, its symptoms and health effects, more than half of those with lupus suffer four or more years and visit three or more doctors before obtaining a diagnosis. Late diagnosis contributes to significant morbidity, disability and mortality.)

Mental Health Anti-Stigma

This campaign aims to decrease the negative attitudes that surround mental illness. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the campaign seeks to reach young adults (ages 18–25) with a message of acceptance and understanding of mental illness. The PSAs encourage friends to offer their support to a friend who has been diagnosed with a mental illness.

Nutrition Education

This campaign motivates moms to encourage proper nutrition and physical activity for their families, emphasizing that a bright future starts with a healthy lifestyle. The notion that "Good Nutrition Can Lead to Great Things" reinforces that healthy eating and physical activity are fuel for a kid's mind and body. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the campaign encourages viewers to visit www.MyPyramid.gov and use the USDA's Food Pyramid as an effective tool to help their children make healthy choices.

Obesity Prevention

This campaign sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services tackles the consequences of sedentary lifestyles and unhealthy eating habits that have taken over our country. The PSAs communicate that getting healthy is not impossible, especially if you take it one "Small Step" at a time. The PSAs use humor to inspire overweight adults to incorporate some of the suggested small steps into their hectic lives.

Childhood Obesity Prevention

This PSA campaign attempts to address the alarming obesity epidemic that is putting America's children at risk, including physical troubles, emotional stress and increase incidence of chronic disease. In partnership with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this campaign, which features a fun, interactive website, helps kids see the lighter side of healthy eating and gives them new reasons to "eat better."

Patient Involvement

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) is the lead agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services with a mission of improving the quality, safety, efficiency and effectiveness of health care for the public. Gaps in the health care system open patients up to serious medical errors, even under routine circumstances. Asking questions at every step is an effective defense. This campaign encourages the public to be active members of their health care team and delivers actionable, simple ways for people to be more involved at www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer.

Reducing Gun Violence

Funded by the U.S. Department of Justice and in partnership with Project Safe Neighborhoods, this campaign takes on the serious threat of gun violence to America's young people. The PSAs encourage youth to think about the repercussions of gun crimes and reminds them that the consequences, death or jail time, just as seriously affect their families.

Suicide Prevention

The goal of the campaign, in partnership with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is to encourage and educate parents on ways to get help for their teens who may be at risk for suicide. (Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds, following accidents and homicide.) The campaign is still under development.

Teen Dating Violence

Still under development, this campaign in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice, will help teens recognize the "digital gray areas" of teen dating violence.

Underage Drinking Prevention

This campaign seeks to reduce and delay the onset of underage drinking by increasing communication between parents and youth. Sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the PSAs encourage parents to talk to their children early and often about the dangers and consequences of underage drinking.

Wildfire Prevention

The longest running campaign in Ad Council history, Smokey Bear and his famous warning, "Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires," is sponsored by the USDA Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters. Responding to the massive outbreak of wildfires in 2000, the campaign changed its focus to wildfires and Smokey's slogan to "Only You Can Prevent Wildfires." The PSAs direct people to www.smokeybear.com to learn about wildfires and how we can protect our forests.

Prior Federal Government campaigns:

Volunteerism

In partnership with USA Freedom Corps, the campaign encouraged every American to answer the President's Call to Service by engaging in service to their neighbors, to our Nation and the world. Audiences were urged to volunteer in a way that reflects their talents and their interests. To help them find such a volunteer opportunity, they were offered the option of visiting the USA Freedom Corps Web site, which features the largest clearinghouse of volunteer opportunities ever created, or calling a toll-free number (1–877–USA–CORPS) for information about service opportunities.

Hurricane Katrina:

Hurricane Katrina Relief: Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the Ad Council created PSAs featuring former Presidents H.W. Bush and William Clinton asking Americans to donate to the USA Freedom Corp's Katrina fund.

Hurricane Help for Schools

In response to the destruction and devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with the Advertising Council, produced three public service announcements featuring Mrs. Laura Bush. The public service announcements were created in support of school-related relief efforts—*Hurricane Help for Schools*—for the hundreds of thousands of displaced children.

Hurricane Mental Health Awareness

The campaign, sponsored by HHS's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), helped the survivors and first responders who were impacted by the hurricanes and were in need of mental health services. Those affected are encouraged to take a break, and assess how they and their families are handling the recovery. They were invited to call a confidential toll-free number to get help and speak to a trained mental health professional.

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve

This longstanding campaign (1972–2001)—sponsored by the Department of Defense's National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR)—targeted employers and directed them to the ESGR to learn their rights and responsibilities for their active duty employees.

Voter Registration and Youth Civic Engagement

The U.S. Department of Defense's Federal Voting Assistance Program's "Get Out The Vote" campaign has been a campaign of the Ad Council's since 1980. Originally created to promote voter registration and participation in the electoral process among Uniformed Services personnel stationed abroad, the campaign evolved over the years to increase civic engagement among 18–24 year olds. The PSAs urge these young adults (the largest group of non-voters in America) to become involved in their communities in any way they can, including voting in local elections, volunteering in their spare time or reading the newspaper and discussing current events with friends.

Troop Support

Launched in 2006, this campaign, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense, encouraged Americans to participate in activities that show their support of the troops. The PSAs invited the public to log on to www.AmericaSupportsYou.mil to find ideas, both large and small, on how to show their support for the men and women of the military. (The campaign was an extension of the Department of Defense's "America Supports You" initiative, which launched in November 2004.)

Statement of Diana M. Rubens,
Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations,
Veterans Benefits Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today. I am pleased to provide information on the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) outreach initiatives designed to address the needs of the brave men and women who are actively serving our country today and those of our distinguished veterans. I believe that each program I discuss exemplifies our pursuit of providing the best possible service to our Nation's greatest heroes.

Benefits Information at time of Induction into Service

Since November 2004, everyone inducted into the five military branches receives a VA benefits pamphlet at the Military Entrance Processing Station. This pamphlet provides inductees with basic information on VA benefits and services at the start of their military active service. We want to be sure they know that VA will be there for them in the future.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP)

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) briefings are conducted nationwide and in Europe to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for return to civilian life. At these briefings, servicemembers are informed of the array of VA benefits and services available, instructed on how to complete VA application forms, and advised on what evidence is needed to support their claims. Following the general instruction segment, personal interviews are conducted with those servicemembers who would like assistance in preparing and submitting their applications for compensation and/or vocational rehabilitation and employment benefits.

Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP)

The Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP) is an integral component of transition assistance for servicemembers who may be released because of disability. Through VA's DTAP briefings, VBA advises transitioning servicemembers about the benefits available through VBA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program. The goal of DTAP is to encourage and assist potentially eligible servicemembers in making informed decisions about the VR&E program and to expedite delivery of these services to eligible servicemembers and veterans.

While TAP and DTAP briefings are central to VA's efforts to inform servicemembers about VA benefits and services, VA also provides briefings to servicemembers about military separation and retirement services programs, military medical facilities, physical evaluation boards, casualty assistance services, and various other military liaison activities.

The chart below reflects the number of briefings and personal interviews conducted by VBA representatives for the past five years. This includes briefings conducted for regular active duty military members, pre-and post-deployment briefings for Reserve and National Guard members, and briefings conducted overseas. VA has increased the number of briefings presented by 40 percent since 2003.

Fiscal Year	*Briefings*	*Attendees*	*Interviews*
2003	5,840	210,015	102,402
2004	7,834	276,574	122,120
2005	8,184	326,664	124,092
2006	8,541	393,345	93,431
2007	8,154	296,855	100,976
2008 (Through March 2008)	3,962	161,749	39,917

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E)

The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program provides services and assistance necessary to enable veterans with service-connected disabilities to become employable or gains in independence in daily living.

