

**SERVICES FOR VETERANS IN ALASKA: FIELD
HEARINGS IN ANCHORAGE AND FAIRBANKS**

HEARING
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS
SECOND SESSION

—————
FEBRUARY 16 AND 17, 2010
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SERVICES FOR VETERANS IN ALASKA

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2010

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Anchorage, AK.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:30 a.m., Anchorage Assembly Chambers, Hon. Mark Begich, Member of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senator Mark Begich.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MARK BEGICH, U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA

Senator BEGICH. This hearing, the Field Hearing on Services for Veterans' Affairs in Alaska is called to order. I first want to thank all the people that are here. I appreciate the opportunity to have this field hearing. We are having multiple opportunities for veterans. One will be this field hearing which is a chance for us to talk with different presenters about some of their issues and concerns. We also have folks from the VA to address some of these concerns. Along with that, we will be in Wasilla this afternoon for a roundtable, which is more of a kind of free discussion with folks. Then we will be in Fairbanks, as well as in Kotzebue.

So, those that are wondering how these work: field hearings designed like this are an opportunity for a Congressional record to be created based on information that will be presented by, for example, our first panel and our second panel. It is not a process that you're normally used to. There is no testifying and so forth; there are panels in the field hearings. The roundtables that we have are more of an open discussion. Again, those are in Wasilla, Kotzebue, and Fairbanks. But, again, we appreciate all the folks that are here. This is an opportunity for us to hear and to ask some questions.

Along with that, for folks that are in the audience, this is an opportunity, again, for questions and comments, during the meeting, after the meeting or even before. If you have some issues that you want to make sure are raised, please put those down on this form and staff will be in the back to collect them.

I have a statement that I'll read into the record here, and then we'll open with our first panel of individuals. Again, thank you all for being here. For the folks from Washington, DC, I thank you for arriving to a warmer climate and less snow than you left. We can also show you how to move snow. It's a skill here.

This hearing will focus on the state of services for veterans in Alaska, support for returning veterans, job opportunities for vet-

erans, benefits for veterans, and a December audit by the VA office of the Inspector General on the VA Regional Office in Anchorage. The Committee has held multiple hearings on VA benefits, health care, and services. However, this is the first time we are specifically focusing on the unique challenges confronting returning Alaska veterans of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom.

I'm pleased that the Committee is joined today by Assistant Secretary of Labor, Ray Jefferson, who will speak to some of the services that the Department of Labor offers to veterans, in particular, those transitioning from military to civilian life. In addition, I hope to hear more about some of the Department of Labor's core functions: conducting employment and training programs; enforcing relevant Federal laws and regulations; and providing transition services.

Alaska is one of the few States with a growing veteran population—70,000 within our State. Alaska has the highest per capita veteran population in the Nation. The Anchorage RO has the highest proportion of compensation claims in the total workload of any regional office. Compensation workload grew by 82 percent in the last 5 years. According to a 2009 VA State Summary Report of Alaska, in 2008 nearly 1,500 veterans from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan sought treatment in our VA facilities.

I applaud the efforts of VA employees in Alaska. These men and women work hard to help veterans who seek their assistance. There are many things the VA does well in Alaska. However, there is always room for improvement, as evidenced by the recent VA IG report dated December 7, 2009, that showed that the Anchorage VA Regional Office failed to meet requirements in 13 of 14 areas covered during the inspection. This concerns me deeply because providing accurate, timely, and comprehensive services to our veterans is one of my top priorities in the U.S. Senate.

More work needs to be done. I hope that both of our panels will shed some light on the issues such as: why we continue to hear veterans are not aware of their eligibility for VA benefits and services; why some veterans are not receiving appropriate VA services; and why veterans struggle finding employment. I hope to discuss these and other important issues with our panels today.

Indeed, our unique geography, diversity, and way of life require that the VA develop a unique strategy to care for our veterans, especially those who reside in rural areas. Back in Washington, we have worked hard to ensure that VA has the resources to provide the best care possible. Congress has provided record-breaking funding increases for the VA. Last year I supported the Veteran Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act to secure funding for veterans' health care 1 year in advance of the regular appropriations process. This bill was signed into law in October, 2009. We have followed up that success with passage in the Senate of a Caregivers' Bill, which will help wounded warriors and the families who care for them. This bill also improves care for women veterans who reside in rural areas and those who are homeless. It has been sent to the House of Representatives. We expect to finalize this bill in the coming months.

Finally, I note that there are many veterans here today who would like to testify. While we cannot accommodate everyone's re-

quest to speak, we do want to hear your views. The Committee is accepting, as I said, written testimony or other documents you may want to present for the record.

In addition, Committee staff is joined by VA staff who can respond to the questions, concerns and comments that you raise. Once again, thank you all for being here. What I would like to do is introduce the first panel of four individuals. First, I'll just read their names in Alaskan. I'll call on each one separately to give their testimony. We'd like to keep the testimony close to 5 minutes, though unlike the Assembly, we have no clock that ticks away. I will tell you when you're close. Please bear with me.

Tim Carroll, is a retired U.S. Air Force Commander Sergeant. Ric Davidge, MPA, is the Alaska State Council President, of the Vietnam Veterans of America, and Board member of the Alaska Disabled Veterans Business Alliance. Gabriel Fierros, is an OIF veteran. Rich Owens, is the Alaska State Chairman, and National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve.

Thank you all for being here. What I would like to do is have you testify in the order that I read your names. If I can have retired Commander Chief Tim Carroll first. Thank you very much for being here. There's a button, just push it down, which should activate the mic. As long as you've got a green light, you're good.

STATEMENT OF CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT TIMOTHY PATRICK CARROLL, USAF (RETIRED)

Chief CARROLL. First off, Senator Begich, thank you for taking the time to come out to—

Senator BEGICH. You have to move that mic a little closer.

Chief CARROLL. Can you hear now? Better?

Senator BEGICH. Move that mic a little, pretend you're like Mick Jagger.

Chief CARROLL. Put it all the way in my throat here.

Senator BEGICH. We'll ask the technician, Mike, to adjust the mic.

Chief CARROLL. Senator Begich, I want to thank you for taking the time to listen to our veterans and for committing yourself to helping those who dedicated their service to this country.

A SPEAKER. We still can't hear you.

Chief CARROLL. You, too, are servants of this great Nation and I for one—

Senator BEGICH. I apologize. I don't know if we can adjust that volume a little bit more. I'm looking for the tech person. You have to hug it like this [indicating].

Chief CARROLL. How is that?

A SPEAKER. Still can't hear back here.

Senator BEGICH. We have to go with what we have while the tech guy works on the volume. Go ahead.

Chief CARROLL. I won't do the can-you-hear-me-now thing. I'll try to speak up a little bit.

First off, Senator Begich and members of the traveling team with you, thank you for taking the time to listen to our veterans and for committing yourself to helping us who dedicated our lives to service to this country. You too are servants of this great Nation and I for one thank you for your tireless efforts on our behalf. I am retired

Chief Master Sergeant Tim Carroll, a 28-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force; the son of an Air Force veteran; and now the father of an active-duty Air Force airman. I am honored to be given this opportunity to provide testimony on my experiences with the transition from active duty to veterans status of the U.S. Air Force. I retired from active duty in October 2008. While on active duty, I was the command chief master sergeant for the third wing at Elmendorf Air Force Base. In this role I had lots of opportunity to hear and to experience those who were transitioning out of the Air Force, but had little opportunity to hear of their transition once they hit the VA system.

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being perfectly satisfied, my personal transition would rate at a 9.0. This is due in large part to the professionals at the Elmendorf Air Force Base, third mission support squadron, the third medical group, and the staff of the Anchorage Veterans Administration, who were attentive to my needs and very much helped me and my family as we managed our expectations for retirement.

I believe those who transitioned alongside me found the same experience. I do know that there are a large number of veterans that had different experiences, and I was able to help some of those people with what we could on the active-duty side. Again, I did not see them once folks went into the Veterans Administration; therefore, when I made the transition myself, it was a first-time experience that I relied on a lot of people to help with. The staff at the Anchorage Veterans Administration helped in every way that they could, but we did deal, of course, with the Salt Lake City Regional Office on issues that were related to the medical transition. My number 1 issue as I retired was finding adequate employment, and as you very well know, the timing when transitioning between careers whether military or otherwise, is very crucial to maintaining a quality-of-life and a standard of living for our families. With two teenage daughters under my roof, retirement is a relative term and it was absolutely essential that I secured employment. The timing that it took to get the DD-214 to marry up to the compensation disability rating did cause a gap in my ability to seek a government job. I find myself now in the private sector and it's working very well.

Again, I would rank my personal experience a 9 on a scale of 1 to 10.

I look for your questions, Senator Begich. And in closing, again, I want to thank you for the efforts you are putting forth to take care of our veterans.

[The prepared statement of Chief Carroll follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF CMSGT TIMOTHY PATRICK CARROLL, USAF (RET.)

Honorable Senators and Distinguished Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Thank you for taking the time to listen to our Veterans and for committing yourself to helping those who dedicated their service to this country. You too are servants of this great Nation; I for one thank you for your tireless efforts on our behalf.

I am retired Chief Master Sergeant Timothy Patrick Carroll, a 28-year veteran of the United States Air Force, the son of an Air Force veteran, and now the father of an Air Force Airman. I am honored to be given this opportunity to provide testimony on my experience with the transition from active duty to veteran status of the United States Armed Forces.

I retired from active duty in October 2008. On a scale of 1–10 with 10 being perfectly satisfied, I would rate my transition experience at 9.0. The professionals of Elmendorf Air Force Base's 3rd Mission Support Squadron, the 3rd Medical Group, and the staff of the Anchorage Veterans' Administration were attentive to my needs and very much helped my family and me manage our expectations for retirement. I believe those who were transitioning at the same time as me found the same experiences. Of course, with two teenage daughters still under my roof, retirement is a relative term.

Overall, I am pleased and satisfied with the outreach and support I have received from the Veterans Administration. I address specific programs and my experiences below.

JOB SEARCH

One of the greatest challenges I believe military members have in entering the civilian workforce is effectively communicating their skills to prospective employers. The Transition Assistance Program was very helpful in opening my mind to the realities of retirement and did equip me with many tools necessary to prepare for the transition; but the reality of communicating my skills was a greater challenge than I ever anticipated. Fortunately for me, it worked out well, as I am now the CEO of a small business in Anchorage.

EDUCATION

I was one of the fortunate young Airmen who had a supervisor that cared enough to threaten me with bodily harm if I failed to open a Veterans' Education Assistance Program (VEAP) account before the program ended. I complied and deposited the minimum required twenty-five dollars to open the account. Many of my colleagues were not so fortunate and failed to open the account. We were repeatedly told what a bad deal the VEAP was, thus it is not surprising to me that so many did not buy into the program. Many years later, when Congress opened the window for those of us with a VEAP account to join the Montgomery GI Bill program, I made the required payments and converted. Over the course of my career, I took advantage of the USAF Tuition Assistance program and obtained my Bachelor's Degree here at the University of Alaska Anchorage. Today, with the aid of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, I am pursuing my Masters Degree with Wayland University in Anchorage. I have heard many complaints about the backlog in processing Post-9/11 GI Bill claims and at this point am pleased with the response I have received from the Veteran's Administration in producing my eligibility certificate. I begin classes this month and anticipate filing for benefits payment in the coming weeks. I did receive an unsolicited phone call from a Veterans Administration official inquiring if I knew of the education benefit, and how to proceed with the program. I found this call very informative and helpful, and again appreciate both the Congress and the Veteran's Administration for enabling me to pursue higher education.

MEDICAL CARE

I am currently enrolled in the TRICARE Prime program and receive care at the Elmendorf Air Force Base hospital. I found the transition from Active Duty to Retiree was seamless in the quality and accessibility of care for my family and me. I am also enrolled in the TRICARE Retiree Dental Program and am satisfied that the benefits we receive are sufficient to care for my needs. When I first joined the Air Force in 1980, my recruiter told me that my medical care would be free for life. This was not a major point in my decision to serve or continue serving, and the premiums I pay today are acceptable. After having three children in orthodontics braces, I do wish the coverage for orthodontics provided a higher expense coverage rate.

I have not yet sought medical care from the Veteran's Administration and can therefore not comment on that quality. I do know that the VA has again extended a helping hand to make sure I am aware of the process to access care in the VA facility.

SERVICE CONNECTED DISABILITY COMPENSATION

When the time came to retire, I received assistance from the American Legion in submitting my claim for service-connected disability compensation. I submitted my claim under the Benefit Due at Discharge program (also known as Fast Track) on June 28, 2008, in advance of my October 1, 2008 retirement. The medical staff at the Anchorage VA medical Center evaluated my claim items in August 2008. I received my rating decision from the VA Regional Office in Salt Lake City on Jan 26,

2009. I am currently appealing the rating decision I received based on inconsistencies in the report I received along with the rating decision, and my experiences in the exam room in Anchorage. All in all, I am satisfied with the timing and attention I received from the VA throughout this claim process.

HOUSING

During the course of my active duty career, I moved too frequently to enjoy the benefits of home ownership. During the last half of my career, I was in key and essential designated positions, which required me to live in government provided housing on-base. When I retired, I was faced with the task of finding a home that maintained my family's standard of living without having any equity in a home to cash in for down payment. I used the VA Home Loan Guarantee program to purchase my home in Eagle River without a down payment.

Throughout my transition period, no one told me that if I had been assigned a compensable disability rating, the VA funding fee would be waived on my mortgage application. Rather, I stumbled on this benefit while comparing on-line mortgage rates using a lender's on-line calculating tool. When I inquired of other retiring members if they knew or had been told of this benefit, no one had.

Timing was not in my favor in that upon my retirement, I had to vacate government housing, yet my disability rating had not been determined and thus the funding fee was in place. Thankfully, I encountered a seller and real estate agent who were very patient and we deferred closing the loan for as long as we could. Ultimately, we closed on the house and rolled the \$12,000 funding fee into our mortgage. Upon receipt of my compensable disability rating, I applied to the VA for a refund of the funding fee, which was approved and applied to the principle of my loan in a timely manner.

SURVIVOR BENEFIT PLAN

Being an enlisted member, I found myself living paycheck to paycheck for the bulk of my career. This made investment options very difficult. The Air Force Casualty Affairs representative at Elmendorf AFB was very helpful and informative in assisting my wife and I in the decision to enroll into the Survivor Benefit Plan. This decision had to be made at the most stressful and uncertain time we had ever encountered in our lives as we truly did not know where we would be living, what my employment would be or what our financial situation would look like. Having an open window at the two-year point to opt out of the plan made making this decision less risky. Ultimately, we decided to enroll and I am presently paying a monthly premium into the Survivor Benefit Plan. Knowing that my wife will receive some continuing benefit should I precede her in death brings great peace of mind to me.

DEATH BENEFITS

The VA provided end of life care for my father through a terminal illness and into death. I saw first hand the care and comfort the VA provided to my mother during this difficult time and I rest well knowing that should my wife need the same help, the VA will be there.

LIFE INSURANCE

I converted my Active Duty Serviceman's Group Life Insurance to the Veterans Group Life Insurance program. I am not a fan of term life insurance, however, the premiums are affordable and the term will allow me to be sufficiently covered while my children are still under our care. I would have preferred to make a similar contribution to a whole life policy during the course of my career, which I did with a private carrier.

JOINT FEDERAL TRAVEL REGULATION

In my situation, my family chose to remain in Alaska for a number of reasons, mostly to allow my high school daughters to complete their schooling in the same high school where they started. My children endured frequent moves throughout their school experience and we chose to offer them some measure of stability at the end. Unfortunately, children school is not a qualifying reason to extend household goods shipment authority beyond one year after effective retirement date. I would like to see this changed in the JFTR.

In closing, I again thank you for your efforts to take care of our Veterans and their families. I urge you to continue to support these programs that bring comfort and peace of mind to the small segment of our population that donned a uniform in selfless and untiring service to our great Nation.

Thank You!

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Let me move down the panel. I'll have questions for each one of you afterwards.

**STATEMENT OF RIC DAVIDGE, MPA, ALASKA STATE COUNCIL
PRESIDENT, VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA; BOARD
MEMBER, ALASKA DISABLED VETERANS BUSINESS ALLI-
ANCE**

Mr. DAVIDGE. Senator, first thing I'd like to point out, the Alaskan Congressional Delegation, including former Senator Ted Stevens, is the only State congressional delegation that unanimously supported advanced funding. Thank you. Most Alaskans don't know that. We are the only State delegation that unanimously supported advanced funding. The highest legislative priority funding for all nine national weapons service organizations over 5 years and we finally got it passed.

One of the things that surprises me, and I shouldn't be surprised at my age, but having worked for Senator Stevens, having worked for President Reagan, having worked in Washington, DC, off and on for many, many years and now as an advocate for veterans in the State of Alaska, I'm constantly amazed at how Federal agencies disregard acts of Congress.

As you know from my written testimony, I gave you some evidence of that, particularly with respect to service-disabled veteran-owned businesses and veteran-owned businesses. A law was passed in 1999, executive orders have been signed, directives have been issued, strategic plans are in place. It is not discretionary under existing strategic plans, executive orders, and hopefully the change in law that's being put forward by the House Veterans' Affairs Committee and we look forward to the Senate doing the same thing. It will no longer be discretionary to provide a 3 percent set-aside for service-disabled veterans all for business and all Federal services. As you know we have a resolution in the State Legislature of Alaska calling for congressional oversight hearings in Alaska dealing with the refusal or inability of Federal agencies to meet that 3 percent set-aside goal. It's currently in House Rules. It should be on the House floor this week for passage, and we don't expect any negative votes. The bottom line is, Senator, the law is the law is the law is the law. And why Federal agencies seem to feel, quote, "you know I just don't have time for this; it's just too much work; you know what I'd have to do to find service-disabled veterans who own businesses and qualify them to get them a procurement opportunity. I just don't have the time." Or "I've been directed not to comply."

The only Federal agency in Alaska in our opinion—which I'm speaking on behalf of the Veterans Business Alliance and I have testimony from the president that I've provided to you, Senator—is the Corps of Engineers. The Corps of Engineers does a lot of work in Alaska; thank God for their efforts. The Air Force, no. The Army, no. The VA is making an effort nationally. They've met their requirement, not in this State. The Forest Service, the National Parks Service, all other Federal agencies in Alaska that were involved actively in doing things and spending money up here and

issuing contracts, except for the Corps of Engineers, have effectively said that it's just not something that's important to them.

Again, Congress passed a law; the President of the United States signed an executive order; there are strategic plans in place at every Federal agency. The only way, Senator, that you could ensure as a former Federal manager that these people will do what they're supposed to do under law is to put it in their evaluation criteria. If you have a senior Federal official that has procurement under their responsibility, and they are specifically evaluated based on their compliance on the 3 percent set-aside, guess what, it will get done. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Davidge follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RIC DAVIDGE, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES, VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA; ALASKA STATE COUNCIL PRESIDENT, VVA; AND MEMBER, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, ALASKA VETERANS BUSINESS ALLIANCE

Mr. Chairman:

"It's just too much work."

"First I have to find those guys, then I have to qualify them, and then I have to notify them of these opportunities." "I just don't have the time."

Or how about: "We've been directed not to follow Public Law 109-461."

That is the attitude in almost every Federal agency approached by the Alaska Veterans Business Alliance over the past two plus years, even with Congressional staff in attendance. There are exceptions, and let me make those clear to you: The Army Corps of Engineers has made the effort and has met with success. Hoorah!

- The US Forest Service? NO
- How about the National Park Service? NO
- The Veterans Administration? NO
- The US Air Force? NO
- The US Army? NO
- And so it goes.

Representatives of the Alaska Veterans Business Alliance accompanied by a staff member of our Congressman, in a meeting with the Alaska Contracting office of Veterans Affairs, then located in Anchorage, were told that they were directed not to follow Public Law 109-461 which contracts out of the VA set-aside for SDVOB. Now the Veterans Affairs Contracting Office has moved out of Anchorage and all contracting is done in Seattle. Not easy for Alaskan SDVOB to meet with.

We even have a state legislative joint resolution (HJR16) that passed the House without objection and is now under consideration in the Senate calling for Congress to hold joint committee oversight hearings in Alaska to ask the heads of each of these Federal agencies why? Why do Federal agencies in Alaska refuse to comply with the law, with the Executive Order, or even with their own regulations and agency specific strategic plans requiring conformance?

