

injuries, Congress directed VA to establish specialized centers for rehabilitative care. VA's four lead Polytrauma Rehabilitation Centers are essential to meeting the needs of the most severely injured veterans and their families.

In the budget before us today, Chairman CONRAD and his colleagues have provided over \$300 million specifically for meeting the needs of these veterans and service members who are in need of the comprehensive health care and rehabilitative services VA delivers through their Polytrauma Centers.

This level of funding will enable VA to conduct assessments and screenings of troops for traumatic brain injury, provide veterans with intensive comprehensive TBI/polytrauma rehabilitation, and most importantly, support intensive case management for veterans with TBI and other injuries when they return to their communities and continue the rehabilitation process.

Recent reports by the VA inspector general and others have illustrated that case management is a key element in the process of assisting these veterans achieve the fullest possible recoveries. Funding VA so that it can provide the continuum of care needed by the most severely injured service members is imperative if we are to truly fulfill our obligation to take care of our troops and veterans.

I am also very pleased that the budget resolution before us is making a long-overdue investment in mental health care.

Studies published in some of the most prestigious journals have found that a third of those seeking VA care are coming for mental health concerns, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. We do not know the full magnitude of this need, as many returning service members have yet to seek care from VA.

As chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, my goal is to make sure that VA is doing everything possible to guarantee that each and every veteran who needs mental health care—whether in North Dakota, Vermont, or Hawaii—can receive that care.

I remind my colleagues that so much of the time, battle wounds manifest themselves as invisible wounds—wounds which cannot be seen but are every bit as devastating as physical wounds. PTSD affects not only a veteran's mental status, it affects his or her physical well-being as well. It impacts the veteran's relationships, his or her ability to work, and to interact in society. VA must catch readjustment issues early before they turn into full-blown PTSD, and this budget resolution would enable VA to take a serious approach towards making this happen.

When we talk about the mental health needs of veterans, we cannot deny the reality that substance abuse is prevalent among many veterans. We know that many veterans with PTSD turn to drugs or alcohol in order to self-medicate. Yet the administration does not seem to want to be in the

business of helping veterans with substance abuse problems. VA used to provide an intensive month-long program to treat substance abuse. Today, most VA substance abuse programs run for 2 weeks—not nearly enough time to put a veteran truly on the road to recovery. Again, this budget resolution provides funds for comprehensive inpatient substance abuse care. This is a very real investment in VA mental health care.

On the benefits side, the current claims inventory and the time it takes to process a claim is unacceptable. Veterans deserve a timely and accurate response to their claims. It is obvious that Chairman CONRAD agrees, as this budget resolution takes a major step toward responding to this very real problem by providing appropriate funding for VA to use to employ additional claims adjudicators.

There are 30,000 more claims pending right now than last year this time. This constitutes an 8 percent increase. As the veterans population continues to age and new veterans come home from Iraq and Afghanistan, this trend of increased claims will continue. Given that it takes nearly 2 years for a new VA employee to start fully contributing to the bottom line, now is the time for new staff to be hired and trained to help reduce this caseload.

Just 2 weeks ago, the Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a hearing on the VA claims adjudication process. During the hearing, VA witnesses testified to the nearly 400,000 ratings claims inventory and the 175 days it takes to process a claim for benefits. We must insist that VA have no more than 250,000 claims in the pipeline at once, and that it take not more than 125 days to adjudicate a claim. VA clearly needs additional resources to hire the employees needed to adjudicate claims in a timely manner, which this budget resolution certainly provides.

Mr. President, I am very pleased with the investment in veterans programs that is made in this budget resolution. I again commend Chairman CONRAD and the Budget Committee for sending the right message to our Nation's veterans—that we are honoring our commitment to them by making a real investment into their care. I urge my colleagues to support swift passage of the resolution before us today.

#### MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent there now be period of morning business with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I rise to honor the centennial celebration of the Elko Area Chamber of Commerce, which will be held April 1. Almost 100

years ago, 37 citizens and business owners gathered to form the Elko Chamber. Their motto was progress, and their goal was to advertise the many resources that Elko County had to offer. Today, the Chamber claims more than 500 members, but their values are still the same—economic diversification, continued prosperity, and forward progress into the future.

During a recent celebration of the Elko Area Chamber of Commerce, board members reminisced about the history of the chamber. They certainly have many accomplishments to celebrate. One of the most successful programs undertaken by the chamber has been their Chamber Checks Program. This effort has encouraged residents to shop at local businesses and kept more than \$4 million in the community. The chamber also took the lead in relocating the landmark Sherman Station more than 60 miles to the heart of downtown Elko. Each part of the homestead was carefully deconstructed and rebuilt by chamber members and volunteers. Today it serves as the home of the Elko Chamber.

Over the years, I have been privileged to work with the Elko Chamber and the Western Folklife Center to promote and honor cowboy poetry. This rich tradition is an important part of Nevada's western heritage. Every year, Elko hosts the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, attracting visitors from across the country. The event would not be possible without the dedication of many volunteers and community leaders, including the Elko Chamber.

The Elko Chamber of Commerce embodies the best principles of the residents of northeastern Nevada. It is my great pleasure to honor their centennial celebration before the Senate. I am confident in the continued success of the Elko Chamber of Commerce, and I look forward to working with them for many years to come.

#### COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTERS INVESTMENT ACT

Mr. SANDERS. Mr. President, today in the United States of America there are 47 million people who are without health insurance and 35 million Americans who are completely without access to the most basic health care services. As a result, in the richest country in the world, 18,000 Americans die each year because their basic health care needs are not met. Despite the fact that we spend twice as much per person on health care than any other industrialized nation, Americans have a lower life expectancy and a higher infant mortality rate than Canada, Japan, and most of Europe.

We are also faced with an alarming dental care crisis in this country. The Surgeon General has reported that tooth decay has become the single most common chronic childhood disease in this country—five times more common than asthma and seven times