Job Resource Labs were fully deployed in all regional offices in 2006. These labs include all the necessary equipment, supplies, and resource materials to aid VR&E staff and veterans in conducting comprehensive analyses of local and national job outlooks, developing job search plans, preparing for interviews, developing résumés, and conducting thorough job searches. These self-service job resource labs aid veterans in the job search process through the use of a comprehensive online employment preparation and job-seeking tool.

VR&E is also continuing to expand the "Coming Home to Work" initiative, which is a collaborative partnership between VR&E and Federal agencies to provide civilian work experiences to interested service members who are in a medical-hold status at military treatment facilities and who meet the eligibility requirements for the VR&E program.

National Guard and Reserve Members

In peacetime, outreach to Reserve and National Guard members is generally accomplished on an "on call" or "as requested" basis. But, with the onset of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) and the activation and deployment of large numbers of Reserve and National Guard members, VBA's outreach to this group has greatly expanded. VA has made arrangements with Reserve and Guard officials to schedule briefings for members being mobilized and demobilized. These benefits briefings for Guard and Reserve members increased from 821 briefings for more than 46,000 attendees in FY 2003 to over 1,800 briefings for more than 96,000 attendees in FY 2007.

Transition Assistance Advisors (TAAs)

A memorandum of agreement was signed in 2005 between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Guard Bureau to institutionalize a partnership and to support better communication between the two. VA is encouraging state National Guard Coalitions to improve local communication and coordination of benefits briefings to assure that National Guard and Reserve members are fully aware of benefits. As a part of this partnership, the National Guard Bureau employs 57 Transition Assistance Advisors (TAAs) for the 50 states and 4 territories.

The TAAs' primary function is to serve as the statewide point of contact and coordinator. They also provide information regarding VA benefits and services to Guard members and their families and assist in resolving any problems with VA healthcare, benefits, and TRICARE. VA and the National Guard Bureau teamed up at the beginning of the program in February 2006 to provide training to the TAAs on VA services and benefits. VA has participated in subsequent annual refresher training, as well as monthly TAA conference calls.

Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS)

The Veterans Assistance at Discharge System (VADS) generates a "Welcome Home Package" for recently separated veterans (including Reserve and National Guard members) that contains a letter from the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, along with pamphlets describing VA benefits and services and a benefits timetable. VADS also sends separate packages that explain Education, Loan Guaranty, and Insurance benefits. In addition to the VADS mailings, a separate personal letter from the Secretary, along with benefits information, is sent to each returning OEF/OIF veteran. The VADs mailings are sent to the address provided to VBA by the Department of Defense at time of separation.

Benefits Delivery at Discharge

In concert with the military services outreach program, VBA continues its Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) Program through which servicemembers can apply for service-connected disability compensation within 180 days of discharge. The required physical examinations are conducted, service medical records are reviewed, and a preliminary rating decision is prepared prior to or shortly after discharge so that benefits can be awarded shortly after discharge. Current BDD program participants include 40 regional offices and 153 military installations (142 DoD sites and 11 Homeland Security Coast Guard sites). This number includes five locations overseas (three in Korea and two in Germany). Participation in the BDD program is offered to servicemembers who are within 60 to 180 days of release from active duty and who are able to remain in the area in order to complete the medical examinations.

Disability Evaluation System (DES)

In response to recommendations by the Dole-Shalala Commission, West/Marsh Independent Review Group, Secretary Nicholson's Global War on Terrorism Returning Heroes Commission, VA and DoD launched a Disability Evaluation System (DES) pilot on November 27, 2007. The DES pilot is scheduled to run for one year. The pilot program differs from the existing DoD DES process in the following significant ways:

1. VA is brought into the process at the Medical Evaluation Board (MEB) stage, counseling the servicemember and taking a claim for VA disability compensation.
2. One examination is performed according to VA protocols, normally done by VA, which forms the basis for the MEB and Physical Evaluation Board (PEB) decisionmaking as well as the VA disability rating, should the member be found medically unfit.
3. If the PEB determines that the member is medically unfit, VA assigns the evaluation for the unfitting condition(s) as well as any other claimed conditions.

The VA rating for the unfitting condition is used by DoD for purposes of determining the amount of severance pay or placement on the temporary or permanent disability retired list. In conjunction with the DES pilot, VA is also initiating enhanced data sharing between DoD and VA regarding medical information.

Seamless Transition Program

With the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), VA established the Seamless Transition Program to ensure we are meeting the needs of servicemembers seriously injured in these operations.

In 2003, VA began to assign permanent, full-time representatives at key military treatment facilities where seriously injured OEF/OIF returnees are hospitalized, including Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Bethesda Naval Medical Center, Eisenhower Army Medical Center, Brooke Army Medical Center, and Madigan Army Medical Center.

VA representatives at these facilities provide benefits information and assist in filing claims. They monitor patient progress and coordinate the submission and smooth transfer of claims to VA regional offices. Each veteran's claim is then case-managed at the appropriate regional office of jurisdiction to expedite processing. Additionally, VA assigns special benefits counselors, social workers, and case-managers to work with these servicemembers and their families throughout the transition to VA care and benefits systems to ensure expedited delivery of all benefits.

VA and its Federal partners recently established a new Federal Recovery Coordinator Program Office and deployed Federal Recovery Coordinators to key military treatment facilities. These Coordinators help develop and implement individual recovery plans for seriously injured servicemembers.

Casualty Assistance—In-Service Deaths

Casualty Assistance Officers (CAOs) from VA regional offices visit family members of servicemembers who died on active duty to assist them in applying for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) and other survivors' benefits. These visits are coordinated with the military CAOs. A special brochure that outlines benefits and services for survivors of servicemembers is provided. The benefits application process is streamlined through the use of a simplified one-page application form that is faxed to the VA Regional Office and Insurance Center in Philadelphia. All of these claims are processed within 48 hours of receipt of required documents. Because family members are in an acute stage of grief during the initial visit, a six-month followup letter is sent to ensure that surviving spouses and dependent children are aware of the full range of benefits available to them.

Survivors Benefits Web Site

In 2005, VBA participated in a joint agency effort with the Department of Defense to create a single point of access to benefits information specific to survivors of OEF/OIF servicemembers. The Web site was launched in July 2005 and offers users a choice of information for survivors of servicemembers who died while on active duty, or survivors of veterans who died as a result of a service-connected disability.

Other Eligible Dependents & Survivors

As required by Public Laws 107–14, section 6 (Outreach to Eligible Dependents) and 107–103, section 304 (Improvement of Veterans Outreach Programs), VA has developed pamphlets describing potential benefits. These are mailed out by the regional offices to approximately 600,000 survivors a year that apply for a United

States flag for burial purposes. A benefits pamphlet is also sent to all dependents and survivors who file original claims for DIC, Death Pension, Dependents' Educational Assistance, and proceeds of Government Life Insurance.

Homeless Veterans

As part of Public Law 107–95, VBA established full-or part-time Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinators (HVOCs) at all 57 regional offices. The HVOCs routinely meet with representatives from various Federal agencies, service organizations, associations, and other groups that are involved in homeless veterans programs, to learn more about programs that homeless veterans may access. HVOCs continue to actively participate in "stand downs" for homeless veterans. Stand downs are typically one- to three-day events providing food, shelter, clothing, health screenings, VA and Social Security benefits counseling, and referrals to a variety of other services, such as housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment.