The original law Public Law 106-50 passed in August 1999 allowed an easier opportunity for a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Company to go into business for themselves by bidding on Federal Contracts. Three percent (3%) of all federally Budgeted dollars are to be set-aside for SDVOB's. In October 2004 President Bush signed an Executive Order (E.O.) 13360 mandating that Federal Contracting Officers achieve the 3% "goal." To date this "goal" is no where near being met as the law intended for it to be—certainly not in Alaska.

According to the Small Business Administration, of the 2008 goals and achievements out of a total of 24 Federal Agencies only 4 agencies were meeting or exceeding their "goals." Meeting their goals were DOL at 4.34% for a SDVOB, VA had their goal up to 11.76% for a SDVOB, EPA had their goal up to 3.66% for a SDVOB, and GSA had their goal up to 3.93% for a SDVOB.

The embarrassment and slap in the face to all Veterans comes from their own of DOD. DOD had their goal at 1.00% which as adjusted and was 1.04% for a SDVOB. These numbers reflect nation wide numbers—certainly not our Alaskan experience.

Out of these 24 Federal Agencies there were a total of 92 Funding Departments that achieved a 1.4862% with a total of \$6,450,206,999.20. These numbers are prime contracts, again according to the Small Business Administration's 2008 goals and achievements report.

When it came to subcontracting opportunities for the SDVOBs, based on the SBA 2008 report, forty-four (44) reporting agencies (or funding departments) achieved only 0.9% of the 3% goal with a total of \$2,250,720,437.00.

It is time for both the House and Senate Small Business Committees to introduce legislation that:

- (1) Changes the language from “may” to “shall” in Public Law 106–50
- (2) Provides enforcement to ensure that the 3% “goal” is being achieved by all Federal Agencies
- (3) And not just on a “nationwide” basis as the Contracting Officers are always saying, but specifically in Alaska.
- (4) If the agency can’t meet their 3% goal then they should lose something—can we suggest putting achieving these goals in the standards for performance for all contract officers and other decisionmakers?

The Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee also needs to introduce companion legislation that the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee introduced last December to fix the Veterans Affairs Acquisition process and changes the wording from “may” to “shall.” H.R. 3719, H.R. 4220, and H.R. 4221.

Veterans of Modern Warfare (VMWUSA) along with the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) are two Veteran Service Organizations Nationally standing together to make sure the laws for SDVOB work as they were intended by Congress back in 1999.

If the Members of Congress want to get serious and get this done, they have to make compliance a part of the performance evaluation of every procurement officer and other key decisionmaker in the Federal Government. We also recommend it be part of the performance evaluation of every senior Federal administrator in every Federal agency responsible for procurement.

It is an honor.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much, Mr. Davidge.

Gabriel Fierros, thank you for your service, too. I appreciate you being here today.

STATEMENT OF GABRIEL FIERROS, OIF VETERAN

Mr. FIERROS. Thank you very much for inviting me to speak today. I’m just going to get right down to it. I joined the Army right after high school. I served 10 years and 9 months. During that time, I had four deployments. My first deployment was 6 months to Kosovo in March 2001; my second deployment was in support of OIF for 12 months starting in February 2003. I was injured for approximately 6 weeks due to a grenade blast, but remained in-country. My third deployment was in support of OIF for 4 months starting December 2004. My last deployment was also in support of OIF and was planned for 12 months starting October 2006.

I was injured in April 2007, in a helicopter crash outside of Baghdad. Eventually I was transferred to Walter Reed for approximately 6 months for injuries to my left eye and treatment for a TBI. Then I was transferred to the Warrior Transition Brigade until my temporary medical retirement in May 2009. Since the accident in April 2007, some of the continuous medical treatments I have received both at Walter Reed and Fort Richardson are speech therapy, occupational therapy, mental health, neurology, physical therapy, and ophthalmology. I started my medical proceedings in December 2008. If I had a choice, I probably would have stayed in for a full 20 years. But I was told by medical personnel that they would be initiating my med board because my medical condition was not improving.

I received my disability rating from the Army of 70 percent, and was unsure whether or not I wanted to get out. So, I applied for continuation on active duty. The application was lengthy, and it

was taking way too long for the process, so in the long run I withdrew my application, decided to accept my medical board findings and retired temporarily. I filed for my VA compensation claim in May 2009 for 13 different service-connected health problems. As of today I've been notified twice that my claim has been delayed for vague reasons. I have been told because I am under the old system, my claim will take longer to process. There are way too many delays and just as I think I've fulfilled my obligation, I am told that I have one more appointment, one more appointment, and one more appointment.

In fact, soldiers that have retired after me on the new pilot program have already received both their VA and their Army claims at the same time. It's also very difficult to obtain accurate information about the VA claim process. When I started, I was not told of the long delays and tedious process. I feel that the best source of information regarding my claim process was older veterans. I found many veterans were very eager to give advice, recall their experiences, and recommend people that could help out. That's the end of my testimony.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much, Mr. Fierros.

Mr. FIERROS. You're welcome.

Senator BEGICH. Rich Owens.

STATEMENT OF RICH OWENS, ALASKA STATE CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL COMMITTEE FOR EMPLOYER SUPPORT OF THE GUARD AND RESERVE

Mr. OWENS. Thank you, Senator Begich, for this opportunity to address the Field Committee Hearing. As a State chairman, I'm very proud to represent the 40-plus volunteers spread across Alaska which compose the Alaska State ESGR Committee. Since ESGR interfaces with and has responsibility for both military air members as well as employers, I'd like to address three points today. First, the length and frequency of deployments have caused more stress by employers especially the small business owners which are the bulk of the employers of our soldiers. Many of these business owners who hired our reserve members are few and far between. Times have changed and the frequency and length of deployments may start to have a negative effect on hirability of reserve component members. The unstable job market is in difficult economic times and does not really have an answer. If the business goes under or is forced to downsize in order to survive, they legitimately may not have the ability to put reserve members returning from deployments back to work. This is not a reflection on the quality of our soldiers, but rather the grim reality that no one can say when we'll have enough growth in our economy to get all of our reserves back to work. The funding issues for our Alaska ESGR committee are not unique. I'm sure that other States are feeling the pinch as well. Where we are unique, however, is our geographic separation. Each of our four ESGR regional committees cover areas larger than most States. Only the Anchorage region can travel to most of its service area by road. The southwest region must travel by plane, boat, or snow machine; the southeast region by boat or plane; and the northern region by plane or car. It is difficult to train five major job positions within each committee when we only

have funding to bring one or occasionally two volunteers to our steering committee meetings or State meetings.

Not only does this make it difficult for them to perform their duties, but it also creates additional turnover when they get frustrated. What we do as volunteers is not hard once you have the training. Volunteers need to be confident in their position whether they're working with soldiers or employers. This confidence comes with training. The national ESGR office has been helpful in trying to accommodate our special needs. But with the tight budget we are now operating under, doing more with less will be the order of the day. Thank you.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much, Mr. Owens. Thanks to all the panel for the diverse views on some of the work of the VA. I'm going to ask a few questions. First, Gabriel, if I can ask you a couple of questions. Your thoughts were very interesting to me regarding the time it took you to kind of go through the process and try to get back into the military, but that did not work out well because of the timeline. Can you describe that a little bit more to me? What happened at that—

Mr. FIERROS. At the initial time of my application for the coed, I had filled out the application, sent it in through my pueblo—it got down there pretty quick—but just seemed to stall once it got to the coed side of the Army. And it stalled and stalled while it was getting closer to my retirement date. So, I kind of panicked and withdrew my application. So, it was just a tedious process, so much waiting and waiting, and there wasn't really any answers as to why it was taking so long either. So—

Senator BEGICH. Did you have communication with them—I mean, would you be calling them? Or how did you—

Mr. FIERROS. All my information came from the pueblo there on Fort Richardson; and he did a fine job of getting the information for me, though it seemed like he just wasn't getting the information either.

Senator BEGICH. He wasn't going to?

Mr. FIERROS. Yeah. Something was going on there, but I'm not sure what.

Senator BEGICH. In that process, is there a time table of response that they have to have it by, or do they have to respond to you by so many days?

Mr. FIERROS. I'm not too sure about that. I couldn't tell you.

Senator BEGICH. Tell me, if you can, just on the claim process—I note that you had several related disabilities when you were going through the process. When they took action, were there some of those disabilities that they clearly had no question of and some they did or how did that work?

Mr. FIERROS. All of them shouldn't really be questioned. They're all documented through the military. They're in my medical records so I didn't see the reason why—sleep studies that I had already done before, you know, or neurology appointments that I go to every 3 months anyway, so—and there's a lot of repeats and a lot of stuff that—you know, I just recently got out, so I don't understand why there was such a need to send me back through all that. I understand they need their own information, but there is just—it's tedious on my part. I'm trying to—you know, support my family

and I have to take off work to go, you know, to appointments all day long. I spend pretty much the 3 days that I have off—because I work a four/ten shift—going to appointments for the VA, for the Army. It's hard on family life.

Senator BEGICH. When you said there are repetitives, some of the work that was already done already was happening or you already had certain tests, you already had certain medical documentation within your file; but you were applying for disability. There were requirements of additional visits, which were basically duplicates?

Mr. FIERROS. Yes.

Senator BEGICH. Is that what you thought—they were duplicates?

Mr. FIERROS. Yeah, they were duplicating. Actually, more recently they signed me up for another sleep study and I told them, no, because I just actually had a checkup at the sleep study clinic—same thing they wanted but for some reason they were saying that it wouldn't work in the VA system.

Senator BEGICH. Same study you already did?

Mr. FIERROS. Yeah, which it was done, you know, for the Army, not for the VA. I thought they were about sharing information, but I guess not.

Senator BEGICH. I have a feeling the next panel will hopefully have a question or two from what you've just laid out to see how that works. Thank you, Gabriel, that was very good.

Mr. FIERROS. OK.

Senator BEGICH. Ric, your testimony has all around good detail in some of the issues around the 3 percent set-aside. I mean, you're right about the Corps. I've seen some of their documentation. They do a pretty good job. We've talked multiple times on it. But what I'm reading in your testimony and hearing in your verbal testimony is that many of the departments are not fulfilling the 3 percent set-aside for disabled veterans in any form. They're just kind of putting the paper out there. So, how do you—I guess I'm asking you: How do you see it from your perspective? Are they trying to process—nothing really comes back, because of the way the process is set up, or they're not even trying that?

Mr. DAVIDGE. Let's take for example, the statement: How do I find these guys? Well, there's a list that's available on the Internet of over 300 service-disabled veteran-owned businesses in Alaska. But the procurement officer was unaware of that. We have legislation in Juneau now that deals with veterans preferences for veteran-owned businesses in Alaska—a 7 percent preference on State procurements. Our effort there is also to get a State registry, so that any State veteran-owned business that would want to apply for State procurement, which would include other additional points for Purple Heart disability, et cetera, et cetera, would be available on the Internet. The day-to-day life of a procurement officer is an interesting experience. The bottom line is, in my opinion, and I think this is a shared opinion of the board of directors of the Veterans Business Alliance in Alaska, is that they have a relationship with certain contractors. They like that relationship. It's an easy relationship, and for them to find new contractors or subcontractors or partners, et cetera, is just a lot of work. The bottom line is they're not held to any accountability for not just effort, but for success. Now, we have a number of service-disabled veteran-owned

businesses who have begun to have success, but it's in response to being rather nasty and getting in the face of certain managers to say, "You just let out this contract; you let it out for the same guy. This is not a service-disabled veteran. They won't even sub with me. This is exactly what I do. I've been doing it for 5 years successfully up here. Why can't I get consideration?"

My point is: If you don't put it in the performance evaluation, you have no hammer. Again, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee has two bills that will now, in the VA—hopefully, another bill is being put together—do it nationally. The set-aside is not discretionary, it is mandatory. And even in those bills at your meetings with the Committee staff, they're looking at specific language requiring performance requirements for supervisors and procurement officers.

Senator BEGICH. Should it—if I can add a comment—should it be not only the supervisor, but the division or the department as a unit?

Mr. DAVIDGE. Yes, any supervisor, any individual all the way up to a director of an agency that has procurement requirements under them should have this evaluation in their performance evaluation criteria. It should be written into their personnel contract.

Senator BEGICH. Does the Association feel that it's readily available for you—I know the Corps did a pretty good job with the presentation to me on what they've done. I've not necessarily seen that from our agencies. This may be a pretty leading question: Is there a need for uniformity in how they report this? Doesn't seem like I see it, maybe you see it. Maybe I'm missing that.

Mr. DAVIDGE. Well, yes and no. When you look at procurements they're all different—

Senator BEGICH. Sure.

Mr. DAVIDGE [continuing]. In many ways, particularly in Alaska.

Senator BEGICH. I guess their percentage—in other words, if they're actually reaching their target.

Mr. DAVIDGE. Some of them are exceeding their targets; the Corps of Engineers is a great example.

Senator BEGICH. Yes, a great example.

Mr. DAVIDGE. As we like to say in management, certain organizations take on the corporate culture, unless that culture is shifted. People are beginning to see how difficult that is. One of the problems we faced when I worked for the Reagan Administration is taking management directives from members of the Cabinet down to the ground and actually getting those guys on the ground to actually do something. The only way to do that is to put it in their performance evaluation.

Let me offer a comment with respect to our new veteran here. Let me say the VA clinic here is one of the best in the country. One of the problems we've seen is—which you have testimony from our nationally-accredited VSO—the VA, both in benefits and services is not in the habit of notifying the veteran's service officer who has filed a claim for that veteran. I have a son who is here in the audience today, 4 years in Iraq, IEDs, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, has brain problems. Getting him to make an appointment is a difficult problem. Not notifying the VSO when the VSO specifically requested to be notified so they can ensure that this veteran comes

and attends those meetings would be a very good thing to do. There is no reason, given the agreement between the veteran and VSO with the power of attorney, that the VA cannot notify that VSO to help this veteran get to a meeting. It is not just veterans with mental problems or brain damage problems, it's veterans that are going through the transition of being a warrior to being a civilian.

Senator BEGICH. Is there—if I can just stay on this with you, Ric. Is there one single thing to help fix this, that you believe could fix that problem, make that connection?

Mr. DAVIDGE. I think there is a very solid, easy way to get the VSO to help the new veteran get to their appointments, get their claims processed, et cetera. If you've got a veteran who has Traumatic Brain Injury who is not making a mental health appointment, there may be a reason other than the simple fact that they're not remembering it, but that should go for all veterans. When the veteran is notified of the appointment, the VSO should be notified of it. And if my VSO doesn't take care of that veteran, he's not going to be my VSO very long.

Senator BEGICH. OK. Very good. Tim, I want to ask you, because you rated your experience pretty high in your relationship with at least transitioning. That's why we wanted this panel, so we could get a sense, a diverse viewpoint. Tell me now that you've gone through it, what made it easier for you? You rated it pretty high. You almost had a 10. It's pretty good. So, I'm trying to take from your perspective and Gabriel's over here, what did it, do for you to move through that system in an easier or faster fashion?

Chief CARROLL. It's hard to put a finger on exactly what would have made a difference. I was pretty aggressive in trying to understand the system myself.

Senator BEGICH. Can I interrupt? When you say "aggressive," tell me what you mean by that. I know when I'm aggressive what it means, but everyone has a different perspective, please.

Chief CARROLL. I stayed on the phone; I stayed on the Internet; I was asking the questions of: What do I need to do to meet the timing? What are the things that I need to provide? What can I do? Be it printed, be it online, be it via the phone, I was a squeaky wheel trying to make sure that I was armed with the right information for what my responsibilities were. Even still, the reason it's not a 10 is that there are a couple of things that I didn't know. I'll tell you, the VA, the Transitional Assistance Program, the TAP, that's run through the military family readiness centers, is absolutely essential, I believe, to transiting or transitioning veterans. The VA representative who presented that briefing did a fantastic job of running down the litany of benefits of making sure that we were armed with what it was that we had available. Even still, there were things that I didn't get from there, and things that—I'll point to one specifically. The VA funding fee on home loans—

Senator BEGICH. VA funding fees on home loans?

Chief CARROLL. On a home loan, correct, using the VA mortgage guaranty program. With a compensable disability, the VA funding fee, the upfront cash fee is waived. I think you know each time you use a VA loan the percentage goes up, up, up. With a compensable disability, that fee is waived. Nobody told me that. The only way I found it was I was doing some on-line search for home loans and

USAA, a great organization out there, takes good care of us, they have an on-line calculator. And one of the questions on their on-line calculator was compensable disability and I clicked “no” because I didn’t know yet, and it showed the bottom line of what the mortgage was going to be. Just for the grins of it, I went back up and clicked “yes” to see what that would do, and it made a \$12,000 difference in my mortgage. What is that all about? Then I went asking questions. No one told me that. I couldn’t find that information anywhere, and I was looking pretty hard for things. I know someone will tell me, Tim, it was printed right there on the top line and you missed it. But, I’m telling you, I didn’t know. I circled back to a lot of folks that were retiring at the same time and nobody knew that. I couldn’t find anyone who knew that. Now, OK. That’s one little thing, but that’s an instant cash, instant effect. My mortgage, because we closed it, was \$12,000 higher than it needed to be.

Now to the VA’s defense, once the disability rating was determined, I made application to the VA, and very timely, it was not slow-rolled by any stretch of any imagination, they refunded the funding fee and it went against my mortgage. So, instantly, we got some equity on our loan. So, the VA responded well to that piece once I made that application. However, I would not have even known it on the front end if not by accident.

Senator BEGICH. Very good.

Chief CARROLL. I asked the questions of veteran services organizations who were very helpful. I used the American Legion, all of the service organizations were more than accommodating for outreach to try to help us. The VA was very good about making sure we knew what resources were available to us to help do it. I guess I’ll throw it in here now. The downside, the unintended consequence, is when the VA is telling us to go to the service organizations to file our claim, when the VA tells us in virtually every written document that I’ve gotten that you can get a legal representative to represent you, it automatically creates an air of adversarial relationship. And, you know, hearing “you can bring a gun to the fight if you want,” tells me, well, what kind of fight is it that I need to bring a gun? What kind of fight is it that I need to have the service organization representing me? What kind of fight is it that I need to have a lawyer represent me? If the system is so cumbersome—which it is—that I need to have that kind of help, then there’s something wrong with the system.

Gabriel is a perfect example: the repeated proof and the repeated evidence that he has to provide over and over and over again for something that’s painfully obvious, come on. Can’t we skinny that down just a bit and make it not so burdensome that we have to have legal representation to get the rights and the benefits that we deserve?

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Before we bring on the next panel, I want to ask Ric: Is there something that we can do through our jobs efforts to make a difference in regards to making sure that those employers who are really pulling the weight here, making sure they rehire when soldiers come back? Is there something we can do within our jobs agenda that can help? It’s a pretty

broad question, but is there something that you sense would make a difference? One target?

Mr. OWENS. I think that, you know, the way they started to schedule the deployments, so you know further out, that definitely helps the employers to plan or to know in advance when their employees will be gone. But I think that for the small employer, by the time someone goes out for their second or third deployment, if you've only got three plumbers in your company and you pull one of them out, then by the third time you pull that one person out, it became, you know—they do it. I think the fact that within Alaska, if you look at the cases that we have and the situations that come up, 95 percent of the questions that we get are resolved with phone calls. They very seldom actually have to go to the Department of Labor or beyond. So the level of support is still there, but what I fear is that as business stretches out longer and longer—subconsciously some of these employers, all things being equal—when someone comes in looking for work, they don't have to tell the business that they're in the Guard or Reserve in advance. But I think it's a small town and you know when someone is in the Guard or Reserve. Subconsciously they may have a bias against the soldiers, and it's not very apparent right now, but, I mean every now and then—more often now than when I started with ESGR, I hear a comment out there that's—the predictability of deployments, you know, when it's going to happen, how long it's going to be. I don't want that to enter into, you know, the employability of the soldiers.

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Mr. OWENS. And I think that, we realize that our budget for ESGR has been has been trimmed down considerably from when I started as well. So on one hand we've got a smaller budget, on the other hand the demand for ESGR services is tenfold.

Senator BEGICH. Probably one of the peak times now?