Since FY 2003, the VA Regional Offices have conducted personal and telephone interviews with more than 171,000 homeless veterans.

Former POW Outreach

Each VA regional office has a Former Prisoner of War Coordinator who regularly disseminates benefits information and provides individualized assistance to former prisoners of war (POWs). A computer database is also maintained of all former POWs to ensure all former POWs and their surviving spouses are notified of outreach activities and information of general interest.

Gulf War Veterans

Additional outreach to Gulf War veterans who served in the Southwest Asia Theater of Operations during the period of August 2, 1990 to July 31, 1991 is provided through the *Gulf War Review* newsletter, which is issued three to four times annually and mailed to about 220,000 individuals. It contains information about Gulf War-related issues and new legislation. A special Gulf War Helpline also supports Gulf War veterans with information and assistance.

Vietnam Veterans Exposed to Agent Orange

The Agent Orange Review newsletter is published annually by the Veterans Health Administration in partnership with VBA and is mailed to approximately 600,000 Vietnam veterans.

Elderly Veterans

VBA outreach coordinators have established relationships with local area agencies on the aging, Social Security Administration (SSA) offices, and other organizations that assist older Americans. VBA distributes 2 million copies of VA Pamphlet 20–00–1, A Summary of VA Benefits, to the more than 1,300 SSA offices nationwide annually.

Women Veterans

Women Veterans Coordinators at regional offices continue to work closely with their counterparts in the Veterans Health Administration and Vet Centers, as well as with local service organization representatives. Through such partnering, local outreach events have been expanded to regional activities such as the annual Women Veterans Appreciation Day in Branson, Missouri. VBA representatives at the national and local levels continue to work with the Center for Women Veterans, the VHA Women Veterans Health Program, and the Secretary's Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, to improve outreach to women veterans. VBA is currently working with the Center for Women Veterans and Seamless Transition Offices to plan the June 2008 National Summit for Women Veterans.

Mr. Chairman, VBA outreach programs provide wide dissemination of information on the array of benefits and services available to servicemembers, veterans, and their families. Our employees are dedicated to ensuring veterans receive the benefits and services they have earned through their service to our Nation, and we work diligently to provide information and assistance in a timely, thorough, accurate, understandable, and respectful manner.

The effectiveness of our aggressive outreach efforts is demonstrated in the dramatic increase in the number of veterans who are filing disability claims. VBA's annual claims receipts have grown 45 percent—from 578,773 claims received in 2000 to 838,141 in 2007, an increase of 259,368. In 2008, we anticipate claims receipts will exceed 850,000.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I greatly appreciate being here today and look forward to answering your questions.

Statement of Leslye Arsht, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, Military Community and Family Policy, U.S. Department of Defense

Distinguished members of the committee: Thank you for the opportunity to discuss what the Department of Defense (DoD) is doing to provide Service members and their families with the information and resources necessary to facilitate a successful transition from military to civilian life.

We require a great deal from our Service members and their families, whether they be Active, National Guard, or Reserve, and I want to affirm the Department's steadfast commitment to them.

Returning to private life after serving in the military is a very complex undertaking. To assist them in doing so, we must empower our Service members with the tools and information they need to develop individual solutions to the challenges they may face as they return to civilian life. Service members' and their families most immediate goals are finding a job, changing careers, enrolling in higher education, and ultimately improving their economic quality of life.

Federal Collaboration

I am impressed by the dedication and willingness of all our Federal partners to provide an assortment of highly desirable transition services. You can be truly proud of the manner in which the DoD, Department of Labor (DOL), and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have continued to enthusiastically support our men and women in uniform. The sustained interest and support of this Committee is also vital to our efforts.

The three Federal departments have been working together in earnest for well over a decade. The many professionals within these departments are bringing DoD, DOL, and the VA even closer together for a common goal of preparing Service members and their families for military life and transition into the civilian community at a pace greater than at any time before. Examples of our increasingly focused efforts include the Transition Assistance Program Steering Committee and the Secretary of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO). DoD and VA also continue to partner extensively though the VA/DoD Joint Executive Council (JEC), the Benefits Executive Council (BEC), and the Health Executive Council (HEC).

The rest of my statement today will touch on the many programs, actions, and activities under way that reflect the shared commitment to delivering transition assistance, employment assistance, and benefits information to our servicemembers and their families.

Office of Personal Finance and Transition (PF&T)

The DoD has undergone a paradigm shift and adopted a new philosophy with respect to assisting our transitioning Service members and their families. Recognizing that financial readiness, military and veterans benefits, and transition assistance are closely linked to one another and must be addressed as a whole, The Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy (ODUSD (MC&FP)) established its newest directorate, the Office of Personal Finance and Transition (PF&T), this past March.

Combining oversight for both the Financial Readiness Program and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), previously operating independently within separate Office of the Secretary of Defense directorates, the office is responsible for a broad range of policies, educational programs, and resource services that address both the financial readiness and transition assistance needs of military members and their families.

Through education, counseling, and an inventory of high-tech and interactive resources and programs, PF&T is responsible for ensuring all military members and their families have access to the tools necessary to attain economic security throughout their military careers and beyond and to make educated decisions regarding their next military career milestones and ultimate transitions to the civilian workforce. Ensuring military members and their families have an accurate and complete understanding of both military and veterans' benefits, and how application of those benefits affects their individual transition and economic security plans, can have significant retention implications, which, in turn, can contribute to mission and force readiness. Part of the office's philosophy is that military life is a series of key transitions, and that "transition assistance" is a lifelong process, required for these transitions within the military just as much as it is for the transition out of the military.

With a mission inclusive of all services and components (Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve) and their families, PF&T is establishing a national network of financial and transition professionals and resources through a "train-the-trainer" approach to ensure the DoD is responsive to the financial readiness and transition needs of state Adjutant Generals and Governors, military regions and installations, and individual units. Additionally, this new approach will ensure 24/7 global access of educational resources and individualized financial and transition plans using the latest technology and multiple delivery methodologies throughout the Service members' and their families' life cycle.

However, while this represents the future vision of the nature of transition assistance, it is important to discuss the formal TAP as it exists today to show how it currently assists our troops and families.

Transition Assistance Program

Since its inception in 1990, the goal of TAP has been to provide Service members and their families the skills, tools, knowledge, and self-confidence necessary for a successful reentry into the Nation's civilian workforce. The goal is to help prepare them to move into the job market or an educational institution. We deliver TAP through a collaborative effort involving DOL, the Military Services, VA, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Education (ED), the Small Business Administration (SBA), the National Veterans Business Development Corporation, and other Federal, state, local and non-profit organizations. The Veterans Service and Military Service Organizations provide outstanding support to TAP and to our Service members and their families at both the national and local levels.

There are four key components to TAP, the responsibility for each shared among DoD, Labor, and the VA.

Preseparation Counseling is the first component of TAP. This counseling is mandatory for separating and retiring Service members and all eligible demobilizing members of the National Guard and Reserve. The Military Services are responsible for providing Preseparation Counseling. Service members are introduced to information about employment opportunities and how to go about finding a job. Also during this phase of TAP, Active Component Service members, looking for a job post-military, are encouraged to attend a DOL TAP Employment Workshop. For the National Guard and Reserve, similar information is provided, geared to their needs. The Guard and Reserve receive a Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) briefing. USERRA briefings are scheduled at installation demobilization sites in coordination with the demobilization commander. National Guard and Reserve personnel are also informed, during the Preseparation Counseling session, about the services available to them at the DOL One-Stop Career Centers. Surveys show that the overwhelming majority of the Guard and Reserve activated have jobs when they are activated; therefore, they have jobs to which they will return. However, members looking for jobs or a career change are encouraged to visit and register with the One-Stop Career Center nearest their residence, once they return home.

While at the demobilization station, they get information about their eligibility to receive employment assistance and other transition services up to 180 days after demobilization from any of the Military Services Transition Offices and DOL One-Stop Career Centers.

In addition to the DOL Employment Workshops, the Military Services provide a vast array of additional employment seminars and one-on-one counseling to Service members. This extensive assistance covers resume and cover letter writing, information about electronic job banks and Internet access to automated employment tools (resume writer, cover letter, and job assistance tutorials), tools on salary negotiation; location of job fairs, details about Federal employment workshops and seminars, opportunities for post military employment networking, relocation assistance, information about Government partnerships for employment and training, benefits for members who are involuntarily separated, employer panels, and information about Veterans benefits (including disability benefits).

The second component of TAP is the DOL TAP Employment Workshop. Attendance is voluntary for Active Duty Service members and their spouses, with the exception of the Marine Corps, which has made attending the DOL Employment Workshop mandatory. The curriculum, facilitators, workshop materials, data collection and analysis related to the employment workshops are the responsibility of DOL. Service members receive information on labor market conditions, assessing individual skills and competencies, how to write effective resumes and cover letters, proper interviewing techniques, and the best methods of searching for jobs. They also learn how to use electronic employment data banks. Finally, they get information addressing the special employment needs of those separating with a disability.

The third component of TAP is the VA Benefits Briefing. Attendance at the VA Benefits Briefing is voluntary for Active Component Service members. The briefing addresses education and training, health care, home loans, life insurance, vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E), disability benefits, burial benefits, and dependents' and survivors' benefits.

Demobilizing National Guard and Reserve Service members receive a VA briefing which also includes information on Disabled Transition Assistance Program (DTAP). The materials, information, counselors, and all data collection and analysis related to the VA Benefits Briefings are the responsibility of the VA.

The fourth component of TAP is the Disabled Transition Assistance Program. Attendance at DTAP is voluntary for Active Component Service members and is a separate briefing. DTAP is for servicemembers and veterans who have, or suspect they have a service-connected disability or an injury or illness that was aggravated by service. During the DTAP briefing, VA addresses VR&E, sometimes referred to as Chapter 31. DTAP addresses the five tracks to employment: re-employment, rapid access to employment, employment through long term services, independent living services, and self employment. DTAP also addresses other services such as medical, dental, optical, mental health treatment, special adapted housing, vet centers, vocational/educational counseling and special hiring authorities for Federal employment. VA provides all materials and information, counselors, data collection, and any analysis related to DTAP.

We also cannot overlook the many options for Federal employment such as Veterans Recruitment Appointment (VRA), Veterans Employment Opportunities Act (VEOA), Appointment of 30% or More Disabled Veterans, Federal Career Intern Program (FCIP), SBA, and the National Veterans Business Development Corporation Programs for those who want to start their own business or franchise.

Finally, as a result of recommendations from the VA's Returning Global War on Terror Heroes Task Force, DoD has established a goal for TAP and DTAP attendance of 85% for separating Service members and demobilizing National Guard and Reserve Forces. To meet this goal, we have tasked the services to allow Service members to attend these sessions so they have access to the employment resources they need to help them transition into the workforce or into an educational institution. In partnership with the DOL and VA, a lifelong learning approach to transition assistance is being developed, to include the redesign and modernization of existing TAP curriculum and course objectives for the four components of TAP. TAP will be designed into a "purple" solution for transition assistance using highly interactive features hosted on the TurboTAP website and multi-media mobile learning technologies (m-learning) to deliver program modules as standalone, web-based, and hybrid courses with a blend of web-based and traditional classroom instruction. The TAP will also provide instructors and facilitators with access to the latest interactive technologies and teaching methodologies to maximize student participation and increase effectiveness and value of course curriculum, regardless of delivery location. This modernization of the TAP programs will provide global 24/7 access and increased quality control of TAP and enable commanders to meet the 85% goal while enhancing the Service members' and their spouses' learning experience.

TurboTAP

There is much concern about how we can better serve the National Guard and Reserve Components coming from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). As I've stated earlier, we are leveraging technology in its many forms to change how the National Guard and Reserve members transition out of the military, in addition to serving as a valuable tool for the Active Component Service members as well. This leveraging has resulted in what we call "TurboTAP".

When TAP was originally developed in 1990, we did not design it with the needs of the National Guard and Reserves in mind. Their mission has changed dramatically since 9–11 and the requirements, with respect to TAP, warrant a fresh look. To better meet the needs of the Guard and Reserves, DoD, with the cooperation and collaboration of the Military Services, National Guard Bureau (NGB), DOL, VA, ED, SBA, and the National Veterans Business Development Corporation, has designed a dynamic, automated web-based system for delivery of transition assistance and related information. The TurboTAPweb portal, launched in 2007, allows each Service member, regardless of component, to obtain a lifelong account and a tailored Individual Transition Plan based on their transition needs which can also connect them to information on military and veterans benefits, many of which have significant cash value. Examples include the Montgomery GI Bill, the Thrift Savings Plan and the Savings Deposit Program.

This portal architecture is the backbone of the updated DoD TAP process for National Guard and Reserve Service members. Usability, flexibility, adaptability, and

individual customization are the keys to successful implementation of this new technology-enabled process. The goal for this system is to increase Service member participation, satisfaction, and ultimately, enhance awareness of military benefits for recruitment, retention, and transition.

We continue to be encouraged by the possibilities for TurboTAP. Military personnel can access a comprehensive Transition Guide for Guard and Reserve and a Pre-separation Guide for the Active Component, obtain employment information, build a resume online, conduct a job search, contact and locate their local One-Stop Career Center for employment assistance, locate the nearest VA Regional Office, Vet Center, and Medical Center, use helpful checklists reminding troops of key things to do prior to leaving the service, be connected to information about VA benefits, services, and programs, and the list goes on.

TurboTAP better meets the needs of the National Guard, Reserve, and Active Component Service members and their families because the website gives them the tools to connect and access the information to meet their needs when they are ready—present or future. This is a 21st century approach to delivering individualized information and benefits to Service members and families. We plan to make the transition to an online transaction, much like banking and bill paying have become. The success and accountability of the transition will be managed online versus a form being hand carried to a personnel file. As we continue to expand the capabilities of the website, we will solicit your approval and legislative support.

The site can be accessed at www.TurboTAP.org.

Outreach, Counseling, and Decision-Making Tools

There are multiple "high-tech, high-touch" initiatives, both online and in person, that exist to better serve our troops and families with their transition, financial readiness, and benefits awareness needs.

In the Fall of 2007, *DoD TurboTAP Mobile Training Teams* began training the National Guard and Reserves. These highly specialized outreach teams travel to State level deployment support and reintegration programs at the request of National Guard and Reserve Component leaders to connect Service members to the benefits they have earned through military service. The TurboTAP Mobile Training Teams provide information about transition assistance, service-related benefits, and related on-demand financial counseling services. By the end of 2009, DoD's goal is to have the TurboTAP Mobile Training Teams fully integrated into deployment support, transition assistance, and financial awareness programs in all 50 states. By coupling financial assistance with transition assistance, Service members will better understand how their benefits can help them reach their military career, personal and family goals and provide economic security throughout their lifetime.