Mr. OWENS. That's one of the things we're struggling with. When we pulled all of the soldiers out of western Alaska, we deployed a crew out there. He's got an Army out in western Alaska that he couldn't fly to, or float to, or snow machine to, but we can only bring one person in to train them for either ombudsman services or employer outreach, military outreach.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Thank you, Rich.

Mr. DAVIDGE. Senator, I have one quick thing I'd like to add.

Senator BEGICH. Very quick.

Mr. DAVIDGE. I think it's time to look at how we use our National Guard and Reserves. We work with Guard and Reserve people that are coming back. This is not what they signed up for. That does not mean they shouldn't serve. I'm simply saying, when you sign up to be in the National Guard, you want to serve in your State or at least in your region, and the whole motivation of joining the Guard and being involved in that kind of thing is different than joining the active service. Our reliance on the Guard and Service Reserve, in my personal opinion and as a contact medic in Vietnam, is beyond the concept of how it was originally set up. Nationally we need to look at expanding active duty as opposed to relying on Guard and Reserve because we're destroying families; we're destroying economies, we're destroying businesses as an uninten-

tional consequence to the way in which we're deploying those men and women.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much, Ric. Thank you all very much for your testimony. Again, for the audience, if you're not familiar with field hearings, all of this enters into the Congressional Record. It helps us determine what efforts we should make for the veterans when we go back to Washington. So, again, to all four of you, thank you very much for your testimony and your participation today.

Let's bring the next panel up. The next panel as they get up here, we're reminding folks that if you have additional questions or comments please utilize the document that we have available in the back at the table. Please feel free to fill out the comments. Again, we will have a roundtable in Wasilla. We will have a roundtable meeting in Fairbanks, and then we're going out to Kotzebue to hear from rural Alaskans about the delivery of jobs and health care. Please have a seat. I'm just biding time, that's what I'm doing as you get situated.

Thank you very much. We're going to do a quick test on the mics. Let's try your table over here. Just talk into the mic to see how we're doing.

[Pausing.]

We have five panelists in this next panel. What we'll try to do—to the people in the audience, as you hear the testimony from this next panel you may have questions, individual comments, or information that you want to offer them. What we'll try to do is allow a little flexibility as we finish this hearing. There will be a couple of us that have to attend to other issues, but we ask that if you have questions on the way out of here these people can have conversations, but very limited because today is a field hearing. But, again, there is opportunity.

Let me introduce the five panelists then we'll go right through the list. As I read these, it's not necessarily the order you'll be called. I just want to forewarn you.

The Honorable Ray Jefferson, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training. Brigadier General Tom Katkus, Adjutant General, Alaska National Guard. Mark Bilosz, director, Anchorage Regional Office, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs. You have a couple of folks accompanying you. Belinda Finn, Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations, Office of Inspector General, Department of Veterans Affairs. Jan Myers, Director, Family Programs, Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs.

The order will be, just so people will know and prepare mentally, the Honorable Ray Jefferson, then it will be Belinda Finn, Mark Bilosz, Brigadier General Katkus, and then Jan Myers.

Let's start with Ray Jefferson. Again, thank you very much for attending and taking up my offer so fast. It was only a month and one-half ago when I ended by asking you to come to Alaska. I'm not sure what you expected. I think you picked the right week to be here.

**STATEMENT OF HON. RAYMOND M. JEFFERSON, ASSISTANT
SECRETARY OF VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING
SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR**

Secretary JEFFERSON. Aloha, Senator. Senator Begich, veterans, citizens of Alaska, members of the Anchorage community, I'm thrilled and honored to be here today. I call Hawaii home. This is my first time in Alaska. I'm really excited for being here this week and learning as much as I can. Let me talk about three things: Who we are, what we do, and how we're serving the veteran community in Alaska. Who we are? Myself a veteran served with the rangers and special forces, lost my hand to a grenade in the line of duty, went through the VA program and now I have the privilege of serving as your Assistant Secretary for Veterans and Employment.

As an agency we have 240 people around America. Our mission essentially is that we proudly serve these men and women behind me today, these veterans and transitioning services members in America. We prepare them in their quest for meaningful careers, maximize their employment opportunities, and we protect their employment rights. We have five primary aspirations.

The first is serving as a national focal point for veterans' employment. That involves ensuring we serve all communities with unique needs. Homeless veterans, women veterans, veterans in rural areas, veterans who have been wounded, ill, or injured, and veterans who are members of the National Guard and Reserve. We also want to increase awareness of access to and participation in our programs and to do what we're doing today, which is convening, collaborating, and communicating with all of our stakeholders. We work in partnership with Congress, sir, as you know, and also the Department of Defense, Veterans Affairs, private sector, nonprofits, the VSOs, ESGR, who is here today, as well, and other government agencies. So, what are some of the things that we're doing?

In addition to serving as a national focal point, we also want to increase our second aspiration: Engagement with employers, particularly the private sector. We want to provide meaningful employment with particular emphasis on green jobs and find seamless transition for our transition services members.

A fourth major aspiration is boosting the impact of USERRA, by increasing awareness of it and commitment to it.

And the fifth is providing excellent service to our veterans and transitioning servicemembers. So, how will these five aspirations translate to what's happening on the ground here in Alaska? Let me start with one of our programs—jobs for veterans State grants. We have 2000 employment representatives around America; 13 of those are here in Alaska. Eight are accessible through the Anchorage and Fairbanks communities. Some of these employment representatives we call local veteran employment representatives and they connect veterans with employment opportunities. We also have disabled veteran outreach program specialists who provide intensive services to disabled veterans. With our homeless veteran integration program we have one standdown that we handle every year in Anchorage. We also want to do a much better job of serving our Native American veterans. Thus far we've met and convened

a gathering of tribal leaders. We're launching and completing a study to identify best practices to serve Native American veterans and we're also going to major convening events of Native American tribal leaders and tribal veterans this year. What we want to learn from the Native American veterans is what they need and how we can do a better job serving them.

USERRA, employment rights. Alaska has five to six complaints a year. There's tremendous support for the veteran community here. We want to make sure the process of submitting these complaints is more efficient and more effective; we're moving to an electronic case management system and we're implementing quality and process control measures there.

Finally, the Transitional Assistance Program. In Alaska, we have about 60 employment workshops a year, and we have roughly 1500 servicemembers who transition out of the military in Alaska each year as well. We have a two-and-a-half-day employment workshop and for the first time in 17 years we're going through a complete transformation. We want to make it more economically relevant, immediately useful, and engaging for participants. We're going to shift it from the current 268 slide show PowerPoint presentation to something which is much more dynamic and high energy with higher quality facilitation; prepared templates so veterans don't need to restart their cover letter and resume every time they prepare one; life and career planning; resiliency training; stress reduction techniques; and also new best practice assessments. So let me conclude, sir—

Senator BEGICH. You're sending that to Congress?

Secretary JEFFERSON. Maybe we can do a demonstration project. [Laughter.]

In conclusion, sir, I'd like to say this: We met last time on November 18. You invited me out to Alaska and I called your office the very next day. I don't want to assume that we're doing the right things in Washington. We're grateful and honored to be here with you this week to learn from you, to learn from the men and women seated behind me and also on this panel to make sure that we're asking the right questions, we're developing the best programs, and what we're doing is valuable and will provide veterans and transitioning servicemembers with the excellent service that they've earned and deserve. Thank you, sir.

[The prepared statement of Secretary Jefferson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RAYMOND M. JEFFERSON, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Senator Begich and Distinguished Members, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the employment assistance and outreach services provided to the Veterans in Alaska.

The mission of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) is to provide Veterans and transitioning Servicemembers with the resources and services to succeed in the workforce by maximizing their employment opportunities, protecting their employment rights, and meeting labor market demands with qualified Veterans.

We accomplish our mission through three distinct functions: 1) conducting employment and training programs; 2) enforcing relevant Federal laws and regulations; and 3) providing transition assistance services.

VETS' PROGRAMS

VETS administers a formula grant program to States that directly meets the goals of its mission. The Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) program funds two occupations, the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialist (DVOP) and the Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER). DVOP specialists provide outreach services, and intensive employment assistance to meet the employment needs of eligible Veterans. LVER staff conducts outreach to employers and engages in advocacy efforts with hiring executives to increase employment opportunities for Veterans, encourages the hiring of disabled Veterans, and generally assists Veterans to gain and retain employment. In Alaska, VETS funds six LVERs and seven DVOPs. Of these 13 individuals, eight are accessible in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

To meet the needs of homeless Veterans and help reintegrate them into the workforce, VETS administers the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP). In Alaska, VETS sponsors one stand-down each year in Anchorage for homeless Veterans. The stand-down provides basic services, medical care, food and clothing for Alaska's homeless population. Veterans with significant barriers to employment or service-connected disabilities are also served through the Veterans' Workforce Investment Program (VWIP)—a focused and innovative training program that coordinates services available through other VETS administered programs.

Both the homeless and workforce investment Veterans programs are funded through a competitive grant process. This year, for the first time ever, VETS will issue a Solicitation for Grant Applications (SGA) for homeless women Veterans. We also will soon issue an SGA to reinstitute the Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program (IVTP) to assist Veterans who will be transitioning back to society from incarceration. Additionally, we are in the process of developing an SGA for both HVRP and VWIP. Service providers for these deserving populations in Alaska are encouraged to apply for these competitive grants.

NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS

To meet the needs of Native American Veterans, especially those on tribal lands, Secretary Solis hosted—and VETS participated in—a Summit of Tribal Leaders at the Department of Labor late last year. We discussed the challenges facing Native American Veterans and potential solutions. This event began the process of better serving this community. VETS will also participate in a number of major Native American outreach events in 2010. Furthermore, we are conducting a study on the employment needs of Native American Veterans living on tribal lands to identify best practices for serving this population.

USERRA

Our compliance programs investigate an average of five or six complaints per year filed by Veterans and other protected individuals in Alaska under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). We also assess complaints alleging violations of statutes requiring Veterans' Preference in Federal hiring, and implement and collect information regarding Veteran employment by Federal contractors.

One of our commitments to Veterans is to increase awareness of USERRA, thereby increasing our ability to protect vulnerable populations. To improve USERRA's impact, VETS recently completed a Lean-Six-Sigma quality enhancement and process efficiency assessment of USERRA, with a view toward streamlining, improving quality, and increasing responsiveness to our Veteran clients. The goals of the assessment were to: 1) identify ways of ensuring a consistent, high standard of investigations; and 2) determine other steps to improve the program and its outcomes. We have begun work on identifying an electronic case management system to eliminate the paper-centric aspect of investigations and improve efficiency. Access to this system will be shared with our Federal enforcement partners. We are also working closely with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to ensure that the Federal Government serves as a role model for honoring USERRA.

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

VETS' transition assistance services are offered through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which provides employment workshops and direct services for separating military members, including those who are seriously wounded and injured.

TAP is a Department of Defense (DOD) program that partners with the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). TAP has four components:

1. Pre-separation counseling—this is mandatory for all transitioning Servicemembers and is provided by the military services;
2. TAP employment workshops—these are voluntary on the part of the transitioning Servicemember and are administered through DOL and its state partners;
3. VA benefits briefing—these briefings are also voluntary and administered by the VA; and
4. Disabled Transition Assistance Program—also voluntary and administered by the VA.

TAP EMPLOYMENT WORKSHOPS

Since 1991, when DOL began providing employment workshops pursuant to section 502 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 (P.L. 101-510), we have provided employment and job training assistance and other transitional services to more than one million separating and retiring military members and their spouses. DOL was further directed to provide these services at overseas locations by section 309 of the Veterans Benefits Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-183).

VETS began facilitating TAP workshops at overseas military installations where, by previous interagency agreement, the DOD had provided TAP workshops since the program's inception. We are currently conducting TAP employment workshops at 55 sites overseas, including Germany, Japan, Italy, Korea, Guam and the United Kingdom. Our mission is to provide TAP at every location requested by the Armed Services or National Guard and Reserve Components.

VETS provides employment search workshops based on projections made by each of the Armed Services and DHS, for the U.S. Coast Guard. DVOPs and LVERs are the primary source for TAP Employment Workshop facilitation stateside. However, because of the distance between many state employment offices and the military installations, as well as the rapid increase in Workshop participants, contract facilitators were added in early FY 1992 and supplemented by Federal staff in FY 1996. Alaska currently does not use contract facilitators.

DOD recently set a goal for TAP Employment Workshop participation of 85 percent of separating servicemembers. Eighty-one percent of active-duty transitioning Servicemembers currently attend the DOL TAP employment workshops, a 30 percent increase in participation since 2001. TAP employment workshop participation is expected to increase over the next year, and we plan to target workshop delivery to spouses and family members of separating Servicemembers, including those with limited English proficiency.

VETS is committed to ensuring a consistently high level of instruction, service and quality for all Servicemembers and spouses attending TAP Employment Workshops. Therefore, VETS requires that all TAP facilitators receive training conducted by the National Veterans Training Institute (NVTI) at the University of Colorado in Denver. NVTI provides competency-based training to further develop and enhance the professional skills of Veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States.

An Alaska DVOP or LVER representative attends each TAP workshop session here to discuss their respective roles and responsibilities in providing job search assistance. Since most transitioning Servicemembers return to some other state, this information is provided to help the Servicemember contact the DVOP and LVER representative in their respective states to assist them directly with their re-integration into the local job market in their areas.

Alaska averages more than 60 TAP employment workshops annually with approximately 1,500 transitioning Servicemembers in attendance. This includes about one workshop per quarter with the Coast Guard. There are four major TAP sites, encompassing all military service branches plus the U.S. Coast Guard with an additional four sites that vary in size and frequency according to need.

National Guard and Reserve personnel in Alaska are informed that they can attend TAP for up to 180 days after they complete their active duty commitment. An individual DVOP or LVER can facilitate a TAP employment workshop, or they may do so as a unit.

The Alaska DVET (Director of Veterans' Employment and Training) meets annually with the DVOPs and LVERs who facilitate the TAP employment workshops to discuss transitioning Servicemember's feedback and curriculum updates based on the input provided by these TAP recipients.

In addition to presently reviewing TAP's performance and impact, we are also working to modernize the workshop, increase its effectiveness and improve participants' employment outcomes. Specifically, we want the content to be more economically relevant, immediately applicable, and engaging for participants. Thus far, we've solicited input from external content experts and service providers to help us

determine what should be included in a best-practice employment transition program. We are working in close cooperation with our partners at DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in this endeavor.

Late last year, our three agencies engaged in a weeklong working group to develop a joint, multi-year, strategic plan for TAP. We're all committed to ensuring the plan is action-oriented and will have a direct, positive impact on our transitioning Servicemembers. The plan will involve an increased emphasis on the employment needs of the Reserve components and Servicemembers who have been wounded or injured, or who are ill.

RESERVE COMPONENT AND NATIONAL GUARD EMPLOYMENT WORKSHOP

Global military commitments have necessitated a mobilization of Guard and Reserve members that is unprecedented in modern times. The longer mobilization periods result in these Servicemembers now being eligible for Veterans' benefits, including TAP. The employment workshop is available for Guard or Reserve Members, along with all other Servicemembers, at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations in the United States as well as overseas locations.

However, Reserve and National Guard members usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites. Typically the demobilization process is rapid, taking a matter of days once the Servicemembers arrive back in the United States from overseas. During demobilization, Servicemembers may be expected to participate in many separate briefings and activities. This leaves little or no time for a full two and one-half day employment workshop. Nevertheless, we have found that many National Guard and Reserve Servicemembers would benefit from such transition assistance. Our State Directors have coordinated with each State Adjutant General, and they work directly with the individual Reserve and National Guard commanders to make special arrangements following demobilization in order to present a modified TAP employment workshop to Guard and Reserve Servicemembers. Based on requests from Reserve Component Commanders or Adjutant Generals and through coordination with our VETS' state directors and local VA staff, VETS has offered to tailor the workshops to the identified needs of the transitioning Reserve and National Guard members.

In fact, since 2001 VETS has provided transition services to over 146,000 National Guard and Reservists. These transition services range in size and content from mobilization and demobilization briefings to the full-scale TAP employment workshops. They are provided in 43 states and the District of Columbia. In some states, National Guard and Reserve members have been allowed to attend the regular TAP for Active Component Servicemembers. The services provided to the National Guard and Reserve are tailored to the needs and requests made by DOD.

To meet the transition needs of the National Guard and Reserves, in FY 2007, DOL directed the NVTI to develop a modular version of the TAP employment workshop. The traditional TAP employment workshop was turned into a 15-module menu from which Reserve and National Guard commanders may select relevant services for their unit members. This modular TAP menu includes a mandatory module that covers local labor market information, USERRA, the One-Stop Career Center system, small business opportunities, and the risks of homelessness. The other 14 modules consist of the current TAP employment workshop curriculum broken down into logical and connected blocks of instruction. This is not a new or separate curriculum for the Reserves and National Guard; rather it has been packaged to better serve this community.

USERRA briefings are conducted upon request and through outreach by VETS' staff. This year, VETS already has provided TAP briefings and USERRA outreach to the State of Alaska Army and Air National Guard units, as well as Marine Corps Reserve.

In closing, I again thank you for allowing me to address you today on this very important issue. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Again, we'll do the same routine. I'll ask each person who testified and then I'll come back with a list of questions. The next person on the panel is Belinda Finn. Let's move that mic. Thank you very much.

Ms. FINN. Thank you. Can you hear me?

Senator BEGICH. Yes.

STATEMENT OF BELINDA J. FINN, ASSISTANT INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS, OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY BRENT ARRONTE, DIRECTOR, BENEFITS INSPECTIONS DIVISION, OFFICE OF AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS

Ms. FINN. OK. Senator Begich, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to testify about our inspection of the VA Regional Office in Anchorage, AK. With me today is Mr. Brent Arronte, who is the Director of our Benefits Inspection Division. The Benefits Inspection Program is an initiative to ensure our Nation's veterans receive timely and accurate benefits and services. The OIG was scheduled to review all 57 Regional Offices on a 5-year cycle. But we've recently began a hiring initiative that will allow us to review all of the offices in 3 years. During our inspections, we've reviewed functional areas and operational activities using five protocols that cover: claims processing; data integrity; management control; information security; and public contact. We report on our results as a snapshot in time for each era.

In the summer of 2009 we conducted an inspection of the Anchorage office focusing on 14 operational activities and found that the office had issues in meeting standards for 13 of those areas. We concluded that the management team has challenges in the oversight of operational activities, improving insufficient network capacity to support business processes, providing training to staff, and managing an internal claims brokering process. We believe that two issues contributed to the challenges in management oversight at the office. First, the VARO did not have a veterans service center manager for approximately 8 months during fiscal year 2009, that position had been filled shortly before our visit. Additionally, the director of the office is actually located in Salt Lake City and manages from afar. Both of these positions are key in managing effective operations in the office.

Also, as you report, as a result of the capacity issues, the employees had difficulty consistently accessing the computer applications they needed to perform their jobs. The employees told us this problem had been occurring for over a year. We also noted that the director was moving claims from Anchorage to offices in Fort Harrison, MT, and Salt Lake City, UT. This movement of claims made it difficult for the staff to manage the workload and associate mail with the corresponding claim folder. Because of this movement of work, we compared the staffing levels in Anchorage to the Boise VARO, and we found that the Boise office had 22 additional full-time employees for a comparable inventory of rating and nonrating claims. We recommended that the director improve oversight of the quality assurance process, develop a mail routing guide to ensure proper mail processing, research the causes and solutions to improve network capacity issues, and provide additional training to staff. The director concurred with all of our recommendations, and provided responsive comments and action plans.

Thank you, again, Senator, for the opportunity to be here today. Mr. Arronte and I would be pleased to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Finn follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF BELINDA J. FINN, ASSISTANT INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS, OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Begich, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Office of Inspector General (OIG) report, *Inspection of the VA Regional Office, Anchorage, Alaska*. I am accompanied by Mr. Brent Arronte, Director, Benefits Inspection Division, Office of Inspector General, Department of Veterans Affairs.

BACKGROUND

The Benefits Inspection Program is a new OIG initiative to ensure our Nation's veterans receive timely and accurate benefits and services. The Benefits Inspection Division contributes to the improvement and management of benefits processing activities and veteran services by conducting onsite inspections at VA Regional Offices (VAROs).

Under the current organizational structure, the Benefits Inspection Division, consisting of two teams, will complete a review of all 57 VAROs during a 5-year cycle, performing 12 inspections annually. The OIG recently implemented a "snapshot" initiative to create a second Benefits Inspection Division. Tentatively, this new division will be operational by the end FY 2010. This initiative would allow the OIG to complete a review of all VAROs within a 3-year period.

For each inspection, we issue a report describing VARO performance as measured against current VBA and VA policy. The scope of our inspections allows for a narrow review of work performed at each office and our reports represent a "snapshot" in time. Currently, we perform our reviews using five protocols focused on distinct functional areas and specific operational activities within the VARO. The protocols are claims processing, data integrity, management controls, information security, and public contact. We designed these protocols based on a risk analysis of previous OIG national audits and Combined Assessment Reviews, VBA's Compensation and Pension Site Visit reports, Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports, and information provided by the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees. Our plan is to review the protocol areas annually to identify new high-risk areas and adjust as necessary.

ANCHORAGE VARO RESULTS

In late July and early August 2009, we conducted onsite work at the Anchorage VARO. Our inspection focused on the following 14 operational activities within the 5 protocol areas:

- Processing of disability claims for specific service-related conditions—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, diabetes and disabilities related to herbicide exposure, and *Haas* claims. A *Haas* claim is a claim affected by a U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims decision that involves veterans who served in waters off Vietnam but did not set foot in Vietnam and whether those veterans are entitled to the presumption of service connection to herbicide agents.
- Integrity of VBA's Claims Management Data—Establishing correct dates of claim and properly tracking veteran's claims folder using VBA's Control of Veterans Records (COVERS) database.
- Management Controls over Claims Processing—Systematic analysis of operations (SAO), a management driven analysis of key business activities designed to identify existing or potential problems; systematic technical accuracy review (STAR), an integral part of VBA's quality assurance program designed to measure VARO performance in processing claims; and accountability for VARO date stamps and usage of the claims process improvement business model. This business model requires employees to rotate between the different teams within the VARO to maintain skills required to process claims.
- Security of Veterans' Information—Mail handling procedures and controls for the safeguarding of veterans documents to prevent unauthorized destruction
- VARO Public Contact Functions—Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS), VA's internet based public message system that allows beneficiaries a means to communicate with VA electronically.

During our visit, we interviewed the VARO Director, Veterans Service Center Manager (VSCM), supervisors, and employees responsible for processing claims and providing benefit services to veterans and their dependents. We reported the Anchorage VARO management team faces challenges in providing benefits and services to veterans. These challenges include addressing oversight of operational activities, improving insufficient network capacity to support business processes, providing

training to staff, and managing an internal claims brokering process. The VARO did not meet VBA's standards for 13 of the 14 operational areas inspected.

Our analysis of disability claims processing revealed a 29 percent error rate at the Anchorage VARO. The error rate represents our analysis of 78 disability claims and not the entire caseload of the VARO. Of the 78 claims reviewed, processing errors occurred in 23 claims, of which only three errors directly affected veterans' benefits. The VARO underpaid two veterans, one for \$288 and one for \$4,758. The other error did not involve monetary benefits. The majority of processing errors involved claims for PTSD and *Haas* claims. These errors occurred because of a lack of training for Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSR) responsible for making disability determinations.

Of those 13 operational areas that did not meet VBA standards, 9 occurred because of a lack of management oversight. These areas were: tracking veterans claims folders, establishing the correct dates of claim, correcting errors identified by VBA's STAR quality assurance program, completing SAOs, safeguarding VARO date stamps, safeguarding veteran's personally identifiable information (PII), properly handling claims related mail, responding to electronic inquiries submitted by veterans, and, responding to congressional inquiries.

For approximately 8-months during FY 2009, the VARO had no manager for its Veterans' Service Center, a key management position affecting many operational areas in the Anchorage VARO. Further, the VARO Director geographically residing in Salt Lake City may have also attributed to diminished oversight. For example, the Director could not observe the effectiveness of SAO recommendations designed to improve station performance and delays in implementing several SAOs occurred while waiting for the Director in Salt Lake City to approve the plan.

In addition to the 14 operational areas inspected, we identified serious concerns regarding network capacity to support current business processes. Employees reported difficulty maintaining consistent access to certain VBA applications required to perform their jobs. These difficulties included applications being unresponsive and the need for employees to restart their computers several times a day. The employees informed us this problem had already existed for over one year. We estimated the Anchorage VARO might lose 7.5 productive hours per rating specialist a month due to network capacity problems.

The VARO Director implemented an internal brokering plan that moves rating-related claims between Anchorage, AK, Ft. Harrison, MT, and Salt Lake City, UT. VBA normally brokers work between VAROs because of insufficient resources to process certain types of work. The Anchorage VSCM informed us it is difficult to create a workload management plan and to control the workload of pending claims brokered to other VAROs. A supervisor from the Anchorage VARO indicated brokering impacts mail handling procedures and it is difficult to associate claims related mail with claims folder located at other VAROs. Currently, the OIG is performing a national audit to determine the effectiveness of claims brokering across all VBA regional offices.

Because the Anchorage VARO was moving so much work to other VARO's, we compared staffing levels between the Anchorage VARO and the Boise VARO to determine if the staffing level was commensurate with similar VARO's. Our analysis revealed the Boise VARO has 22 additional full-time employees while maintaining a comparable inventory of rating and non-rating claims. We based this comparison on the total number of actual claims pending in each office. We believe this provides the best comparison of actual workload, rather than the number of veterans who reside in each state or those veterans who might file claims.

The Benefits Inspection Division completed 6 VARO inspections during FY 2009. A comparison of the percentage of claims processing errors revealed the highest error rate occurred at the San Juan, PR VARO, (41 percent), followed by Anchorage, AK (29 percent), Roanoke, VA (25 percent) Baltimore, MD (20 percent), Nashville, TN (19 percent) and Wilmington, DE (11 percent). These error rates represent our analysis of a sample of disability claims and not the entire caseload at each VARO. None of the VAROs inspected complied with 100 percent of the operational areas we reviewed. The Baltimore office had the highest rate of non-compliance with VBA standards followed by Anchorage, San Juan, Nashville, Wilmington, and Roanoke.

We recommended the Director improve oversight of the quality assurance process for several of the operational areas that did not meet standards, develop a mail routing guide to ensure proper processing of mail, research the cause and solutions to improve network capacity issues, and train staff to maintain required skills. The VARO Director concurred with all of the OIG's recommendations in the inspection report.

SUMMARY

Although our inspection found the Anchorage VARO management team faces many challenges in providing benefits and services to veterans, we believe the Director's comments to our recommendations are responsive. The Benefits Inspection Division has not performed any follow-up regarding the implementation of these recommendations at this time.

Senator Begich, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. Mr. Arronte and I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Let me ask Mark Bilosz, Anchorage Regional Office, VA Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs to testify next.

STATEMENT OF MARK M. BILOSZ, DIRECTOR, ANCHORAGE REGIONAL OFFICE, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY WILLIE C. CLARK, SR., WESTERN AREA DIRECTOR; AND PATRICK KELLEY, VETERANS SERVICE CENTER MANAGER, ANCHORAGE REGIONAL OFFICE

Mr. BILOSZ. Thank you, Senator. Senator Begich, it is my pleasure to be here today to discuss our efforts in meeting the needs of veterans residing in Alaska. I will discuss important benefits and services provided to veterans living in Alaska as well as discuss concerns about the Anchorage Regional Office, addressed in the recent VA Office of Inspector General report. The Anchorage Regional Office administers the following benefits and services: disability compensation; pension benefits; vocational rehabilitation and employment assistance; and outreach for all veterans and survivor benefits. Our goal is to deliver these benefits and services in a timely, accurate, and compassionate manner. This is accomplished through the administration of a comprehensive and diverse benefits program.

Currently a total of 34 employees work in the Veterans Services Center and seven employees work in the vocational rehabilitation and employment division within the Regional Office. Employees at the Anchorage Regional Office are very motivated and provide excellent service to Alaska veterans. Performance indicators revealed that the Anchorage Regional Office is performing much better than it has in the past, completing a greater number of claims each month while improving its accuracy. As the out-based director of the Anchorage Regional Office, I visit the Anchorage office at least quarterly and often more than that. I have also daily discussions with division management to maintain an open line of communication and provide direction and oversight. A new VHA clinic is scheduled to open in May 2010 and VBA has secured space at the new site. Anchorage Regional Office is looking forward to moving into this new space as it will provide us with improved working space. In June 2009 a new Veterans Service Center Manager reported to duty at Anchorage. The Veterans Service Center Manager position was vacant for approximately 8 months. This position was vacant due to the difficult task of recruiting an experienced individual to the Anchorage area.

Additionally, the Anchorage Regional Office has recruited and hired two new supervisors. The appointment of the new supervisors has had a positive impact on the overall management and performance of the office this fiscal year.

For example, rating inventory has trended in a positive direction every month this year. Compared to December of last year, the Anchorage RO completed 226 more claims this year, showing an increase of about 16 percent. In addition, rating and authorization quality have both shown improvement.

In fact, due to the focus on internal training within our office, rating quality at the Anchorage RO exceeds the national average. The Anchorage vocational rehabilitation and employment division is one of the top performing divisions in the Nation. It was identified as a top performer in fiscal year 2009 with a VA Level II Performance Award.

In addition to providing improvements in quality, the management team has successfully implemented several policies pertaining to the workload that I would like to highlight: a policy for the timely corrective action of errors identified by the VBA; and a national quality review program was implemented. A policy outlining control and tracking of claims folder was implemented. This policy provides for better control of the location of the claims folders. The management team implemented a consistent local quality review process to complete timely quality assurance reviews that ensure veterans' service representatives are establishing direct data claims. A most recent review completed in January showed only a 1 percent error rate. As VBA has an ethical and legal responsibility to maintain adequate controls over all date stamps throughout our facilities, two new electronic date stamps with locking devices are now in place and both stamps remain in secure locations. The Veterans Service Center also has taken action to more efficiently safeguard veterans' personal identifiable information. All employees will receive training on the proper safeguard and destruction of materials, desk inspections of work stations and common areas are performed regularly.

In September 2009 a new work flow plan was implemented to ensure Veterans Service Center staff would properly control and process all mail. To ensure Congressional inquiries are processed in a timely and accurate manner, a new policy for handling Congressional correspondence was implemented in November 2009. Our goal is to complete Congressional inquiries within 5 days. So far this fiscal year we're under that goal at 4.3 days.

The VA Office of Inspector General conducted an inspection of the Anchorage Regional Office during the summer of 2009. The OIG report recommended 12 areas of improvement. Action has been taken to correct the deficiencies as identified by the OIG. Those items have been addressed in my oral and written testimony that you've received today. With the help of OIG report findings, specific shortfalls of the Anchorage Regional Office have been identified and action plans are in place.

The VA senior leadership is committed to providing the necessary resources, funding and employees and facilities to the Anchorage Regional Office which were the best possible services provided to the Alaskan veterans and their families. I'm fully committed to continue to improve claims processing in Alaska, Mr. Chairman.

This concludes my testimony. I greatly appreciate being here today and I look forward to answering any of your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bilosz follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARK M. BILOSZ, DIRECTOR, ANCHORAGE VA REGIONAL OFFICE, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Begich and Members of the Committee, it is my pleasure to be here today to discuss our efforts in meeting the needs of Veterans residing in Alaska.

The Anchorage Regional Office (RO) serves Veterans throughout the state. We also provide outreach services to Veterans in Fairbanks, Fort Wainwright, Fort Richardson, Elmendorf Air Force Base, and Eielson Air Force Base.

The Anchorage RO administers the following benefits and services:

- Disability compensation and pension for Veterans and dependents;
- Vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) assistance; and,
- Outreach for all Veteran and survivor benefits.

Our goal is to deliver these comprehensive and diverse benefits and services in a timely, accurate, and compassionate manner.

The Anchorage RO is responsible for delivering non-medical VA benefits and services to over 76,400 Veterans and their families in Alaska. Approximately 14,000 of these Veterans receive disability compensation. In fiscal year 2009, the Anchorage RO completed more than 2,100 decisions on Veterans' disability claims.

The Denver Regional Loan Center (RLC) administers VA home loan services to Alaska Veterans. Alaska Veterans are served by a full time RLC employee who is stationed at the Anchorage RO. Most Native lands are leasehold estates, which qualify for VA's guaranteed loan program. VA has guaranteed 65,575 home loans in Alaska with a cumulative loan amount of over \$9 billion.

STAFFING

The Anchorage RO hired five employees as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The employees are making direct contributions to improving claims processing by assisting with development of claims and mail processing. Currently, 34 employees work in the Veterans Service Center (VSC) and 7 employees work in VR&E.

Employees at the Anchorage RO are very motivated and provide excellent service to Alaska Veterans. Performance measures indicate that the Anchorage RO is performing well, completing a greater number of claims each month while improving accuracy.

MANAGEMENT TEAM

As the out-based Director of the Anchorage RO, I visit Anchorage at least quarterly and hold weekly videoconference calls with division management to maintain open lines of communication. In addition, I hold a weekly conference call with the Veterans Service Center Manager (VSCM) to provide direction and oversight. I also communicate regularly with the Anchorage VA Medical Center Director, as the Anchorage RO is currently co-located with the Medical Center.

A new VA clinic is scheduled to open in May 2010, and the Veterans Benefits Administration has secured space at the new site. The Anchorage RO is looking forward to moving into this new space as it will allow VSOs and all claims files to be located in the RO. The new facility will also include a large training room.

In June 2009, a new VSCM reported for duty in Anchorage. The VSCM position was vacant for approximately eight months due to the sometimes-difficult task of finding an individual with the right leadership and managerial skills to fit the position. Many times relocating an employee and his/her family to Alaska is difficult.

Additionally, the Anchorage RO recruited and hired two new supervisors. The appointment of the new supervisors has had a positive impact on the overall management and performance of the office this fiscal year.

For example, rating inventory has trended in a positive direction every month this year. Compared to December of last year, the Anchorage RO completed 226 more claims this year, an increase of 16 percent. In addition, rating and authorization quality have both improved. Rating quality at the Anchorage RO exceeds the national average.

A new training plan was developed and implemented in September 2009. Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs) receive weekly training from the Decision Review Officer. Training topics are aimed at eliminating the errors found during various reviews. All RVSRs attend the monthly Systematic Technical Accuracy Review calls to discuss commonly found errors and to prevent future errors.

The Anchorage RO's VR&E division is one of the top performing divisions in the Nation. Identified as a top performer in fiscal year 2009, the VR&E division was awarded Level II performance award.

OUTREACH EFFORTS

Our employees conduct an average of 580 personal interviews per month, and last year conducted 47 Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) briefings for 1,078 servicemembers. VR&E personnel provide monthly DTAP briefings at Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Wainwright.

The Anchorage RO conducted two significant rural outreach initiatives in 2009. In February and March, the RO participated jointly with the Alaska VA Health Care System to offer Alaska VA Education Forums. Teams traveled to Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Nome, Dillingham, Ketchikan, Juneau, and Sitka to provide benefits information and counseling to Veterans and medical providers.

We also participated in two Homeless Standdowns at Fort Richardson and in Fairbanks in August 2009. An RO representative provided information and VA benefits counseling at these events. Earlier this month, a Standdown was held to introduce Veterans to the VA Domiciliary facility in Anchorage.

In October 2009, the Anchorage RO teamed with the Medical Center to staff an information booth for 500 Veterans and family members via the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). AFN is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska. Its membership includes 178 villages (both federally-recognized tribes and village corporations), 13 regional Native corporations and 12 regional nonprofit and tribal consortiums that contract and run Federal and state programs.

As of December 31, 2009, 134 servicemembers were participating in the DOD/VA Disability Evaluation System Pilot at Ft. Wainwright, Ft. Richardson, and Elmendorf AFB. This pilot is instrumental in streamlining disability processing for separating servicemembers.

IMPROVEMENTS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

The new management team successfully implemented several new workload management and quality assurance policies and procedures.

A policy for the timely corrective action of errors identified by VBA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review Staff was implemented in November 2009. The VSCM tracks all errors and corrective actions. A review process was established to ensure Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) correctly enter claims data into our processing systems. Refresher training was provided to all claims assistants and VSRs. Weekly training is held on scheduled topics and errors identified in quality reviews.

A policy outlining the use of COVERS, VBA's system to control and track claims folders, was also implemented in November. This policy requires claims folders to be "COVERed" every Monday and also requires supervisors to perform weekly spot checks.

Systematic Analyses of Operations (SAOs) are now completed accurately and timely. A tracking mechanism is in place to monitor the status of required SAOs and training on SAO writing techniques was provided.

The VSC has also taken action to more efficiently safeguard Veterans personally identifiable information. All employees received training from the Records Management Officer in August 2009 on the proper safeguard and destruction of materials. Inspections of workstations and common areas are performed regularly. Two new electronic date stamps, with locking devices, are now in secure locations.

In September 2009, the Triage Workflow Plan was implemented to include a mail routing guide to ensure VSC staff properly control and process the mail. The Triage Coach provides the VSCM with a monthly summary of all mail actions as well as any required follow-up actions. Triage training is conducted every Thursday to ensure the workflow plan is being properly implemented.

An Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS) Quality Review Policy was implemented in November 2009 to improve quality assurance reviews. The IRIS system is the electronic method Veterans use to communicate with VA. The Public Contact supervisor reviews a minimum of five IRIS responses per employee every month. The supervisor also discusses errors during weekly training sessions with individual employees to ensure the highest level of quality and accuracy is maintained.

To ensure Congressional inquiries are processed in a timely and accurate manner, a new policy for handling Congressional correspondence was implemented in November 2009. The Public Contact Team maintains a log of all Congressional correspondence where inquiries are annotated within one day and assigned to an employee to review and complete. The individual receiving the assignment has two

working days to present a response for approval by the VSCM. Our goal is to complete Congressional inquiries within five days.

The Anchorage RO reports the results of internal brokering to VBA leadership monthly. The Western Area Office is informed monthly of any transfers of work. Brokering claims, or sending claims to another RO, is done to provide better service to our Veterans. Brokering is a short-term strategy to assist ROs with workflow challenges.

VA OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a review of the Anchorage RO from July 28, 2009 to August 6, 2009. The five areas examined were disability claims processing, data integrity, management controls, information security, and public contact. The OIG report recommended 12 areas of improvement. Action has been taken to correct the deficiencies identified by the OIG.

The Western Area Director and staff conducted an on-site review of the Anchorage RO from January 6, 2010 to January 7, 2010. A major part of this visit was to evaluate compliance with the OIG's recommendations. All action plans implemented in response to the OIG's recommendations were reviewed for compliance and effectiveness. The Western Area Director found the Anchorage RO had implemented the required actions to be fully compliant with all 12 of the OIG recommendations.

CONCLUSION

VA leadership and the employees of the Anchorage RO are committed to ensuring the best possible service is provided to Alaska Veterans and their families. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I greatly appreciate being here today and look forward to answering your questions.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. I know you have two individuals with you also. We'd like to introduce them. Willie Clark, who is the Western Area Director, and Patrick Kelley, Veterans Service Manager for the Anchorage Regional Office. Thank you for being here. I will have some questions, though now I'd like to now introduce, Brigadier General Tom Katkus.

General KATKUS. Good morning, Senator.

Senator BEGICH. If I can make one comment to all Alaskans. You should be very proud of the Brigadier General. He was there in Washington, DC, last week with the snow as deep as can be, but he kept his appointments with his team. I thank you for that.

STATEMENT OF BRIGADIER GENERAL TOM KATKUS, ADJUTANT GENERAL, ALASKA NATIONAL GUARD

General KATKUS. Senator, I have more snow in my front yard at home.

Senator, I'm a member of an organization, a very proud privileged position that takes a holistic view of its membership. We have programs in place to mentor and develop young children and young adults into the military. We take care of our military members through paid compensation training, and then we take care of those veterans who leave the organization through retirements, national cemeteries, et cetera. What I'd like to report on is one particular portion that was very small but has been a very intricate part of Alaska, and that's the Alaska Territorial Guard. They didn't fit too many molds out there and through a great deal of effort I'd like to report a very positive development. As of February 1 the Federal Government reinstated all of the ATG members' retirement benefits. There was a lot of bureaucratic process to get this accomplished. There's been a great deal of confusion about how the ATG veterans were credited with this act of service that they performed between 1942 and 1947. Each member that received his dis-

charge was credited with 5 years again of active Federal service. And these 5 years have a monetary impact on veterans only if they served in the National Guard or active duty for 15 or more years and this 5 years of Alaska Territorial Guard time made them eligible for a Federal retirement.