DoD is expanding and enhancing its network of financial professionals to provide financial counseling and planning services to meet the needs of all our Service members and families, ranging from budgeting and debt consolidation to advanced financial planning. To augment our own network of contracted financial professionals, DoD is building and expanding relationships with United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extension educational institutions, community colleges, universities, non-profit financial readiness partner organizations, financial planning associations, and DoD on-installation banks and credit unions to provide our troops with a variety of financial planning and counseling resources. A key to the success of expanding resources and partnerships is the train-the-trainer program being developed by DoD. The websites and multimedia mobile learning technologies (m-learning) will deliver train-the-trainer program modules as stand—alone, web-based, and hybrid courses with a blend of web-based and traditional classroom instruction. Benefits awareness and an understanding of how these benefits fit into a larger financial wellness plan can act as a powerful retention tool, or, should the member still decide to leave the service, can assist tremendously with the decision-making process for a second career.

Additionally, at the request of National Guard and Reserve units, the Department is dispatching consultants with financial readiness specialties to attend special events such as drill weekends, reintegration, pre-deployment, and wellness fairs, to meet with Guard and Reserve members and families and provide education on many aspects of financial readiness and transition.

One of the newest key outreach and benefits awareness initiatives is the Joint Family Support and Assistance Program (JFSAP). Originally started in 15 States and now projected to expand to all 50 (to include the four territories) by the end of 2009, the JFSAP facilitates partnerships among Federal, state and local organizations, builds benefits and transition assistance outreach for deploying units, and resources a vital state by state database for around the clock family assistance. Through partnerships with such groups as the Red Cross, JFSAP will help reach

Service members and their families within each State, especially the geographically dispersed families of the National Guard and Reserve, to ensure they are aware of and can easily be connected to benefits within their area. In this manner, we can contribute to the financial well-being of all troops and families, and in keeping with the new DoD philosophy, leverage this awareness as a retention tool.

Regarding financial tools, DoD is committed to providing our Service members and families with those that will enable them to truly enhance their financial wellness and economic security. DoD is building a catalog of resources through technology, expanding online counseling and mentoring tools, and researching and providing more decisionmaking calculators for financial career decisions to help troops address the question that all Service members eventually have to confront: "Should I go or should I stay?"

Three of the key online resources sponsored by DoD that contain transition, financial, and benefits information are Military OneSource (www.militaryonesource.com), Military Home Front (www.militaryhomefront.dod.mil), and TurboTap (www.turbotap.org).

Military OneSource provides support services 24/7 for all troops and their families, including the Guard and Reserves, regardless of their mobilization status, and offers free, convenient access to confidential resource and referral support. When a Service member or spouse calls or emails, a master's level consultant provides assistance. Military OneSource is especially beneficial to those geographically separated from installation services or those who are unable to seek assistance during traditional working hours. The "Money Matters" section of Military OneSource contains financial calculators, DVDs, CDs, and informational pamphlets to assist a family in its financial plan. Additionally, Military OneSource now features telephonic financial counseling to augment those programs provided by the services.

Military Home Front is DoD's "Google" for quality of life information. As a sister site to Military OneSource, MilitaryHOMEFRONT is the library of DoD information on quality of life issues—to include transition and financial readiness—useful to installation staff and policy makers. In Fiscal Year 2007, there were over 1.7 million visits to the site.

MilitaryHOMEFRONT, in coordination with the JFSAP, has introduced the *MySTATE* database (www.mystate.mhf.DoD.mil), a powerful new tool providing State and local Service members and their families across the Nation with access to various organizations and businesses that offer special discounts and services specifically for military personnel and their families. MySTATE includes State directories, locations of programs and services, maps, directions and much more. The website also gives users the opportunity to provide feedback on the organizations or businesses listed.

Credentialing and Certification

While in the service, Service members receive extensive, high-quality training in a wide range of military professional fields (referred to as MOS's and Rates). The training, combined with military work experience, contributes significantly to a highly skilled workforce. Making the conversion from military occupations and skill sets to civilian jobs and certification presents challenges for transitioning military members. It is critical that DoD assist these troops in overcoming these challenges since credentials help pave the way to immediate employment in the civilian world and long-term economic security

In response, DoD, in partnership with the DOL, formed the Credentialing Working Group to address the issue of the conversion of military training and experience into nationally recognized industry accepted certifications. The Working Group is carrying out its mission by expanding current information, leveraging assistance resources, and promoting uniformity and reciprocity across the States with regard to certification, licensing, and apprenticeship to assist and prepare individuals to transition into civilian life with credentials for high-wage high-demand jobs that can provide economic security.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our Service members and their families have sacrificed much in support of the Global War on Terror. Our military is experiencing a dynamic deployment cycle of unprecedented levels. It is DoD's duty to provide our troops with the decisionmaking tools they need to help them with the key financial and transition decision points in their lives to enable them to execute their individual career and economic security plans. The new DoD Office of PF&T, in partnership with other Federal and private agencies, will get us there.

On behalf of the men and women in the military today and their families, I thank you and the members of the Committee for your steadfast support during these demanding times.

Statement of Kevin Crowley, Deputy Director, Manpower and Personnel, National Guard Bureau, U.S. Department of Defense

Introduction

Chairman Hall, Ranking Member Lamborn and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of Chief of the National Guard Bureau, H. Steven Blum, I am here to testify before on the effectiveness of the Veterans Benefits Administration's outreach efforts. I greatly appreciate your commitment to veterans and current members of the Armed Services and am grateful for the chance to testify regarding veterans outreach for the National Guard.

In the National Guard, we recognize that our people are our most valuable resource. Accordingly, we understand the importance of assuring that our Soldiers and Airmen returning from deployments receive the support they need to continue to serve in the National Guard and effectively transition to civilian life.

NGB Interactions with the Veterans Benefits Administration

In the fall of 2004, LTG Blum met with the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs to develop a strategy to support National Guard members who had been deployed. As a result a working group was established that developed a memorandum of agreement which was signed by LTG Blum and the Department of Veterans Affairs, Under Secretary for Benefits and Under Secretary for Health. In addition to the national memorandum of agreement, 48 states and territories have signed local memorandum of understandings that include the Regional Veterans Benefits Administration offices.

Since May 2005, 62 National Guard Transition Assistance Advisors have been jointly trained by the National Guard and Department of Veterans Affairs. Transition Assistance Advisors work at the State Joint Force Headquarters and are responsible for educating National Guard members and their families on Veterans benefits. Transition Assistance Advisors also act as a conduit between the National Guard and local Veterans Affairs personnel. Of the 62 Transition Assistance Advisors 57 are Veterans, 30 of which are disabled Veterans, and the remaining Transition Assistance Advisors are spouses of active National Guard members.

The Transition Assistance Advisor initial training was held in February 2006 at the Veterans Benefits Administration Training Academy in Baltimore. This training was conducted jointly between the National Guard Bureau and the Department of Veterans Affairs and covered basic information on all Veterans Benefit Administration programs preparing Transition Assistance Advisors to act as an advocate for National Guard members and a liaison to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Since that initial training, the National Guard Bureau and Department of Veterans Affairs have conducted annual refresher training that includes representatives from the Veterans Benefit Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and State Directors of Veterans Affairs. Annual training is supplemented by monthly phone calls jointly hosted by the National Guard Bureau and Veterans Affairs Central Office with representatives from the Veterans Benefits Administration on-call to answer questions. This training is further supported by a jointly written and published Transition Assistance Advisor quarterly newsletter that includes up-to-date information on Veterans Benefit Administration issues. We were pleased in January 2008 when the State Directors of Veterans Affairs also joined our newsletter to continue to emphasizing state benefits.