The State of Alaska does not consider the 5 years of active Federal service toward the Alaska National Guard State Annuity unless this provides the veteran enough credit for the National Guard retirement. Of roughly 6,500 members of Alaska Territorial Guard between 1942 and 1947, we have received 1,592 discharge applications from veterans or family members. Of that number, 1,057 ATG discharges have been received from the U.S. Army. We have over 72 charges that are pending certification by the Army Personnel Center. We had 149 discharges of the 163 living Alaska Territorial members that we've identified. Of those, six applications are pending certification in St. Louis and eight have not applied as of this time. Our plan is to continue presenting these discharges at ceremonies in each member's community. In 2009, we had posted over 20 such ceremonies in villages throughout Alaska. There are currently 22 ATG members eligible for military retirement. They each spent 20-plus years of active military service with additional ATG time that we've managed to credit. That now is calculated into their retirement check and adjusted accordingly by the defense accounting system. We're continuing our research to find other members who now qualify for retirement as a result of this act of Federal service. We have found four new ATG members eligible. Three will be receiving or have received their check on 1 February and the fourth will be receiving his check March 1. Another benefit of this investigation into the ATG: along with retirements from service, survivors' benefits are awarded to widows of those members.

We've worked hard to dig through the military personnel records and found that there were ATG members that had 15 years of National Guard service. As a result of this search, we've identified 32 spouses that might receive survivor benefit payments now. As of 27 January, all 32 packages have been sent to the auditors at St. Louis. They'll go through to make sure that all time is calculated properly, and those spouses who are eligible will start receiving the monthly survivor benefits. That's approximately 55 percent of the base pay of their spouse. This also includes health care. With those numbers from the ATG service, the list goes on. We found that six members of the ATG who were eligible for the National Guard are now eligible for State retirement with the National Guard. So these retirement documents were sent to the Division of Retirement for the State, they'll review them and now that they are officially retired from the National Guard, they are eligible for the State annuity. So it's not 5 years of active Federal service, but rather 15 years of State annuity as they were members and in employment of the State after 1969.

The VA offers a grave marker free of charge for each veteran. We initially had problems last summer when the VA would not send markers to the Post Office boxes. After discussing this issue with the director of mortuary services, this was corrected and our ATG veterans now receive this honorable benefit.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the Alaska National Guard military funeral honorary team, which is supported by National Guard Bureau. The team has a motto of honoring those who serve, which is reflected by their willingness to serve any place any time. Last year the funeral honors team provided 158 services to servicemembers throughout Alaska.

Additionally, as it applies to ATG veterans, if they did not receive an honor ceremony in the past, the team will go out and have the service and present the flag to the family. Senator, thank you for your time today, and thank you, personally for the efforts that have been made by the Congressional delegation over the past years to make sure that this very small, but very important piece of Alaska's history and our veterans was reflected positively and service to them could be completed.

[The prepared statement of General Katkus follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF BRIG. GEN. THOMAS KATKUS, ADJUTANT GENERAL, ALASKA NATIONAL GUARD; AND COMMISSIONER, ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERAN AFFAIRS

Good Morning, I'm Brigadier General Thomas Katkus, the Adjutant General for the Alaska National Guard and Commissioner for the Alaska Department of Military and Veteran Affairs.

This morning I would like to provide a status update on the Alaska Territorial Guard. Effective February 1, the Federal Government reinstated ATG member's retirement benefits.

There has been a great deal of confusion among the ATG veterans due to a poor understanding on how time is credited for their active Federal service between 1942 and 1947. Each member upon receipt of their discharge is credited five years of active Federal service. These five years have a monetary impact on the veteran only if they served in the National Guard or active duty military, for 15+ years and the five years of ATG time made them eligible for Federal retirement. The state of Alaska does not consider the five years of active Federal service toward the Alaskan National Guard state annuity unless this provides the veteran enough credit for a National Guard retirement.

Of the roughly 6,500 original ATG members, 1,592 ATG discharge applications have been received by DMVA from veterans and family members.

1,057 ATG discharges have been received from the U. S. Army. Over 72 discharges are pending certification by the Army Personnel Center.

149 discharges have been issued to the 163 living ATG members that we have identified. Six applications are pending certification in Saint Louis and eight have not applied.

We plan is to continue presenting these discharges at ceremonies in each member's community. In 2009, we hosted 20 of these ceremonies in villages throughout Alaska.

There are 22 ATG members eligible for Federal military retirement. They each spent 20+ years in active military service and with the addition of the ATG time now receive a combined retirement check from the Defense Accounting System.

We are continuing the research to find other members who now qualify for retirement. To date we have found four new ATG retirement eligible veterans. The first three started receiving their new check on the first of February. The last member will be receiving his check by the first of March.

Along with retirements come survivor's benefits for widows. We have worked hard to dig through our military personnel records to find all the ATG members who served 15+ years in the National Guard. As a result of this search, we've identified 32 spouses that might receive survivor's benefits payments. As of 27 January have all 32 packages are on the desks of the auditors in St. Louis. Once they go through the verification process, those spouses who are eligible will start receiving the monthly survivor's benefits. This includes pay and healthcare.

We also found six members of the ATG who were eligible for National Guard state retirements. These retirement documents were sent to the Division of Retirements. There are no surviving members or spouses found and the benefit will be paid to the next of kin.

The VA offers a grave maker free of charge for each veteran. We had a problem last summer when the VA would not send the markers to Post Office boxes. After discussing this issue with the Director of Mortuary Services this was corrected and our ATG veterans now receive this honorable benefit.

I would be remiss in not mentioning our Alaska National Guard Military Funeral Honors Team along with the VA grave markers. This team has a motto of "Honoring Those Who Serve" and this is reflected by their willingness to serve any place any time. They performed over 158 services in 2009 alone and are projecting even more services this year. Additionally, if an ATG veteran did not receive an Honor Ceremony in the past, the team will go out now and do the service and present the flag to the family.

Thank you for your time today to bring you up to date on this very important Alaskan issue.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much, General. Let me ask the last presenter, Jan Myers, Director of Family Programs, Alaska Department of Military Veterans Affairs. We want to see how that mic works. We may do a little swap. We'll see how that works.

**STATEMENT OF JAN MYERS, DIRECTOR, FAMILY PROGRAMS,
ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Ms. MYERS. Good morning, sir. My name is Jan Myers, and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I serve as the Alaska National Guard State family program director and as such have oversight of programs designed to assist and care for our military veterans and their families. We are available 24 hours, 7 days a week and 365 days a year with high quality troop and family support to meet the needs of our servicemembers, veterans, and their families. I will briefly describe some of those programs pertinent to today's discussion.

The Alaska National Guard family assistance centers offer information and referral services to troops and families from all military branches, whether active, guard, reserve, retired, or not. Professional consideration and confidentiality are fundamental elements found at each family assistance center. With topics running the gamut from personnel issues requiring advice to difficult challenges resulting in referrals to outside researches. We have nine family assistance centers throughout Alaska that are ready to serve military members, veterans, and their families in building strong resilient communities. Our sexual assault prevention and response program's mission is to end sexual violence and ensure high-quality comprehensive and preventative measures, encouraging competent servicemembers and families. We also promote change that fosters a military environment that is responsive to victims and survivors of sexual assault. The suicide prevention program recognizes the seriousness of suicidal behaviors and potential within the military. The mission is to implement appropriate control measures that address and minimize the risk factors of suicide while strengthening the factors that mitigate those risks.

We aid and equip commanders and leaders with skills and resources necessary to combat suicide by providing quality interactive training on prevention, intervention, and postvention. We work to ensure early identification and treatment of emerging deployment-related health concerns for our troops and veterans. Through our military life consultants, we provide short-term non-medical solution-focused counseling services to individuals, couples, and families. We advocate psychological fitness for our members

and their families through the office of our psychological health director. We also provide training on topics related to military life and everyday issues. The child and youth program helps our youth understand why family members serve in the military and introduce coping skills to deal with the stresses of deployment.

Employer support of Guard and Reserve seeks to promote a culture by which all American employers support and value the military service of their employees. The Alaska committee conducts employer and military outreach and an ombudsman program to recognize outstanding support, increase awareness of the law, and resolve conflicts through mediation. We are evolving now to assist troops with finding jobs. The transition assistant adviser is the Statewide point of contact to assist members in assessing veterans' affairs, benefits, and health care services. They provide assistance in obtaining entitlements through the TRICARE military health system and access to community resources whether our troops are going from civilian life to active duty or retiring. We are there to help them through the process.

We also provide assistance with education benefits to ensure all members have an opportunity to attain their educational goals. Our Honor Guard, as the General mentioned, performs funeral honors in accordance with service tradition to all eligible veterans when requested by an authorized family member. Our Yellow Ribbon Program provides information and referral for servicemembers, families and employers throughout the deployment cycle. The Yellow Ribbon Reconnecting Veterans Outreach Program is a partnership constituted between Alaska National Guard, Alaska Veterans Affairs, and Veterans Service Officers from the State and was funded through a Federal appropriation. This program has been operating since January 2009 and the goal is to visit every village in our great State while assessing our veterans' needs. To date nearly 125 villages have been connected and 1,021 veterans or family members have been personally briefed, questions answered, and a survey filled out. We also provide VA applications for our veterans. The outreach team has found older veterans, including the Alaska Territorial Guard or their family members to be our biggest audience. They appreciate our effort and applaud the follow-up.

All 42 of our folks are available to travel where the need is and we service all branches no matter what status. I appreciate, again, your time for me to be here.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Myers follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAN MYERS, DIRECTOR, FAMILY PROGRAMS, ALASKA
DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY VETERANS AFFAIRS

Good Morning. I am Jan Myers and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I serve as the AKNG State Family Program Director and as such have oversight of programs designed to assist and care for our Military, Veterans and their Families. We are available 24 hours, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, with high quality Troop & Family Support to meet the needs of our Servicemembers, Veterans and their Families. I will briefly describe some of those programs pertinent to today's discussion.

The Alaska NG Family Assistance Centers (FACs) offer information and referral services to Troops & Families from all military branches, whether active, Guard/Reserve, retired or not. Professional consideration and confidentiality are fundamental elements found at each FAC, with topics running the gamut from personal issues requiring advice to difficult challenges resulting in referrals to outside resources. We

have 9 FACs throughout Alaska that are ready to serve, assisting military members, veterans and their Families in building strong resilient communities.

Our Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Program's mission is to end sexual violence and ensure high quality, comprehensive, and preventative measures, encouraging competent Servicemembers and Families. We also promote change that fosters a military environment that is responsive to victims and survivors of sexual assault.

The Suicide Prevention Program recognizes the seriousness of suicidal behaviors and potential within the Military. The mission is to implement appropriate control measures that address and minimize the risk factors of suicide while strengthening the factors that mitigate those risks. We aid and equip commanders and leaders with the skills and resources necessary to combat suicide by providing quality interactive training on prevention, intervention, and postvention. We work to ensure early identification and treatment of emerging deployment-related health concerns for our troops and veterans.

Through our Military Life Consultants, we provide short term, non-medical; solution focused counseling services to individuals, couples, and Families. We advocate psychological fitness for our members and their Families through the office of our Psychological Health Director. We also provide training on topics related to military life and everyday issues.

The Child and Youth Program helps our youth understand why Family members serve in the military and introduce coping skills to deal with the stresses of deployment.

Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve seeks to promote a culture in which all American employers support and value the military service of their employees. The Alaska Committee conducts employer and military outreach, and an ombudsman program to recognize outstanding support, increase awareness of the law, and resolve conflicts through mediation. We are evolving now to assist troops with finding jobs.

The Transition Assistance Advisor is the statewide point of contact to assist members in accessing Veterans Affairs benefits and healthcare services. They provide assistance in obtaining entitlements through the TRICARE Military Health System and access to community resources. Whether our troops are going from civilian life to active duty or retiring, we are there to help them through the process.

We also provide assistance with education benefits to ensure all members have an opportunity to attain their educational goals.

Our Honor Guard renders professional military funeral honors, in accordance with service tradition, to all eligible veterans when requested by an authorized Family member.

Our Yellow Ribbon Program provides information and referral for servicemembers, Families and employers throughout the deployment cycle. The Yellow Ribbon, "Reconnecting Veterans Program" is a partnership constituted between Alaska National Guard, Alaska Veterans Affairs, and the Veteran Service Officers from the state and was funded through a Federal Appropriation. This program has been operating since January 2009 and the goal is to visit every village in our great state while assessing our veteran's needs. To date, nearly 125 villages have been connected and 1021 Veterans or Family members have been personally briefed, questions answered, and a survey filled out. We also provide VA applications for our veterans. The outreach team has found older veterans, including the Alaska Territorial Guard or their Family members, to be our biggest audience. They appreciate our effort and applaud the follow-up.

All 42 of our folks are available to travel where the need is and we service all branches, no matter their status.

I appreciate your time and I am available for any questions.

ADDENDUM



**Alaska National Guard Family Progr
Family Assistance Center**

P.O. Box 5800, Fort Richardson, Alaska 99505-2555
Telephone (907) 428-6663 / Fax: (907) 428-6685
Outside Anchorage Toll-Free: 1-888-917-3608



The contacts for this informational paper are the following: Jan Myers, State Family Program Director, (907) 428-6680 or Gretchen Nealy, State Crisis Manager, (907) 428-6219.

- 1) The Alaska National Guard is working hard to improve the response to Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Post-vention through a variety of programs and education.
- 2) The current programs that we have in place for Prevention and Awareness are the following:
 - a) In response to the soaring numbers of suicide the Army ordered a "stand down" between February 15 and March 15, 2009. This stand down was created to be completed in a three phase program.
 - i) Phase I was to be completed as a two hour interactive training video "Beyond the Front" to illustrate that the decisions that we make each day, be it small or large, has an impact on fellow soldiers, family members and the community that surrounds them.
 - ii) Phase II also uses an interactive video called the "Shoulder to Shoulder". In addition to establishing the credo "No soldier left behind" it allows small groups to partake in discussion of how to react and be alert to those suffering with thoughts of suicide.
 - iii) Phase III was designed to create a focus on continuing education and awareness through annual trainings and will be held as needed throughout the year.
 - b) Suicide Awareness Annual Training was designed to create a safe place for service members to gain knowledge of the issues and where to seek help. The current program that is in place for the Army National Guard is ACE (Ask -Care-Escort). The Air Force is in the process of rolling out their ACE program. We are now able to offer an ACE program for families that touch on the stresses. Touching on the stresses and difficulties that the families deal with on a day to day basis and during deployment. *On the 19th of February we were able to speak to 100 soldiers and family members at a 60 day Yellow Ribbon Event on the subject of suicide intervention and resources.*
 - c) Suicide TALK is an interactive training created by the presenter through the material provided by Living Works. This training has been adapted for Suicide Awareness Talks for the Air and Army National Guard and can be used with ages 13 and older when working with families and youth. We have been able to reach into our communities, Bethell, Kotzebue and Ft. Greely to encourage the use of the AKNG qualified instructors to facilitate this program. This program uses the acronym TALK (Tell-Ask-Listen-Keep Safe) to bring awareness to communities about sheltering the talk of suicide, to speak out and embrace that it is a problem and that it is ok to address it at any age.
 - d) Our Crisis Care Coordinator has reached out through the Alaska Native Health Consortium to promote AKNG programs to enhance the community and partnering ties between the AKNG and the State of Alaska's Health Care facilities.
- 3) The National Guard realizes that although we offer training and educating there are some times that we must provide means for intervention. We have established and adopted the following programs.
 - a) Post Deployment Health Re- Assessment (PDHRA) is part of the force health protection program. It extends the continuum of care for Service members' deployment-related health concerns. The PDHRA provides education, screening, assessment and access to care for a wide variety of questions and concerns that one may have about their health after they return from deployment. With this program we are able to help a service member, by assisting in obtaining their entitlements through the Veteran Affairs Program. We have been successful in

SATELLITE OFFICES:

Bethel: (907) 543-2759 Fairbanks: (907) 459-8729 Fort Greely: (907) 873-4906 Juneau: (907) 523-4020 Nome: (907) 443-6263



**Alaska National Guard Family Program
Family Assistance Center**

P.O. Box 5800, Fort Richardson, Alaska 99505-2555
Telephone (907) 428-6663 / Fax: (907) 428-6685
Outside Anchorage Toll-Free: 1-888-917-3608



- bringing in service members from across the country, up to six assessments, to meet the emotional, physical and psychological needs that arise due to deployment and reintegration.
- b) Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) is a Living Works Education Program that the military has adopted for training service and family members to grasp the necessary skills to provide suicide intervention. This course takes place over 2 days, 14 hours of training. It is an interactive session working with small groups. This course is ideal for everyone, military, family and the community. We will be offering this course in Juneau, March 2010, with our veteran population.
 - c) Suicide Intervention Officers (SIO), the AK Army National Guard is required to assign an SIO per unit. Each one of these service members will receive training through the ASIST program offering support to those service members that are suffering with thoughts of suicide.
 - d) The Director of Psychological Health (DPH) provides high quality services that are National Guard member specific, friendly and comprehensive, while increasing state utilization rates to promote service member readiness. Assisting program managers and supervisors to improve service member's readjustment to civilian life by managing professional services and/or overseeing an individual's mental health needs. Providing consultation and support to help address organizational and individual health care situations that have a detrimental effect on the member's reintegration to civilian life. Offering consultative guidance and support to senior management on state specific mental health needs based on Guard member demographics and mental health status and by providing National Guard oriented mental health training throughout the full spectrum of the deployment cycle.
 - e) Military Family Life Consultants (MFLC) provide short-term, non-medical counseling to service members and their families through the MFLC Program to augment existing military support programs. Through the MFLC Program, licensed clinical providers assist service members and their families with issues they may face through the cycle of deployment - from leaving their loved ones and possibly living and working in harm's way to reintegrating with their community and family. The MFLC program provides support for a range of issues including: relationships, crisis intervention, stress management, grief, occupational and other individual and family issues.
 - f) The Chaplains provide 24 hours/7 days a week support to service and family members and our community when necessary for all facets of life.
- 4) Post Vention is a vital part of any suicide. As we have seen not only does the loss of a loved one effects the immediate family and friends but has an influence over the community. The AKNG reaches out to the families, service members and community by providing the following resources.
- a) Crisis Intervention through group, peer and individual support. By offering a safe venue for those grieving from their loss to express their emotions in a structured group setting.
 - b) With the thought of Post Vention we can offer many of the same resources that we offer through the intervention programs. Our counseling and chaplain resources are available 24 hours/7 days a week. We offer services and referrals to those who are suffering the loss of a loved one. In addition we have traveled to educate communities on resources available after the loss of a community member and how to address the affect suicide has as a whole.
- 5) Upcoming Events:
- a) ASIST: March 15-16, 2010 – Juneau AKNG Armory
 - b) ASIST: April 2010 – Fairbanks AKNG Armory

SATELLITE OFFICES:

Bethel: (907) 543-2759 Fairbanks: (907) 459-8729 Fort Greely: (907) 873-4906 Juneau: (907) 523-4020 Nome: (907) 443-6263



ALASKA NATIONAL GUARD

J1/Personnel Support Services Team



Personnel Support Services Team	
State Family Program Director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Ms. Jan Myers/ jan.myers@us.army.mil /428-6680 ▪ Oversight of Service Member and Family Support Services. ▪ Provide 24/7/365 high quality Family services to meet the needs of the Guard and Reserve service members and their Families. ▪ Source of accurate and current information. ▪ Information and referral ▪ Coordination with Rear Detachments of deployed units. ▪ Assistance during local and National emergencies and evacuations. ▪ Oversight of state grants
Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Coordinator & State Crisis Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Gretchen Nealy/ gretchen.nealy1@us.army.mil /428-6219 <p>The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Programs mission is to end sexual violence and ensure high quality, comprehensive, and preventative measures encouraging competent service members and Family members; and to promote change that fosters a military environment that is responsive to victims and survivors of sexual assault.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides 24 Hour Victim Assistance/Advocacy, Annual Training, Domestic Violence Prevention and Reporting, Education, Suicide Intervention, CISM. ▪ Available Training: ASIST (Suicide Intervention), Bystander Training, Four Lenses, ACE (Suicide Prevention), Suicide TALK (ages 13 and older) <p>If you or someone you know may have been a victim of sexual assault or domestic violence you have options, militarily and through the State of Alaska to receive confidential services. Check with your SARC or a Victim Advocate today to learn more about Restricted and Unrestricted reporting options.</p>
Military Family Life Consultants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Two positions currently vacant /428-7524 <p>Provides direct short term, non medical, solution focused counseling services to individuals, couples, Families and groups for situations resulting from commonly occurring life circumstances. The counseling service will assist Service members and Families in dealing with relationships, crisis intervention, stress management, Family issues, parent-child communications, Family separations, and reintegration due to deployments.</p>
Military OneSource Representative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Laurie Hogan/ laura.hogan@militaryonesource.com /428-6293 <p>State expert on the resources available in the communities where Service members and their Families reside. Will travel throughout the state to meet with Families, units and Family support staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can provide a 10 minute to 2 hour trainings regarding several topics related to military life and everyday issues. There is a form located at www.militaryonesource.com under "events and presentations" to request a presentation.
Transition Assistance Advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Mirta Adams/ mirta.v.adams@us.army.mil /428-6208 <p>The Transition Assistance Advisor (TAA) program is to serve as the statewide point of contact to assist members in accessing Veterans Affairs benefits and healthcare services. Provide assistance in obtaining entitlements through the TRICARE Military Health System and access to community resources.</p>

Child & Youth Program Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Joan Boltz/ joan.boltz@us.army.mil /428-6670 ▪ Assist youth in understanding why their Family member serves in the military ▪ Help youth realize their coping skills to deal with the stressors of the deployment cycle ▪ Provide accurate and useful information and resources to the parents and youth ▪ Encourage youth to develop positive self-esteem, self-confidence, show respect for self and others; and help youth to develop team skills and leadership abilities ▪ Assist youth in becoming more aware of hazards of substance abuse and other destructive behaviors ▪ Provide teachers and other community members with helpful deployment, separation and redeployment (reunion) information through work with the Education Deployment Task Force/JFSAP Education Outreach
Family Readiness Assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Rich Williams/ richard.williams4@us.army /428-6669 ▪ Provide training, hands-on assistance, and information to subordinate unit commanders and unit Family readiness groups on all aspects of Family readiness, wellbeing, and deployment cycle support. Maintain up-to-date Family Readiness library including, but not limited to directives, policies, regulations and program material
Employer Support of Guard and Reserve Administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Jamie Abordanodo/ jamie.wunn@us.army.mil /428-6829 <p>Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve is a Department of Defense agency that seeks to promote a culture in which all American employers support and value the military service of their employees. The Alaska Committee conducts employer outreach, military outreach, awards, training, public affairs and ombudsman program to recognize outstanding support, increase awareness of the law, and resolve conflicts through mediation.</p> <p>To nominate your employer for outstanding service go to www.esgr.org</p>
Director of Psychological Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Lyn Tashea/ lyn.tashea@us.army.mil /428-6662 <p>The mission of the National Guard Psychological Health Program is to advocate, promote, and guide National Guard members and their Families by supporting psychological fitness for operational readiness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct 24/7/365 access to your state DPH • Assessments • Referral services • Case management services • Follow-up services • Commander consultation services • Leadership training • Wellness education • Critical incident management services
Chaplain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Rick Koch/ rick.koch@us.army.mil /428-6904 <p>Chaplains are ready to meet the pastoral and spiritual needs of all our National Guard members, their Families and all of our civilian support staff. Counseling sessions with chaplains are always strictly confidential and no records are kept. We also offer quality relationship enhancing programs for couples, Families and singles through Strong Bonds at no cost. To register for events, go to www.strongbonds.org and sign up.</p>
Yellow Ribbon Program Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: ANG Nikki Victory/ nichole.victory@us.army.mil /428-6606 ▪ POC: ARNG Mary Sorensen/ mary.sorensen@us.army.mil /428-7501 <p>We will provide information, services, referral and proactive outreach opportunities for service members, Families, employers and youth throughout the entire deployment cycle. We will work hand-in-hand with the Alaska National Guard Family Programs to ensure that service members and their Families receive the services available to them to include Family counseling, DEERs, TriCare, VA support, financial planning and more.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Programs are provided on a 90-60-30 day Pre-Deployment/30-60-90 day Post-Deployment training for all service and Family members.

Education Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: SGT Marisa Diaz-Rivera/ NGAK-EDUservicesoffice@ng.army.mil /428-6228 <p>There are numerous education benefits that may be available to you through the National Guard or your prior military service. You may be eligible for Federal Tuition Assistance, University of Alaska Scholarship, Non-University of Alaska Tuition Reimbursement, Chapter 1606-Select Reserve GI Bill, Chapter 1607-REAP, Chapter 30-Active Duty GI Bill, Chapter 33-Post 9/11 GI Bill, and/or Chapter 33-Post 9/11 Transferability.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides guidance counseling and Educational Briefings to Service Members
Honor Guard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Rod Julian/ rodney.julian@us.army.mil /428-6420 ▪ Renders professional military funeral honors, in accordance with service tradition, to all eligible veterans when requested by an authorized Family member. ▪ Trains entire units or individual volunteers for funeral and flag detail
Survivor Outreach Services Specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Rick Cavens/ richard.cavens@us.army.mil /428-6606 <p>Survivor Outreach Services demonstrate the Guard's commitment to Families of the Fallen and the retired. If a deceased person wore a military uniform their Family belongs to us; and we are to make sure that as a Family continues to grieve they don't fall through the system's cracks. Our mission is to expand and improve services to survivors. Define roles and the responsibilities of military agencies to Families of the deceased to improve the response of their needs while streamlining the process for Families of the Fallen. We do this by coordinating local and Federal benefits, offering financial counseling, and providing long term grief support.</p>
Suicide Prevention Program & Post Deployment Health Reassessment Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: SFC Russell Overman/ russell.overman@us.army.mil /428-6241 <p>To recognize the seriousness of suicidal behaviors and potential within the AKNG. To implement appropriate control measures that address and minimize the risk factors of suicide while strengthening the factors that mitigate those risks. To aid and equip commanders and leaders with the skills and resources necessary to combat suicide by providing quality interactive training on prevention, intervention, and postvention. To ensure early identification and treatment of emerging deployment-related health concerns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop positive life coping skills. ▪ Encourage help-seeking behavior. ▪ Raise awareness of, and vigilance towards suicide prevention. ▪ Synchronize and integrate our efforts with joint-forces' and community initiatives. ▪ Conduct suicide surveillance, training, analysis, and reporting on an ongoing basis.
Re-connecting Veteran Mobile Support Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Alice Barr/ alice.barr@us.army.mil /428-7594 ▪ The Mobile Support Team delivers benefit information to all veterans, to include service and Family members, of all services outside of the Anchorage Service Area. These benefits include filing Veteran Affairs (VA) health claims, enrollment into VA healthcare, education, home loan, Military Funeral Benefits and any additional VA entitlements. ▪ Additional services include: TriCare information, ESGR and Behavioral Health. ▪ The team consists of: the Transition Assistance Advisor, Veteran Service Officer, Veteran Health Administrator, Yellow Ribbon Representative and behavioral health (LCSW).
Family Assistance Center Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ POC: Carrie Schrader/ carolyn.schrader@us.army.mil /428-6663 or toll free 1-888-917-3608 <p>Family Assistance Centers (FACs) offer information and referral services to Families from all military branches, whether active, Guard/Reserve, or retired. Professional consideration and confidentiality are fundamental elements found at each FAC, with topics running the gamut from personal issues requiring advice to difficult challenges resulting in referrals to outside resources. FAC Specialists are ready to serve, assisting military leaders and Families in building strong military Family readiness.</p>

ALASKA NATIONAL GUARD FAMILY PROGRAM & TROOP SUPPORT LOCATIONS:

Joint Force Headquarters

Office Hours: 8am – 4pm, M-F

Main Line: 907-428-6663

Fax: 907-428-6685

Toll-Free (Outside Anchorage): 1-888-917-3608

Physical Location: Camp Denali

Rooms D-105 & D-101

Fort Richardson, AK

Mailing Address:

PO Box 5800

Ft. Richardson, AK 99505

Statewide Family Assistance Centers / Wing Family Program locations:

Bethel Family Assistance Center

Bethel Armory

PO Box 508

Bethel, Alaska 99559

907-543-2759

Fairbanks Family Assistance Center

Fairbanks Armory

PO Box 83381

Fairbanks, AK 99708

907-459-8729

Juneau Family Assistance Center

Juneau Armory

PO Box 210000

Juneau, AK 99821-0000

907-523-4020

Mat-Su Family Assistance Center

Alcantra Armory

3401 E. Bogard Road

Wasilla, AK 99654

907-373-9446

Nome Family Assistance Center

Nome Armory

Pouch 490

Nome, AK 99762

907-443-6263

Fort Greely (Delta Junction)

PO Box 310009

Fort Greely, AK 99731

Family Readiness: 907-873-4906

Eielson ANG (Fairbanks)

168th ARW Family Program

2680 Flightline Ave. Ste 117

Eielson AFB, AK 99702-1740

907-377-8715

Kulis ANG (Anchorage)

176th Wing Family Program

5005 Raspberry Rd., Bldg. 37

Anchorage, AK 99502

907-249-1130

Yellow Ribbon Reconnecting Veterans

Mobile Outreach Team

A Partnership constituted between Alaska National Guard, Alaska Veterans Affairs Behavioral Health, and the Veteran Service Officers of VFW, American Legion, DAV, Purple Heart and Vietnam Vets was funded through a Federal Appropriation. This program has been operating since January, 2009. To date, nearly 125 villages have been visited with the remainder to be accomplished by the end of September, 2010. The team is generally on the road 3 weeks out of every month. To date, nearly 125 villages have been visited

- Outreach is successful.
- Many Vietnam veterans have come forward to seek services again, after having been denied many years ago. "It's been 41 years since anyone has sought us out." We are finding many Vietnam veterans who are now struggling with medical issues which may connect directly to their time in service in Vietnam.
- Many WWII vets are seeking benefits as well.
- Assistance is being provided to access missing documentation – DD214's and NGB 22's, headstone applications, medical and service records, and educational benefits individual to each veteran.
- OEF/OIF veterans are seeking assistance. Some are requesting that mental health groups be started remotely and this being planned in collaboration with Manelliq Corp.
- St Paul Island requested a visit at a specific time and the tribal liaison contacted and scheduled all veterans to be available during the outreach. There were two OEF/OIF veterans in attendance, both separated out of Ft. Richardson, and neither with information about how to utilize their education benefits.
- Ilanka Clinic in Cordova requested an early visit by the team, then planned and coordinated the calling of over 72 veterans, cooked a lasagna dinner, and hosted the event resulting in over 100 veterans and their families being assisted in one evening. Irene Washington, VA Rural Liaison, presented information on the MOU between Ilanka Clinic and VA. Since that time 3 veterans have sought assistance through the clinic.
- ATG families have requested military funeral honors for those passed and have been assisted in receiving headstones for their veterans. Multiple applications for previously unaccounted ATG veterans have been received and processed.
- Spouses of deceased veterans have applied for surviving spouse benefits. On Prince of Wales Island we found a surviving spouse who had attempted to follow through shortly after her spouse's demise but was so overwhelmed at the time she was unable to complete the task. With assistance, she was able to finish the applications for surviving spouse and this is now being worked by the VA.
- Having Veteran Service Officer support has been invaluable as it allows us to initiate the process and carry it to the receiver. Questions can be answered on site and appropriate information gathered.
- The VA Rural liaison, Irene Washington, has been tremendously helpful in meeting the needs of the Kuskokwim area when traveling with the team. Her knowledge of culture and language create a learning environment for all.
- We continue to receive requests for additional services post visits and regularly receive follow up phone calls regarding individual progress with the system.

Suggested Changes

1. TRICARE Prime Remote

The TRICARE Prime Remote benefit should be amended to extend the entitlement to other categories.

For example: It should be offered to National Guard and Reserve component members during their TAMP benefit. Many times these Service Members and their Families face financial hardships in transition back to life before deployment on Title 10 (active duty) orders. This extended time of TRICARE Prime Remote coverage would assist with cost shares and also offers a travel entitlement which could play a major part for members residing in remote areas who may need to seek care for injuries or illnesses which surface within those 180 days of transitional coverage.

Another example: This benefit should be extended to Families of deployed service members without restriction. In other words, if an active duty family chooses to relocate while their spouse is deployed, if their relocation is to a remote area, they should be allowed to enroll. Also, if a Reserve Component family enrolled into TRICARE Prime Remote relocates from the address the service member had during deployment, they should be allowed to continue with the benefit. Or, when a single or dual service member family must deploy and their children must relocate to a remote area, they should be allowed to utilize the TRICARE Prime Remote benefit while in the care of their custodian.

2. MRP 2 Process

This process is in place to assist National Guard and Reserve Component members return on active duty orders and assigned them to the Warrior Transition Battalion for deployment associated illnesses and/or injuries. At this time, this process is lengthy and requires input and recommendations from various personnel prior to the request moving on to National Guard Bureau for final approval. The process leaves little room for the service member's privacy rights. The process is dependent on too many people and thus is dependent on these people completing it in a timely manner. The process should be amended to accommodate the privacy of the service member and to eliminate some of the time it takes to complete the packet.

Also, this process should be reevaluated to include verbiage allowing our Active Guard Reserve (AGR) members who meet the qualifying criteria and need this benefit to apply. It has been a challenge getting these service members back on Title 10 orders. The response most given to the AGR is, "You already have all the medical care you need available to you." However, their illness or injury may prevent them from performing the current duties their AGR position requires. Therefore, we need to take care of these AGR members in the same manner we are caring for our traditional/m-day service member.

3. Education Benefit

Our Active Guard Reserve members should be offered the Post 9-11 (Chapter 33) GI Bill with the same regulations as those active duty service members on Title 10.

4. VA Benefits

VA benefits are offered to veterans with line of duty or service connected injuries and or illnesses. If a service member leaves active duty or his/her guard commitment, with a Dishonorable Discharge, service members are not entitled to care through the VA. This should be amended to care for veterans who may have been discharged in this manner prior to their PTSD or TBI injuries being diagnosed. Their discharge status should be reviewed and changed as needed to better serve all veterans.

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Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. We're going to be tight on time. I'm going to walk through a few things here. I don't want to go too far past noon. I know the Anchorage assembly and the mayor would not want me to sit in the seat too long. They have so much business to take care of tonight. I'll leave it at that. [Laughter.]

First, thank you, Ray, for coming this long distance and being part of Alaska. One thing you mentioned which I wanted to follow up on—it wasn't here that you talked about, it was outside the building while we were talking about the tour of the VA building. You talked about new job opportunities in regard to technology and the Internet. Can you put on the record what you envision there?

Secretary JEFFERSON. Yes.

Senator BEGICH. I thought that was interesting, especially for us here in Alaska—a new avenue.

Secretary JEFFERSON. Sir, one of the things I've been looking at is: How do we provide value and help veterans in rural America? Communities where you don't have Fortune 1000 companies, have smaller enterprises, and where people are geographically dispersed. It's hard to move around. We're going to be in Kotzebue on Wednesday and Thursday. What could be an innovative solution? One of the things that I want to explore is the value of e-commerce: Internet-based home businesses, where an individual using the Internet can create a whole business around us. There's actually an interesting book out which has been a *New York Times* best seller maybe a year now called *The 4-Hour Workweek* that lays out the whole model. I think you'd want to spend more than 4 hours a week on it.

Senator BEGICH. We're looking for that job.

Secretary JEFFERSON. This individual has done quite well for himself, for no other reason than for the book. On a serious note what we want to look at if this is a model that can be used for veterans in rural America. One of the things I mentioned as I'm working out in Washington, DC, is to bring all the government agencies that touch most of the business development together so we can work as a synergistic team. The Department of Commerce, Small Business Administration, the Minority Business and Development Agency, et cetera, for all of us to come together and ask: How can we better serve veterans in America? What do we currently have? Let's make sure that all veterans are aware of everything that's out there. What are some of the new opportunities such as this e-based commerce in a home-based business?

Senator BEGICH. All of those agencies have aspects that they're working with in some form or another.

Secretary JEFFERSON. Yes, though we are not communicating with one another. We need to break that stovepipe down and I'm working on that now.

Senator BEGICH. Are you going to try to be the lead convenor of that—

Secretary JEFFERSON. Yes.

Senator BEGICH. I know about local bureaucracy; Federal is even a much different ball game when defining who takes the lead and puts effort into it. Is that what you're thinking you should be able to do? Or are you looking for a partner to do that?

Secretary JEFFERSON. In the short time I've served in this position, we do like to be action oriented. My understanding is that all heads are stepping up to bring the meeting together. We're working to make it happen, before the holidays, though it's a little challenging with people's travel schedules. We're working right now. My goal is to get the agency heads together, get commitment at the senior level, and cascade that down to all the States.

Senator BEGICH. You will start with the convening of that?

Secretary JEFFERSON. Yes.

Senator BEGICH. Can you keep us informed, at least myself and the Committee?

Secretary JEFFERSON. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. The other comment is that I appreciate your review of your 268-page PowerPoint.

Secretary JEFFERSON. Page by page.

Senator BEGICH. I don't know if I've ever seen or done a 268-page PowerPoint. I can only imagine the effectiveness of that. I say that because it sounds like you understand that just doesn't work.

Secretary JEFFERSON. It doesn't work, sir. And this was a well-intentioned program. One of the things that we talk about as an agency is, one, transformation; and two, incorporating best practices. So, what are the adult learning principles? We know it's having people do things. We want to have them doing and practicing their skills during employment workshops and then bringing in the best practices which I previously mentioned so there's new content. They enjoy it; they can use it immediately, and it has long-lasting benefits to the servicemember.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Thank you. Belinda, first, I appreciate the report that was done. I think, you know, for your capacity, to do reviews not every 5 years but now every 3 years is probably a huge benefit for the Regional Offices, because I think there's always room for improvement no matter what you're doing. Your office went through a lot of issues, and I want to follow up to make sure I understood what you said, and that is regarding the areas of concern. The Regional Office has accepted those as areas of concern and are taking action to do something. Is that—did I hear you say that right? That there was no disagreement, necessarily, but they recognized them. They acknowledged them. Am I saying that correctly?

Ms. FINN. Yes, sir, they accepted all of the recommendations. While the team was on staff, there was discussion back and forth

on the various issues that we found. But the office did concur with all of our recommendations and proposed appropriate actions.

Senator BEGICH. And what will be the follow-up from your agency and your staff? How are you making sure that what they have committed to is fulfilled and there's actually results? In other words, the plan may be a good paper plan, but what happens to make sure that you can come back and say this is exactly what we hoped for and what's your mechanism to do that?

Ms. FINN. In this case, our mechanism generally will be our second visit to each Regional Office that hopefully will take place somewhere between 3 and 5 years, depending on how soon we hire everybody and how the schedule works out.

Senator BEGICH. Is there anything we can do? Especially when I was mayor we did audits all the time; we always had a team that would follow up on a regular basis. If you wait too long, the systems don't get corrected as quickly as you like. They may get corrected, but they're not really producing results. Is there a mechanism to speed that up at all, or is it just really a staffing issue that you have to make sure that you have a lion's staff to follow up?

Ms. FINN. The Senate and the House Veterans' Affairs Committee have been very supportive of our inspection program and provided more resources so that we could increase our cycle. I think the other action is to continue to keep the focus on our findings through hearings such as this.

Senator BEGICH. Excellent. Do you think the types of recommendations that you've made are—assuming from your perspective—reasonable; do you think it's what is going on in the Anchorage region? How do we compare, I guess, to other regions that you're reviewing? I'm not sure what the right phrase is. Are we in the middle, in the bottom, on the top? How do we rank in the bigger picture of Regional Offices when it comes to the VA and its administration?

Ms. FINN. We did cover that in our written testimony that will be part of the record, and Anchorage is somewhere in the middle. I will say that our inspection—our protocols and our team, they are pretty tough, because all of our inspectors are folks who used to work at VBA and so they know the process.

Senator BEGICH. They know it all.