What the National Guard is doing to assure returning service members know about their VA Benefits

When National Guard members return from an overseas deployment, they learn about Veterans benefits available to them through various means. These include briefings during the demobilization process, state reintegration programs, post deployment health reassessments, and numerous other state sponsored events. We believe that the most effective briefings are those delivered locally. First, it allows National Guard members to follow up with the same individuals who briefed them. Second, it allows family members to be present, and we find that Guard families play a pivotal role in the education of our Airmen and Soldiers. Families also play a key role in National Guard members following through on applying for health benefits.

At the National Guard Bureau, we continue to educate our Transitional Assistance Advisors and National Guard leadership on Veterans benefits. Additionally, in April 2008, we published our first Warrior Support newsletter that is specifically directed at the benefits of National Guard members. This newsletter is distributed through the local Transition Assistance Advisors who add local contact information.

Each month, Transition Assistance Advisors submit a monthly report. At the request of the Department of Veterans Affairs, in January 2008, the report was modified to include referral information to the Veterans Benefit Administration, Veterans Health Administration and Vet Centers. This information will be used by the National Guard Bureau and Department of Veterans Affairs to measure the effectiveness of our education and outreach programs and to make modifications and improvements where necessary.

Best practices in the states or at NGB for reintegration of returning servicemembers that we have seen

There are numerous examples where the National Guard has partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs at the local level to deliver innovative programs that educate National Guard members. We believe the Beyond the Yellow Ribbon initiative will continue to improve the collaboration between local National Guard and Department of Veteran Affairs personnel.

Conclusion

Few areas, if any, are more important to the National Guard Bureau as veterans outreach programs. We have appreciated the support we have received from the Department of Veterans Affair, and we thank them for their service to all Veterans.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these important matters with Congress and I look forward to working with your Committees to ensure that these programs remain robust. I would like to thank the committee for its continued support of the men and women of the Armed Forces.

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
June 2, 2008

Ms. Diana M. Rubens
Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Field Operations
Veterans Benefits Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue
Washington DC 20420

Dear Ms. Rubens:

In reference to our House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs hearing on "Examining the Effectiveness on VBA Outreach Efforts" on May 22, 2008, I would appreciate it if you could answer the enclosed hearing questions as soon as possible.

In an effort to reduce printing costs, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, in cooperation with the Joint Committee on Printing, is implementing some formatting changes for material for all full committee and subcommittee hearings. Therefore, it would be appreciated if you could provide your answers consecutively on letter size paper, single-spaced. In addition, please restate the question in its entirety before the answer.

Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your response to Ms. Megan Williams by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 225–3608.

Sincerely,

John J. Hall
Chairman

Questions for the Record
The Honorable John J. Hall, Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
May 22, 2008
Examining the Effectiveness of VBA Outreach Efforts

Question 1: At the hearing you said you would pursue this opportunity. Did you find out why with the JEC, BEC, HEC, and SOC, there are no links to the VA homepage on the DoD websites?

Response: The Department of Defense (DoD) currently has a link to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Web site on the DoD DefenseLink Web site under the "Web sites" dropdown menu. Two other military websites Navy.com and MyArmyBenefits.us.army.mil have links to the VA Web site. A link is also provided on MilitaryOneSource.com.

The VA/DoD Benefits Working Group, a subgroup of the Benefits Executive Council (BEC), is working to provide links to the VA Web site on all the main DoD Web sites. The BEC will ensure the links are placed on the appropriate sites.

Question 2(a): At the hearing, the DAV mentioned the biennial plan for outreach activities due to Congress on October 1, 2007, what has happened to that report?

Response: The outreach report required by Public Law (PL) 109–233 is due to Congress on December 1, 2008. The Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Policy and Planning has the lead role in coordinating and preparing the report.

Question 2(b): DAV also mentioned plans for a 2008 National Veteran Survey. Has the process begun?

Response: The National Survey of Veterans was awarded by the Office of Policy and Planning on May 28, 2008, to Westat, Inc. of Rockville, Maryland.

Question 3(a): Can you tell me how many of those briefed during the last five years of TAP classes were active duty, national guard, reserve, survivors or other family members?

Response: Prior to fiscal year (FY) 2007, VA collected data only on active duty and reserve/guard attendees. In FY 2007, VA began collecting the information by type of briefing and included family members.

Total VA Benefits Briefings (FY 2004–FY 2006)

Fiscal Year	Active Duty	Reserve/Guard	Total
2004	188,208	88,366	276,574
2005	208,006	118,658	326,664
2006	299,984	93,361	393,345

VA Transition Assistance Program (TAP) Briefings

Fiscal Year	Active Duty	Reserve/Guard	Family Members	Total
2007	145,846	15,662	3,345	164,853
FYTD 2008*	98,476	12,218	2,109	112,803

*Through May 2008.

Other VA Benefits Briefings (Non-TAP)

Fiscal Year	Active Duty	Reserve/Guard	Family Members	Total
2007	94,777	27,439	9,786	132,002
FYTD 2008*	54,673	31,396	1,266	87,335

*Through May 2008.

Question 3(b): Why have the numbers gone down significantly between 2006 and 2007?

Response: The number of military benefits briefings conducted in FY 2007 declined for a number of reasons.

- DoD closed a number of military bases in FY 2007. As a result of fewer military bases, the number of briefings scheduled/conducted in FY 2007 was less than the number in FY 2006.
- During FY 2007, DoD increased the deployment period from 12 months to 15 months. Many servicemembers who would have separated in FY 2007 were extended into FY 2008.
- The deployment of additional units ("surge") placed more soldiers on "stop loss." This "stop loss" in FY 07 reduced the number of servicemembers attending benefits briefings.

Question 3(c): Why are the numbers you reported for briefings and attendees about double of those reported by DOL and DoD for the same time period?

Response: The numbers reported by VA in the May 22 testimony were for briefings for regular active duty military members, pre- and post-deployment briefings for Reserve and National Guard members, and briefings conducted overseas. Those numbers included not only VA's TAP to prepare retiring or separating military personnel for return to civilian life and disabled transition assistance program (DTAP) briefings for servicemembers who may be released because of disability, but also other VA benefits briefings. Other VA benefits briefings include briefings such as Commanders' Calls on VA's educational programs and VA's loan guaranty program.

Question 4: In examining the TAP program, it was brought to the Subcommittee's attention that one of the major problems with conducting TAP briefings is that the VBA personnel don't always show up for their portion of the briefing. How do the regional offices ensure that they are present at all of the TAP briefings and how do you handle it when your staff are no-shows or cancel?

Response: A TAP Steering Committee is responsible for the ongoing coordination of TAP activities both in the United States and overseas. The Committee includes representatives from the four military service branches. If a VA employee does not show up for a briefing, the local Transition Assistance Office would contact the regional office of jurisdiction to address the issue. If the issue could not be resolved at the local level, the TAP Steering Committee would notify the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) central office who would intercede in the matter. To ensure VA representatives are present at all TAP/DTAP briefings, the local transition assistance office manager coordinates the schedule requirements with the local regional office.

Question 5: At the hearing you mentioned that you were developing a process to provide unique benefits briefings to survivors and for caregivers of the severely injured who will need assistance in accessing the additional supportive resources, such as aid and attendance or housing adaptation. Can you tell me more about that process, its strategic plan and timeline?

Response: VA has implemented special outreach programs for veterans' survivors and caregivers of severely injured servicemembers. Casualty assistance officers from the local VA regional office visit family members of service members who died on active duty and assist them in applying for VA benefits. These visits are coordinated with the military casualty assistance officers. A special brochure targeted at surviving family members outlines our benefits and services. The benefits application process is streamlined through the use of a simplified one-page application form faxed to the VA Philadelphia Regional Office and Insurance Center. All survivor claims are processed within 48 hours of receipt of required documents. Because family members are in an acute stage of grief during the initial visit, a 6-month followup letter is sent to ensure the family is aware of the full range of VA benefits available to them. Additional outreach is scheduled as needed.

VBA liaisons are assigned to military treatment facilities to support our severely injured service members and provide VA benefits information and assistance. They meet with the service members and their caregivers to provide information about the full range of VBA services, including aid and attendance, specially adapted housing benefits, education benefits, and vocational rehabilitation. The liaisons assist service members in completing their claims and in gathering supporting evidence.

Additionally, each VA regional office has a designated Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) coordinator for outreach activities. This coordinator is the primary VBA point of contact for severely disabled service members and their caregivers. VBA has distributed guidance to field staff to ensure the roles and functions of OEF/OIF coordinators are fully understood and proper coordination of benefits and services takes place at the local level.

Question 6: Does VA track the response rate generated from the VADS mailings it sends out? If so, what is it?

Response: VA has an expansive outreach program. We have no means to track whether a claim was made in response to the veterans assistance at discharge system (VADS) mailing or another outreach effort.

Question 7: It seems VA was having success with its Office of Seamless Transition and was establishing a better working relationship with VBA, VHA, and DoD. Why did VA close that office?

Response: The Office of Seamless Transition is not dissolved; rather, it is reorganized to best allow for the operation and management of the component parts. The component parts evolved as the mission expanded, and the logical placement of the work became evident. The Office of Seamless Transition has been reorganized into the following three categories: policy, care management, and outreach.

Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Executive Director Office (Policy): The Under Secretary for Health (USH) established the OEF/OIF Program Office and the Executive Director position. The Executive Director serves as an advisor to the USH on issues regarding the transition and continuity of care for OEF/OIF veterans seeking health care in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The office also provides strategic direction for policy and coordination of the transition of health care services and works with the Department of Defense (DoD) and other agencies to ensure a smooth continuum of care for service members as they become veterans. This office collaborates with other VA offices, including the Office of Policy and Planning (OPP) and the Veterans Benefit Administration (VBA) to specify remedies for barriers and challenges as they are identified. The office also serves as the USH's daily contact point for Senior Oversight Committee activities.

Care Management and Social Work Service (Care Management): VA created this office, within the Office of Patient Care Services (PCS), in October 2007 in response to a need for clinical case management of OEF/OIF service members, veterans, and their families. This realignment brought together several key clinical programs engaged in coordinating and managing care for OEF/OIF service members and veterans. Care management and social work staff work closely with the staff from polytrauma, rehabilitation, nursing, and mental health services, as these programs are all under the single Veterans Health Administration (VHA) organizational structure of the PCS office. Military liaisons, VBA and our internal social work and nursing staff members are responsible for patient issues.

This new office's mission is to coordinate patients' health care and to partner with VBA in addressing their benefits. OEF/OIF coordinators at each VA medical center and benefits office coordinate with DoD discharge staff to facilitate a continuum of care and services at locations nearest the veteran's residence after their military discharge. This coordination ensures that service members and veterans are receiving patient-centered, integrated care and benefits. These essential programs now work in concert at every organizational level, including the national level, to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of our OEF/OIF service members and veterans.

The VHA/DoD Coordination Office (Outreach): This office provides a national focus on VHA's systematic efforts to identify new veterans and to provide information on services available to them. This component works closely with DoD and the Reserves and National Guard. Starting in May 2008, the VA/DoD Coordination Office began making phone calls to 15,000 veterans who may have a need for care management, and more than 500,000 separating service members who may not be aware of VA benefits to which they are entitled. The VA/DoD Coordination Office also coordinates efforts with Reserve and National Guard units on DoD's post-deployment health reassessment (PDHRA) program. During the period of November 2005 through May 2008, VHA staff have supported over 1,400 PDHRA events and DoD's 24/7 PDHRA call center. These Reserve and National Guard PDHRA activities have generated over 60,000 referrals to VA medical centers and vet centers.

Question 8: In the JEC Annual Report there are several special categories of veterans with exposure issues that VA notes it provides outreach. This included Agent Orange, Gulf War, SHAD, and Edgewood. Why has VA not included the women from Ft. McClellan in its efforts; knowing how much less likely women are to identify with VA programs?

Response: Women veterans who were stationed at Ft. McClellan have recently expressed concerns about exposure to biological or chemical agents. VA contacted DoD for any information regarding possible exposure and was advised that no women were tested or exposed to chemical agents while stationed at Ft. McClellan. If DoD does inform VA that a service member was exposed to chemical agents, a letter is sent to them explaining how to apply for benefits. VA has designated women veteran coordinators (WVC) at each VBA regional office to actively conduct outreach activities to women service members and veterans. The WVCs are available to provide benefits counseling and assist in obtaining VA services.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
June 2, 2008

Ms. Leslye Arsht
Deputy Under Secretary of Defense
Military Community and Family Policy
Military OneSource
Department of Defense
1300 Defense Pentagon 30844
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Ms. Arsht:

In reference to our House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs hearing on "Examining the Effectiveness on VBA Outreach Efforts" on May 22, 2008, I would appreciate it if you could answer the enclosed hearing questions as soon as possible.

In an effort to reduce printing costs, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, in cooperation with the Joint Committee on Printing, is implementing some formatting changes for material for all full committee and subcommittee hearings. Therefore,

it would be appreciated if you could provide your answers consecutively on letter size paper, single-spaced. In addition, please restate the question in its entirety before the answer.

Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your response to Ms. Megan Williams by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 225–3608.

Sincerely,

JOHN J. HALL
Chairman

Questions for the Record
The Honorable John J. Hall, Chairman
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
May 22, 2008
Examining the Effectiveness of VBA Outreach Efforts
Linking DoD Web Sites to VA Homepage

Question 1: At the hearing we discussed the DoD websites (Defenselink, Military OneSource, and Military Homefront) that offer supportive services to service members and their families, but found that they don't easily link to the VA homepage. The Chairman asked if that would be possible. Is it?

Answer: Yes, that is possible. We will link TurboTAP and MilitaryHOMEFRONT to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) website homepage. We are working with the Armed Forces Information System to link Defenselink to the VA homepage.

VA Benefits Training for Military OneSource Operators

Question 2: At the hearing, we discussed what happened when the Subcommittee called the Military OneSource (MOS) toll free line and asked about veterans' benefits, and we were told to contact the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for any information, but we were given a toll free line for VA's Health Revenue facility, which was the wrong number. You mentioned that the Department of Defense (DoD) does provide training to Military OneSource operators on VA benefits. Can you provide the protocol for this training and who gives it? What kind of quality checks do you do on Military OneSource referral information?

Answer: Please be assured that VA's Health Revenue Center is the proper source for veteran's benefits information and that the correct number was provided to the caller. To obtain this information, we used our internal recovery process, a tool to recover information and provide quality control checks on answers that have been provided to callers. We were able to access this information by tracking the calls pertaining to VA.

There are two VA toll-free numbers that provide benefit assistance: 877–222–8387 for the Health Revenue Center and 800–827–1000 for VA's Telephone Assistance Service. MOS consultants refer these numbers to callers seeking information about VA benefits, pay, Medicare Part D forms, VA health care enrollment, locations, directions, etc. The MOS consultant will stay on the line with the caller, if desired. MOS consultants also have access to VA contact information via the VA website and have resource materials at their desks with these numbers.