Ms. FINN. They know where the errors occur. Brent, our director here spent 8 years with VBA before coming to the IG. So, none of the offices that we have inspected so far have gotten a clean bill of health. Everybody—every office has had some type of issue.

As far as the percentage of errors, Anchorage is in the middle. Baltimore was the highest office with issues, and Anchorage followed them. However, I will say that when we looked at particular claim folders and looked at the errors on those, we had only—of the errors we found, a number of those are procedural, and Anchorage had three errors that actually affected veterans' benefits. I think, Brent will correct me if I'm wrong, that in several other offices that rate has been much higher with where the errors affected benefits a lot more.

Senator BEGICH. So, a lot of what was occurring here was process and as you shook it down, all the way down to the levels of the

benefits they received there was minimal or there was still benefit impact, but not like some others.

Mr. ARRONTE. Yes, normally, that's correct. There was a higher rate of procedural problems, like Belinda said. There were three disability claims that actually affected the veteran's monthly benefit. And I believe that's probably one of the lowest rates of the seven or eight offices that we had visited.

Senator BEGICH. I want to thank you. I'm going to zip over, take a few minutes and go until about ten after. Mark, if I can ask you a few questions. Thank you for the tour of the office today. I do have to say the office is small and cramped and I know you're looking forward to better space to actually be able to better process the claims; and it's in a better environment. I can tell you I can only imagine what that's like when the load gets heavy. I want to ask verbally for the record: What efforts are you making with regard to the training? I thought you pointed out in the report that training was one of the issues for employees. What are you doing to train your employees to be better qualified or better prepared to handle these?

Mr. BILOSZ. We're making an investment. We are taking the time to have weekly training sessions with our employees. We're reviewing the errors that are being found on national quality reviews and also the errors that are being found on our local quality reviews and incorporating those as part of our training program. This has helped us to really improve our training. We, again, appreciated the Office of Inspector General's report where we took all of the areas that they found which we needed to improve on and incorporated that as part of our review period. We've used that.

Senator BEGICH. As you've reviewed, I know they're in your testimony. Are those the measurements that your employees know that you're measuring to? These are some of the measurement metrics you're going to use in the long term, or is it more of a management knowledge? Do the employees understand how they're being measured?

Mr. BILOSZ. Yeah. We share that. That's part of their training—to understand what we're doing, how what we do affects our services to veterans. You may not have noticed as you zipped into the office, but there was a big white board where we walked in and it had a lot of the data on it. The employees see it when they come in. They know how what they do affects the claims process and how what they do affects the quality of the claims process, too.

Senator BEGICH. During the tour, I forget which one mentioned to us, but the staffing levels that you now have, how many of those folks are new to the process in the last year? Some discussions occurred, I don't remember—

Mr. BILOSZ. We have six rating specialists that actually do the rating decisions for veterans; and three of those have less than 6 months of experience. We feel that six is adequate to get the job done, but they have to be fully trained, so we are ramping up the training with those folks so that they're able to process claims as quickly as they can.

Senator BEGICH. Do you have a high turnover rate that is caused by some factor that's explainable? I went through one office of the VA. What is it like there?

Mr. BILOSZ. It hasn't been a high turnover rate. I think that we've had a few people leave over the past year which we've replaced, obviously. We've also increased our staffing level from about 28 or 29 to 34, so we've had new people come on board. We've also promoted some folks. As I said we have two new supervisors that came up through the ranks and, again, that's left a little bit of a void there in the short term.

Senator BEGICH. Do you have a question, comment, Patrick?

Mr. KELLEY. I do not feel—we do not have a high turnover rate, but we have people that will transfer down to the Lower 48 and get out of the VA down there which is generally when their spouse transfers through the military or circumstances such as that. But we haven't had anyone just quit with the exception of one employee.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. One of the comments was the review from Salt Lake City and kind of how that connection is. Comment on that?

Mr. BILOSZ. Pat is the Veterans Service Center Manager. He's responsible for the day-to-day operations of the office. Me being the director there, I have oversight over Pat to ensure that he and the service center are performing the way they should be, making sure that when we have a process in place that it's being accomplished. So, again, Pat and I talk daily. We have more formal meetings a couple times a week. So, we're all on the same page as to what is occurring in the office.

Senator BEGICH. Is it possible—I'm going to move to two last questions for a couple of folks remaining here—but I want to first thank you folks for testifying for the record. Mark, you had some interesting statistics that you had mentioned this year already. Can you, by June, prepare a data point report that you could present at least to me and the Committee to give us an understanding of kind of where you're at compared to a year ago? And how that also addresses some of the concerns that the IG has brought up. Is that something you can do?

Mr. BILOSZ. Absolutely.

Senator BEGICH. I'd be very interested in that. The metrics you used to measure were impressive the last 9 weeks of this year. I want to compare a longer period of time and compare a flow. And if you wouldn't mind presenting it, that would be fantastic.

Mr. BILOSZ. Absolutely.

[The additional information requested during the hearing follows:]

Deliverable: Updated metrics on the Anchorage Regional Office's (RO) performance by June

Response: The performance of the Anchorage RO continues to improve, as indicated in the information below.

- Rating inventory reduced from 1,435 claims at the beginning of FY 2010 to 1,328 claims in April 2010. Over the same period of time, the percent of rating inventory pending for more than 125 days dropped from 44 percent to 38 percent.
- Average days pending dropped from 131.8 days at the beginning of FY 2010 to 125.6 days at the end of April 2010.
- Claims completed increased from 78 per month in FY 2009 to 160 per month in FY 2010. In April, the Anchorage RO completed 287 claims.
- "Average days to complete" rating claims was 203 days in April 2010, the lowest month in the fiscal year.
- Rating accuracy improved from 83.7 percent in April 2009 to 85.8 percent in April 2010.

Since the 2009 VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) review of the Anchorage RO, all 12 recommendations were addressed. All new and revised station policies are in place, and continued oversight ensures policy compliance.

Anchorage brokered claims to both the Salt Lake City and Fort Harrison ROs. Brokering assistance, combined with increased production in Anchorage, contributed to the 7.5 percent reduction in rating inventory this fiscal year.

The Anchorage RO hired nine employees as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. These employees assist with mail processing and development of claims. Two new supervisors were appointed this year, and they are positively impacting performance. Both the Veterans Service Center Manager and Decision Review Officer will be leaving the RO over the summer, and recruitment efforts are underway to fill these positions.

The Anchorage RO moved to a new facility, which opened on May 10. The RO is now part of the 184,000 square-foot VA Outpatient Clinic, a two-story building located outside the Muldoon Gate adjacent to Elmendorf Air Force Base. Located on the second floor, this office is significantly larger than the previous facility and provides bigger training facilities, increased file storage, and enhanced information technology and video conferencing.

Senator BEGICH. Two quick things, then we're going to close. First, General Katkus, I want to thank you all for the effort with the ATG. I'm impressed that you are finding more folks who are eligible for benefits, so I want to thank you for that.

Is there anything more we can do in the system from the Federal end to help with regards to this, or what we've done in the change of law to kind to give you the tools you need?

General KATKUS. Sir, there was one last area of concern. That was the Federal association to use National Guard resources to help on this. Your letter to General Carpenter resulted in my being notified on the way over here that he has funded a Federal position to assist on that. I think that was the last hurdle we had.

Senator BEGICH. Did he know you were coming to this hearing?

General KATKUS. I think it was just timing, sir.

Senator BEGICH. The position will be funded by them?

General KATKUS. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. Excellent. That will assist you in your efforts. Fantastic. That's great news. Thank you and your team and all the folks.

The other thing I wanted to ask is what Rich Owens brought up, and that is maybe a dual question to you and Jan. You heard the concern that the well times, the deployment times are having more of an effect especially on the small businesses, not necessarily the large businesses, but the smaller operations. They're starting to see the impact. Are you preparing or are you looking at that issue in a—kind of a vetted measure, rather than waiting for it to grow into a bigger problem? Is that something that is a concern to you? I heard from Rich. It makes me nervous, a little bit, to be frank.

General KATKUS. I'll start off before Jan. I'm sure she's got some answers on that, also. As commander of the National Guard, we're going to affect soldiers and airmen in their career paths, because they're going to be away from the job. Those businesses have to be engaged. We have to engage them in a positive way. We try to do that in recognition programs. We try to keep them informed. We try to keep them involved and stress the importance of each drill. I think that the Nation as a whole, all is in concert that we are at war and they're making sacrifices. But those small businesses continue to make sacrifice after sacrifice. Now after 8 years, it is a concern, and we'll do our level best to continue to engage them. But if anyone has ideas on how to better compensate the businesses or make up for that loss of an employee, we'd certainly be open to support that and try to engage on those areas.

Senator BEGICH. Jan, do you have anything to add to that?

Ms. MYERS. Just that they are moving toward finding jobs and different jobs that possibly they can do with the rotation that we have coming up. More to come.

Senator BEGICH. Ray, you gave some good commentary on kind of bridging this larger group of agencies and maybe part of that could be—I'm assuming you're thinking this. If not, I don't want to assume the obvious—the Guard and how they participate in that small business community, maybe there's an opportunity to figure out the work you're doing and getting this connection together. It does make me nervous. My wife runs four small businesses. I was a small businessperson for many, many years. The plumber example you gave, I actually had that situation with my plumber. He has three employees, and one has gone away off and on. When that happens the workload shifts, and you end up at the bottom of the list, literally.

Secretary JEFFERSON. We actually met with the national director of ESGR right before the storm a week and a half ago, and we're going to talk about looking at some things, because it's a challenge. Use Hawaii as an example, because Hawaii and Alaska have a lot of similarities: 90 percent of the companies are small businesses; 90 percent of those have less than 10 employees. What do you do when one or two of those are deployed? I think what General Katkus was talking about is exactly the way to look at this: Are there some ways we can provide a temporary fill or a temporary

solution? So we want to talk to ESGR about that and see what options we can come up with.

Senator BEGICH. Could you keep us informed on that?

Secretary JEFFERSON. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. Very good.

Jan, I'd be very interested in the information on the work you're doing with regard to suicide prevention. It's a growing concern from my other role as a member of the Armed Services Committee. We have had this on our agenda a couple of times, and it's a growing concern of how we handle it, especially since the numbers have not decreased; they're increasing. What do we do regarding preventative work? I know from the Department of Defense they're having mental health workers now in the field, which is a huge plus. They have a lot to hire. They're going to the field rather than waiting for the back end. I'd be very interested, if you wouldn't mind, to maybe share with our staff at some point some of the ideas that you're working on, some of the work you're doing specifically, and things that you think we could be doing in this area to have a positive effect, not only for veterans, but, obviously, our active military. What we can do more as preventative work? If you're willing to do that—I was very intrigued by some of your conversation on that.

Ms. MYERS. Sure. Love to, sir.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much.

Let me end there. Thank you. We've run over a little bit.

Secretary JEFFERSON. Sir, if I could make one comment. We have our State director for veterans employment and training here, if I can just briefly introduce him. For any veterans who are unemployed or who know someone who is unemployed, or just seeking a job change, this is our State director for veterans employment and training. Please contact him. He will get you access to the employment representatives for Alaska. This is a portal, and we are ready and eager to help those veterans in Alaska find meaningful employment in their careers.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Thank you to all those that traveled a great distance to be here. Thank you for being at the hearing today. I appreciate all the commentary. Again, all your statements, written and verbal, will be in the record to be shared with the Committee. Thank you very much.

At this time the meeting is adjourned.

[Field hearing adjourned at 12:15 p.m.]

A P P E N D I X

STATEMENT SUBMITTED AT HEARING BY STEVEN CLAPP, AFGE NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
Anchorage, Wasilla and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Name: Steven Clapp Phone Number: [REDACTED]
Address: 14601 Joanne Circle Cell Number: [REDACTED]
Anchorage AK 99516 FAX Number: _____
Email: clapps@afge.org
Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes No

Questions or comments:

- ① Seattle VAO has current vacancy (job) announcements for 100 (one-hundred) Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs). The VA OIG (Bethina Finn) audit of the Anchorage VAO identified that a similar sized workload at the Boise VAO has 22 (twenty-two) ADDITIONAL staff. That is DOUBLE the staff RVSRs of the Anchorage office. It is clear the Anchorage office is severely understaffed.
- ② The Director of the Anchorage VAO - DOES NOT LIVE IN ALASKA !!

Referral:

VHA VBA CASEWORK OTHER

STATEMENT SUBMITTED AT HEARING BY ZULENE SIMMONS OF CHUGIAK, ALASKA

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Anchorage, Wasilla and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Name: Zulene Simmons Phone Number: [REDACTED]
 Address: 19722 Luce Rd Cell Number: [REDACTED]
Chugiak, AK 99567 FAX Number: _____
 Email: zswhealth@aol.com

Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes No

Questions or comments:

Our veterans have been told that
after they "retired" they would
have great medical care - There
is talk wanted trying to process
veterans claims and their attorney
to reach the magic 50% to
in order to receive "free care"
at the VA - all Retirees should
have their VA records marked
as such - They should NEVER
be charged to be seen in
a VA hospital or clinic.

Referral:

VHA	VBA	CASEWORK	OTHER
_____	_____	_____	_____

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Anchorage and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Name: Robert Johnson **Phone Number:** _____
Address: 119722 Loop Rd **Cell Number:** _____
Chugiak AK 99527 **FAX Number:** _____
Email: _____

Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes _____ No _____

Questions or comments:

Please do not allow congress
increase charges for hospital
care for the veterans and
their families.

Please make questionnaires/surveys
subjective - so people can really
answer how they feel

Referral:

VHA VBA CASEWORK OTHER

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Anchorage, Wasilla and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Name: Glenn Johnson Phone Number: _____
 Address: 19722 Luce Road Cell Number: _____
Chugiak AK 99567 FAX Number: _____
 Email: _____
 Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes _____ No _____

Questions or comments:

Do transition as part of
 separation/retirement - Disability
 and retirement pay should start
 immediately - Medical evaluation
 should be part of that transition.
 You should receive your military
 pay until they have complete
 their job.

Referral:

VHA	VBA	CASEWORK	OTHER
_____	_____	_____	_____

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

Anchorage, Wasilla and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Name: Steve Simonis Phone Number: [REDACTED]
Address: 19722 Law Rd Cell Number: [REDACTED]
Chugiak AK 99567 FAX Number: _____
Email: rusthealth@aol.com

Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes No

Questions or comments:

After a sigmoid colectomy for
 colon cancer, my father was
 required to have an appointment
 collection.
 The colon was gone, there was
 only a rectum and a piece -
 this was a waste of my father's
 time, my time and the physician's
 time.

Referral:

VHA VBA CASEWORK OTHER

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RUSSELL N. KELL, VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

**ALASKA STATE COUNCIL**

February 16, 2010
US Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Anchorage Field Hearing

Senator Begich:

First, I thank all involved for the opportunity to provide testimony to this Committee.

I worked approximately 32 years for the US Dept. of Veterans Affairs (VA) from 1974 to 2006. I have worked in both the Veterans Benefits Administration and Medical Administration of the agency. I will confine this testimony primarily to the Veterans Benefits Administration in AK.

Alaska's Benefits office is one of a handful of small offices that service a small number of veterans in a particular State. Our office loses an economy of scale that is enjoyed by States with larger veteran populations. This has historically resulted in disparate treatment of Alaska's Veterans. Add to that the decision of VA to consolidate the Veterans Benefits Administration in the early to mid 1990s which effectively did away with Veterans Services Division, the primary advocate of veterans within VA. In the early years of this decade, additional consolidation by placing Veterans benefits under the direct supervision of the Salt Lake Regional Office. These consolidations are a primary cause of problems currently encountered by all veterans and compounded the disparate treatment of Alaska's veterans.

As early as 1988, I began to point out that the average age in the division I supervised was approaching 54 years old in a system that allowed retirement at age 55. I repetitively stated in Systematic Analysis of Operations and Internal Control reports that to ensure continuity of the best operation possible and ensure the historical transfer of knowledge additional personnel and training were needed. The most charitable thing I can say is: I was ignored.

I point this out only to illustrate a situation that has existed in VA for more than 20 years and has had direct impact on today's service to Alaska's veterans. I point out one of the reasons we are here at this Hearing.

Since retiring from VA, I have been an accredited service officer for Vietnam Veterans of America. I would like to share one experience concerning a recently discharged veteran with two tours in Iraq. Once he obtained a compensation rating of 50%, I assisted in filing for Vocational Rehabilitation & Counseling (VR&C). He missed his initial appointment, and I met with VR&C explaining the problem. I identified myself as his accredited representative and I requested that I be provided a copy of his notice to report for an appointment. This notice was never provided. He missed his second appointment. I again made this request. Again he missed his appointment and

again I did not receive a copy of the notice I had requested. Knowing that this veteran had been exposed to EID explosions and had a claim pending for traumatic brain injury was disheartening to say the least.

Even more pertinent to this hearing is what I was told by a VR& C employee at the end of January, 2010. I visited VR&C to find out the veteran had missed his third appointment. I was told that the VR&C regulations did not require this notification, that was the way the system worked, and that I knew the system doesn't change. To the best of my understanding this employee had worked for VR&C for more than 15 years. Yet, apparently there is some misunderstanding of Title 38 USC Section 5103. My understanding of the law and regulation is that it would be required to assist a veteran with possible brain injuries to make an appointment, and that assistance would include notice to the accredited representative. However, if I am incorrect, I recommend that the VR&C regulations be amended to insure there is no misunderstanding on this issue.

The same issue relates to delayed compensation claims processing. Veterans Health Administration rarely notifies the accredited representative of appointments for compensation exams. Yet missing a scheduled compensation exam is a major reason for delays in decisions and resultant backlogs. This area of concern has been known for years and ignored for the same period of time. Being as charitable as possible, let me say that employees who point these concerns out are not usually well received by the Anchorage Office or the Department.

In closing, let me again thank the Committee for allowing the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Russell N. Kell
3113 Wesleyan Drive
Anchorage, AK. 99508

SERVICES FOR VETERANS IN ALASKA

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2010

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Fairbanks, AK.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 1 p.m., Fairbanks North Star Borough Administrative Center, Hon. Mark Begich, Member of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senator Mark Begich.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. MARK BEGICH, U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA

Senator BEGICH. We'll call this meeting to order. This is a Field Hearing on Services for Veterans in Alaska for the Veterans' Affairs Committee of the U.S. Senate.

First, I know that we have two mayors here. Mayor Hopkins, thank you very much for being here. Mayor Isaacson from North Pole, there you are. Thank you both for being here today and for your interest in veterans' issues, and thank you for the great weather. I have come from the deep cold of Washington, DC, where there is fifty-plus inches and 25 to 30 degree weather. It's amazing to come to Alaska and be in warmer weather with less snow, I have to tell you.

I also have some folks here I'll introduce in a second from Washington, DC, and I did tell them that they will be able to come to the tropics if they can come with me to Alaska in February. So, they are here. We want to give them special recognition for, one, traveling to Alaska, but, two, for traveling in February. We give them extra credit points, just so you know that. When they come in the summer, they don't get any extra points for that.

Let me make a few comments and then I'll describe what today is going to be about and how it will work. This hearing will focus on the State's services for veterans in Alaska, including support of returning veterans, job opportunities for veterans, benefits for veterans, and the December audit by the VA Office of Inspector General of the VA Regional Office in Anchorage.

The Committee has had multiple hearings on VA benefits, health care, and services; however, this is the first time we are specifically focusing on the unique challenges confronting returning Alaskan veterans of Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom.

I'm pleased that the Committee is joined today by Assistant Secretary of Labor Ray Jefferson. Ray, just raise your hand. I know you'll be on our second panel. He was with me in Anchorage for a field hearing. We've been to Wasilla, today we're in Fairbanks, and

then we're off to Kotzebue tomorrow. So, we're giving him a full, rounded Alaskanized approach to getting people familiar with what's going on here in Alaska. In addition, you'll hear when he testifies a little bit about the Department of Labor and some of the efforts and work they're doing.

We are also joined by Dr. Susan Pendergrass, the Director of Veterans' Integration Service Network, or VISN 20. Dr. Pendergrass is responsible for the VA Northwest Health Network. Thank you again. She'll be on the second panel.