The MOS staff is provided training on the use of the VA website (*https://iris.va.gov/scripts/iris.cfg/php.exe/enduser/cci/phonenbrs.php*) as one of the primary reference points for VA callers. The Department and the military services provide training to ensure up-to-date and accurate information is being presented. All training materials are reviewed on a quarterly basis.

If it is learned after the fact that the caller was dissatisfied and if the caller has provided his/her name, MOS will initiate a recovery process based on the person's name to determine what information was incorrect and will then provide an additional resource. If the caller has provided his/her name and telephone number, the MOS consultant follows up within three days to ensure the resource was appropriate and met the needs of the requester. In this particular case, the call was anonymous; therefore, it wasn't possible to initiate a recovery process based on the caller's name or to follow up.

Prior to providing referral information to an individual, the consultant validates the resources. If the MOS consultant is providing a "warm handoff," the MOS con-

sultant will contact the resource, describe the request and stay on the line with the caller until the caller agrees it is okay for the MOS consultant to hang up.

Possibility of VA OneSource Sister Site

Question 3: Could there be more information on VA benefits integrated into Military OneSource or does VA need a "Veteran OneSource" counterpart?

Answer: Military OneSource is available to all active duty, Guard and Reserve members and their families with resources to manage the mobile military lifestyle. As troops transition to Veterans, a warm handoff to the Department of Veterans Affairs is arranged if the caller agrees. The consultant will stay on the line to ensure the referral will provide the requested assistance.

If the caller prefers for the information to be sent to them, it is researched and provided within 72 hours of the initial call. After the information is sent, the consultant will follow up with the caller and ask if the information was received, if it was helpful and what follow up questions or concerns may be addressed.

Joint Executive Council oversight of TAP

Question 4: What is the Joint Executive Council oversight doing regarding TAP attendance and ensuring that VA knows when the briefings are taking place and why was TAP data removed from its 2007 Annual Report?

Answer: The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Task Force on Returning Global War on Terror Heroes examined transition assistance program (TAP) attendance, and as a result, Secretary Gates pledged to the President that the Department of Defense (DoD) would increase attendance at TAP and VA Disabled TAP (DTAP) sessions to 85% of those separating Service members and demobilizing National Guard or Reserve members. The Joint Executive Council (JEC) will continue to reflect this commitment to increasing TAP attendance in future Joint Strategic Plans.

DoD strongly encourages attendance at the four separate parts of the TAP process:

1. Pre-separation counseling, conducted by DoD, is mandatory by law for all separating or transitioning Service members and provides a broad overview of transition resources available. During the counseling, Service members can decide which topics they would like to learn more about through formal TAP classes. While Service members, other than Marines, can opt-out, they are encouraged to take advantage of all of these sessions.
2. Attendance to the Department of Labor (DOL) Employment Workshop, while not mandatory, is very highly encouraged by DoD. DOL tracks attendance by both servicemembers and spouses and reports those numbers to DoD on a quarterly basis. National Guard and Reserve members are also provided a Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act briefing to ensure they understand their rights and the responsibilities of their employers as they transition back to their jobs. DOL workshops are scheduled by installation TAP managers or individual units and are made available on a frequent, recurring basis at appropriate intervals on installations or at demobilization points to accommodate the flow of transitioning Service members.
3. The VA benefits briefing covers VA benefits and the claims process for departing Service members. As with the DOL workshops, attendance to VA benefit briefings is strongly encouraged. The VA provides attendance reports to DoD on a recurring basis.
4. The VA DTAP provides more detail about the special benefits afforded to those transitioning servicemembers who may have a Service-connected disability. Reports on attendance are provided to DoD. Generally, coordination for both the VA benefits briefings and DTAP is done on the local level, working with VA Regional Offices to ensure these sessions are scheduled at appropriate times on installations and at demobilization sites.

DoD is working in concert with VA and DOL to overcome the challenges which can disrupt attendance at any of TAP's four components. In many cases, demobilizing National Guard and Reserve members are afforded precious few days to demobilize, which can affect attendance at formal TAP classes. Additionally, operational requirements may keep a Service member on station longer than anticipated, which can also limit the number of available days to out-process prior to separating. Finally, physical attendance at a TAP class, which has been considered the optimal method to deliver necessary TAP information, may not be the preferred method of receiving information by younger Service members.

Increasing access to TAP information through multiple delivery methodologies (i.e.—interactive websites available 24/7, info reminders via e-mail or cell phones/ blackberries, and interactive Compact Disks and Digital Video Disks) would be a force-multiplier in getting TAP information into the hands of the separating Service member and would deliver an invaluable complement to formal TAP classes in a format in which younger Service members routinely and comfortably operate. In this spirit of increasing access, DoD, DOL, and VA have collaborated to launch TurboTAP (www.turboTAP.org), an online repository of TAP information which allows the user to establish a lifelong account featuring information tailored to the Service member's interests and personal transitioning needs. TurboTAP is not designed to replace the formal TAP process; it is provided as a supplement to which even a veteran, having long departed from the military, can refer back to review and learn about separation programs and policies.

Finally, to transform the old paradigm for TAP where Service members are educated on resources and programs close to the end of their service, DoD has embraced a new philosophy where Service members will be educated on their available benefits and transition resources early on and throughout their careers. Adopting this practice, Service members will be better-informed and make more educated decisions about their transition from military service; doing this has already proven to actually increase retention. The Office of Personal Finance and Transition, the newest office within DoD, is dedicated to combining the personal finance and transition assistance programs, looking at both programs holistically, and communicating the benefits and resources for each throughout a Service member's career. This, in turn, would mitigate those instances where transitioning Service members may want to return home rather than attend classes following a deployment.

In response to your question about the absence of TAP data from the 2007 Annual Report, we are working with VA to include current information in their 2008 report. The VA Office of Seamless Transition addressed the TAP data issue in the last report submitted in 2006.

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Washington, DC.
June 2, 2008

Mr. Kevin Crowley
Deputy Director
Manpower Personnel
National Guard Bureau
U.S. Department of Defense
1300 Defense Pentagon 30844
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Mr. Crowley:

In reference to our House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs hearing on "Examining the Effectiveness on VBA Outreach Effort's" on May 22, 2008, I would appreciate it if you could answer the enclosed hearing questions as soon as possible.

In an effort to reduce printing costs, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, in cooperation with the Joint Committee on Printing, is implementing some formatting changes for material for all full committee and subcommittee hearings. Therefore, it would be appreciated if you could provide your answers consecutively on letter size paper, single-spaced. In addition, please restate the question in its entirety before the answer.

Due to the delay in receiving mail, please provide your response to Ms. Megan Williams by fax at (202) 225–2034. If you have any questions, please call (202) 225–3608.

Sincerely,

JOHN J. HALL
Chairman

Questions for the Record
The Honorable John J. Hall, Chairman,
Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs,
House Veterans' Affairs Committee
May 22, 2008

Examining the Effectiveness of VBA Outreach Efforts

Question: At the hearing you offered to submit the following information for the record: You mentioned that the advisors submit a monthly report and have included VBA referral information. Do you know how many Guardsmen transitioned and how many were referred to VA?

Answer: For the month of April 2008 (the first month with all states/territories reporting), there were 781 referrals from a National Guard transition assistance advisor (TAA) to the Veterans Benefits Administration. This number just represents the month of April 2008. Since this is a new report, we believe this number may be low. Some of our TAAs are new; however, reporting methodologies are in their infancy. We will continue to track these numbers.