I want to give you a little bit of statistics though most of you know this already: Alaska has over 70,000 veterans; about 11 percent of our population. We are the highest per capita in the Nation. The Alaska population is very diverse, but also spread not only in the urban areas, but into the rural areas. So we have very unique situations that face our veterans in the challenges that they face, not only in employment, but other services that they need. Along with that, each year about 1,500 individuals from the military, especially from our recent conflicts, move out of active service and into veteran capacity.

I want to applaud the VA employees in Alaska for the work they do—and the VA does a lot of very significant work in making a difference for Alaskan veterans; however, there is always room for improvement, as evidenced by the recent VA IG report dated December 7, 2009, that showed the Anchorage VA Regional Office failed to meet requirements in 13 of the 14 areas covered during the inspection. This concerns me deeply because providing accurate, timely, and comprehensive services to our veterans is one of my top priorities as a Member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. More work needs to be done.

I hope that both of our panels will shed some light on the issues, such as why we continue to hear from some veterans that are not aware of their eligibility for VA benefits and services; why some veterans are not receiving appropriate VA services; and why veterans have such a tough time finding employment. I hope to discuss these and other important issues with our panels today.

Indeed, our unique geography, diversity, and way of life require the VA develop a unique strategy to care for our veterans, especially those who reside in rural areas. Back in Washington, we have worked hard to ensure that the VA has the resources to provide the best care possible. Congress has provided record-breaking funding increases to the VA. Last year, I supported the VA's Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act to ensure funding for veterans' health care 1 year in advance of the regular appropriation process. This bill was signed into law in October 2009.

We have followed up on that success with passage of the Caregiver's Bill, which would help wounded warriors and their families who care for them. This bill, which also improves care for women veterans, those who reside in rural areas, and those who are homeless, has been sent to the House of Representatives for their action and we expect action later this year.

Finally, I know there are veterans here in the audience. As you know, back some time ago I came up and had a veterans' roundtable at one of the facilities here. Today is a little different. Today

is a congressional hearing that I'm chairing here on behalf of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. The process, just so everyone is aware, is we will have two panels that will present testimony? You will see diverse thoughts and views on the services of the VA. This hearing will help us create a congressional record to understand specifically Alaskan issues that we can then bring back to Washington, DC.

I know there are individuals who would like to testify. This congressional hearing does not allow for individual testimony; but saying that, we have created a document to allow anyone to submit testimony. Anything presented today will be part of our congressional record, shared with the rest of the Committee, as well as with my office. There is a form we put out front that you can fill out and put down additional comments, concerns, or questions that you're not getting answered by the Veterans Administration. Let us know that. The staff will collect those or you can put them on the table. Would every staff member raise your hand. These are the folks that you want to hand that term to, please give it to them so we can make sure we keep a record of it.

Again, it's not the normal process that a lot of people are familiar with when they walk into an assembly chamber like this where people line up for 3 minutes to give testimony. This hearing is for the Committee to learn what we can do to improve veteran services.

So, that's the process here. Several of us in between our next appointment, leaving from here to our next one, will have available time for people to come up to our special guests to give them additional information.

I will now introduce panel 1.

Linda, I practiced your name; I think I got it right. Boisseau. Is that—

Ms. BOISSEAU. Boisseau, yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Today we have Linda Boisseau, Department Service Officer, Disabled American Veterans. We also have Robert Roof, an OIF veteran; Joe Sheehan, a Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army Retired, and Chairman of the Northern Alaska Military Retiree Council; and Ron Woolf, Unit Representative, Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve. We're going to have a ceremony afterwards with some other folks that are anxious to sign up, we're very excited about that.

The order will be just that, and we'll start with Linda, who will give her presentation. As I said to the people who are testifying, just imagine we're in your living room, all of us. Keep it casual. That's what we try to do here: to give you the flexibility to express your views on things that we can do to improve service. Linda.

Ms. BOISSEAU. I would like to have a Miller Lite, sir.

Senator BEGICH. A Miller Lite for Linda.

[General laughter.]

STATEMENT OF LINDA BOISSEAU, DEPARTMENT SERVICE OFFICER, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

Ms. BOISSEAU. Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I'm glad to be here on the behalf of the Disabled American Veterans. I know that the VA has problems and there's no need in con-

tinually ragging on it and saying, OK, you failed 13 out of 14 things. So, if possible, I would like to just bring up a few instant issues that we're having problems with.

First of all, sir, we're having to broker out our claims. A lot of them go to Salt Lake City. They also go to Seattle, WA, and they also go to San Diego, CA. I cannot overemphasize how horrible San Diego, CA, is on their claims. I wish the OIG would go in there and pull a lot of the claims that are being, you know, done down there to come back to Alaska. They result 9 times out of 10 is a Notice of Disagreement or appeals. It's like they give vets zero percent or they deny them. There's no in-between. It's really very, very poor.

That's been one of—we have problems with Salt Lake City and Seattle, but not half as much as we do with San Diego, CA, rating our claims.

Another issue that I have is mail continues to be misplaced. Instructions to VA by the veterans are overlooked and communication is non-existent. We've had a rash of people supposedly not showing up for their C&P exams. I don't know if it's a miscommunication from the people that are supposed to be sending out the notices to people who have C&P exams, but there's been no mail forthcoming to—these people have missed appointments and are being denied their claims through the VA because of this supposed mailed-out notice of C&P exam missed. That's been another big issue that we're having. Some of these are pretty serious with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder that they have had since 2000. Now they're doing a review and threatening to take them down from 100 percent to 50 percent, assuming that their GAF has changed—their GAF score. Which is not 52, it's 42, according to the records, but it was quoted as 52. It's just a—it's very irritating and when people have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, they haven't worked since 1989, they even have trouble coming to some of the groups, and don't even speak but have to sit in the corner. Yet they still need the camaraderie because they can't continue staying in the dark, shall we say, all the time. I find that so offensive, and they need to fix that supposed C&P notification. I don't believe it's happening, honestly, for the majority of them.

The phone centers cannot provide the information to veterans other than what is input into the system, and that is the problem. When we call 1-800-827-1000, we usually get Phoenix, AZ, out of Alaska. We have a problem with Phoenix in the fact that here in Alaska if you get 50 percent or higher rating, you receive up to \$170,000 property tax exemption.

When my veterans asked for the property tax exemption paperwork and the civil service preference letter, Phoenix seems to have a terribly difficult problem understanding what in thunder the property tax exemption letter is that has to be presented to the borough no later than the 31st of March. So, that is a delay for my veterans receiving those benefits. I would like to have that fixed. Somebody needs to educate those people that we live in Alaska and maybe some of—as you noted before, sir, when you came in—our circumstances are quite different from the Lower 48.

Notes are not updated on a regular basis. We have a veteran that was awarded disability pension in August 2009. The veteran has a VA medical appointment scheduled back in November 2009

and again in February at the Fairbanks medical clinic. All right. He lives in Northway, which is 258 miles from the medical clinic here in town. The winter bus schedule out of Northway is such that the veteran has to stay in Fairbanks for at least four nights. He has to arrive on Wednesday and depart on Sunday, through no fault of his own; there's no other transportation for this gentleman. The veteran has to have paid this out of his pocket, \$776.10 out of his pocket, because his file did not reflect—it was not put into the computer that he was awarded disability pension. His annual income other than the pension that he receives is from social security, which is only \$3,072, sir. He's in poverty through no fault of his own. He hasn't got the money to pay for something that should be taken care of by the Veterans Administration.

There are some claims that haven't had a progress note or action for approximately 6 months and the claims are still active. That's another huge problem. An example: a Notice of Disagreement received and dated, stamped by the Anchorage VA, July 30, 2008. On December 10, 2008, the spouse received a letter from the VA indicating that the Notice of Disagreement procedure would be sent. On November 13, 2009, after a service officer inquiry as to the status of the claim, the VA indicated that the file had been closed and shipped to St. Louis, MO, prior to the date originally received and the date stamped. No communication on this death benefit for the spouse has been received as of this date.

Thank you for your time, sir.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Boisseau follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LINDA BOISSEAU, DEPARTMENT SERVICE OFFICER,
DEPARTMENT OF ALASKA, DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the current state of veterans services available to Alaska's 76,000 veterans. Before I begin my formal statement, I would like to thank Senators Begich and Murkowski and Representative Don Young for their support of funding reform and Senator Murkowski for her special interest and support of women veterans.

In Alaska and across the country, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) offers a comprehensive array of benefits and services to military veterans and their survivors, including health care, vocational rehabilitation, readjustment counseling, disability compensation and pensions, educational assistance, home loans, life insurance, and burial services.

Disabled American Veterans (DAV) Department Service Officers assist our National Service Officers (NSOs) in representing veterans and their families with claims for benefits from government agencies, including VA, and the Department of Defense. Veterans need not be DAV members to take advantage of this assistance, which is provided free of charge.

NSOs function as attorneys-in-fact, assisting veterans and their families in filing claims for VA disability compensation and pension; vocational rehabilitation and employment; education; home loan guaranty; life insurance; death benefits; health care and much more.

One of the biggest problems facing Alaska's veterans today is their inability to get correct or timely decisions on claims for disability compensation. As you are aware, VA's Office of Inspector General (VA OIG) recently completed an inspection of the disability compensation claims processing and Veterans Service Center (VSC) operations at the VA Regional Office in Anchorage. During this review, the OIG found that the Anchorage RO did not meet the requirements for 13 of 14 operational areas reviewed. While this may come as a surprise to some, it is consistent with what is been happening at VA Regional Offices across the United States.

During recent inspections of other Regional Offices, as well as in reviews of Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) operations in general, the VA Inspector General found the same problems as those identified in Alaska: inaccurate decisions, too

much workload, not enough trained staff, inadequate oversight and quality control, and insufficient IT capability to handle the mountain of paper claims.

In March 2009, VA OIG reported on the overall system and found that almost a quarter (22%) of all veterans' claims for disability compensation were decided incorrectly in the 12-month period reviewed. During that period, over 200,000 veterans received inaccurate decisions on disability compensation. Here in Alaska, the OIG found that 29% of the cases reviewed had errors resulting in veterans being denied compensation due to them. Equally troubling, of the cases which the Regional Office itself found, 42% of those errors were not corrected. The chart attached at the end of my testimony depicts the result of the last six VA OIG visits.

And while errors go uncorrected, the volume of claims is rising faster than VA's ability to address this growing workload. As of January 11, 2010, there were 466,985 claims for disability compensation and pensions awaiting rating decisions; 162,352 (37.3%) of the claims have exceeded VBA's 125-day strategic goal. In fact, the average time to approve a rating has exceeded 180 days for more than a decade. And to complicate the problem even further, claims folders for almost 300,000 veterans were misplaced and claims for 141,000 veterans are lost.

VA today continues to rely on a cumbersome paper-based system to review and evaluate claims for disability compensation and pension. Beginning with the application for benefits, which is now a 23-page document, the system has become increasingly complicated. Moreover, in the past several years, there has been about a 50% increase in the most complex disability compensation applications, those in which a veteran cites eight or more disabilities, requiring even greater time and expertise to correctly reach a correct, equitable decision.

Unfortunately, the VBA has yet to develop a modern information technology (IT) system to begin to move from such a paper-centric system to a contemporary electronic system. Regional Offices are being overwhelmed with massive amounts of paper, from the applications themselves to piles of medical evidence supporting those claims.

In fact, after a recent inspection at the Roanoke, Virginia VA Regional Office, the VA OIG found nearly 11,000 folders sitting on top of file cabinets already filled to capacity with the paper claims and supporting evidence of tens of thousands of veterans. After calling in the building engineer to look at the situation, they determined that the load on floors 10, 11 and 12 of the 14-story building was double what is considered safe and heavy enough to cause the entire building to collapse.

Mr. Chairman, too many disabled veterans and their survivors must wait too long for disability compensation and pension rating decisions that are too often wrong or inaccurate. If we do not address these problems and reform the claims processing system here in Alaska and across the United States, the entire system is in danger of collapsing on itself just from the sheer weight of the workload.

Congress must reform the claims processing system so that disabled veterans and their survivors are able to apply for benefits through a simple, uniform and modern IT-based process that enables VA to make accurate decisions within acceptable timeframes. Active duty servicemembers should be able to apply for benefits before discharge and receive accurate decisions by the time of their discharge.

To accomplish these goals, VBA must develop a work culture that emphasizes quality at all steps of the process. It must begin with the development of a management culture that measures and rewards the quality of results, not just the quantity, and that provides sufficient training of both VA's management and workforce in order to arrive at correct decisions.

VBA must modernize its IT infrastructure and optimize its business processes. The current paper-centric system must be replaced with a secure and accessible paperless system that rapidly moves and organizes information necessary to help rating specialists reach correct decisions. The new system must optimize both the workflow and the business processes.

VBA must also implement a simpler and more transparent benefits application and approval process. There should be a universal and simple application procedure that provides veterans with regular updates on the progress of their claims and allows them to access their records and pending claims securely from any location.

In the short term, there are several reforms that VBA could begin to immediately implement either on its own, or consonant with Congressional action. For example, VBA wastes significant time by ordering a VA medical examination for virtually every claim for compensation, even when sufficient medical evidence from the veterans' private physician already exists. VBA should create standardized templates for private physicians so that private medical evidence can be developed and delivered in a standardized manner that meets VBA requirements and allows VBA rating specialists to use that private medical evidence to make determinations without the need for redundant VA examinations.

VBA should also take advantage of their existing authority to provide deferred rating decisions quickly to veterans when there is sufficient evidence to establish a compensable service-connected condition. This would allow VBA to quickly adjudicate those issues where the service connection matters and levels of disability are clear cut, assign an interim rating so that the veterans could begin to receive financial support and access VA health care services. Then, at a later date VA can schedule any necessary exams and develop the evidence necessary to determine the final rating for other more complicated disabilities.

VBA must also take steps to establish comprehensive and uniform systems to train and provide continuing education to its workforce, including more substantial on-the-job-training. They must develop and implement a new quality control regime that places emphasis on the quality of decisions made, rather than only on the quantity of work completed and reward employees accordingly. A renewed commitment to and investment in training and quality control will help to ensure that benefits decisions are done right the first time, which will save time over the long run. For a more detailed explanation of these recommendations and their origins, please refer to the *Independent Budget* for fiscal year 2011, in which DAV is a major participant and partner along with AMVETS, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States and Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Although DAV NSOs and Department Service Officers do not heavily focus on the VA health care system, I would like to make a few comments on the state of medical care available to Alaska's veterans. Today, VA operates a medical center in Anchorage, and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in Fairbanks, Kenai and Matanuska-Susitna Valley, in total providing more than 130,000 outpatient visits a year. We recognize the unique challenges our veterans face in Alaska and I am pleased DAV Resolution 247, adopted by the delegates to DAV's last National Convention, assembled in Denver, Colorado, August 22-25, 2009, fully supports the right of rural veterans to be served by VA. Our resolution further notes that funding for additional rural care options and outreach be sustained and not be the cause of reductions in highly specialized VA medical programs.

Public Law 109-461 authorized VA to establish the Veterans Health Administration Office of Rural Health to promulgate policies, best practices and innovations to improve services to veterans who reside in rural areas. We strongly urge this Office to coordinate with VA medical care facilities and veterans service organizations in Alaska to ensure alternative and creative programs and services are developed to meet the unique needs of sick and disabled veterans residing in this area.

Mr. Chairman, this completes my written testimony.

ATTACHMENT

VA OIG Reasonable Assurance of Compliance for Calendar Year 2009-2010						
VA Regional Offices	Nashville	Wilmington	Roanoke	Anchorage	San Juan	Baltimore
Claims Processing						
Haas	No	No	No	No		No
PTSD	No	No		No	No	No
TBI	No		No	No	No	No
Diabetes		No	No	No	No	No
Data Integrity						
Date of Claim	No	No		No		No
COVERS		No		No		No
Management Controls						
SAO				No	No	No
STAR	No			No	No	No
Date Stamp Accountability				No	No	No
CPI	No					
Information Security						
Mail Handling Procedures	No		No	No	No	No
Destruction of Documents	No	No	No	No	No	No
Public Contact						
IRIS	No		No	No	No	No
Congressional Inquiries		No		No		No
Fiduciary	No	No	n/a	No	No	No

Key:

Haas

Haas v. Nicholson references claims of veterans who served in waters off Vietnam and did not set foot in Vietnam and whether those veterans are entitled to the presumption of exposure to herbicide agents, including Agent Orange.

PTSD

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

TBI

Traumatic Brain Injury

COVERS

Control Of Veterans Records System

SAO

Systematic Analysis of Operations

STAR

Systematic Technical Accuracy

Review

CPI

Claims Process

Improvement

IRIS

Inquiry Routing and Information System

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. You did very well. What I'll do is take the testimony from all four and then I'll come back with questions.

Ms. BOISSEAU. Thank you for your time on this, sir, very much.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Thank you very much. Robert. Robert and I had a great conversation just before we started, and I told him, don't worry, just say what's on your mind.

STATEMENT OF SPC ROBERT L. ROOF, USA (RET.)

Mr. ROOF. I'll do the best I can, sir. I do want to say before I go on with my tirade, pointing fingers and attempting to describe the flaws in the system, I'd like to mention that I do so humbly. For despite the errors of a few and the system as a whole, there have been many more instances of good individuals, many who are sitting in this room today, that I have come across that have done their best to aid in my path of recovery and transition.

I would also like to acknowledge the idea that my generation of veterans has the greatest understanding and support than any generation of the past. It is with the utmost respect to the warriors that have come before me, those individuals who have tirelessly helped me to navigate my recovery and to you, Senator, that I dare to voice my complaints. Sadly, there are still issues that must be addressed, particularly health care issues.

I've found that there lacks available counseling. In order to get in and see anybody or to be prioritized, you must basically be a harm to yourself or someone else. There's just a lack of people available. And when I was seen in counseling, it was once a month at best. A few times I had appointments canceled without being notified until I was walking through the door, yet I continually got reminded that, you know, if I'm going to miss an appointment that I need to notify them so that someone else can have my time slot, or if I fail to go to a certain number of appointments, then, you know, I'm at risk of losing my counseling, which I've never heard of happening, but the threat is always there.

Numerous times because of the lack of VA facilities here in Fairbanks, I've had to fly to Anchorage, missing—you know, taking time off of work and losing days' worth of wages and/or missing out on school. To get down there and find my meds that I was supposed to be receiving not be there and then be told by the nursing staff that I need to do my best to, next time I have an appointment, to call and let them know, to remind them to order my medication, when I thought that's what my patient record was for. As someone suffering from the disabilities I have, I have trouble remembering if I locked my door when I leave the house each day, let alone trying to worry about if me flying to Anchorage and losing out on my day, if, you know, I'm going to get the care that I went down there for.

Since my transition out of the military—I was a gunshot wound victim and receiving OT and was meeting with surgeons before I left Fort Campbell, but after receiving my orders to get out on a medical board there has been no follow-up care on my injury, which at this point I'm sure there's not much that could be done. But it was a simple fact that I fell through the cracks, basically. There

was no further attention paid to my gunshot injury. The only issue that has somewhat been addressed is the PTSD.

I mentioned the lack of VA facilities here in Fairbanks. You know, you have to go all the way out on post and—which is a hassle in itself at times just trying to go through the gate.

I've been trying to go back to school since I returned to Alaska and I enlisted the help of the voc rehab program as opposed to the GI Bill because as a disabled veteran, I thought it was the goal of the voc rehab program to provide the additional support needed for disabled veterans such as myself, and that has not been the case. When I first went to set up my voc rehab, I was told by the counselor that I needed to go out and gather up all this information. As I mentioned, as a person with my disabilities, I'm not the most sociable. And, as a student, I mean it's—the school system is hard enough to navigate on my own, but then with the additional problems that I have, basically, I was on this wild goose chase. I brought back this information, which I thought he had asked for numerous times, and he failed to communicate exactly what he was looking for or what I thought he was looking for didn't work, and after the third time I was finally able to give him what he needed.

And, let's see, I apologize—

Senator BEGICH. No, you're doing fine.

Mr. ROOF. At one point, I enrolled in a class that was for—it was a humanities degree requirement for my program. I received a phone call from the voc rehab counselor stating that this class wasn't listed on my degree requirements and that therefore the VA was going to fail—was not going to pay for it and that I cannot be out there freelancing my education. Honestly, I really don't care for school. I love to learn, but school is just really not for me, and I really don't want to spend any more time with it than I have to. I'd much rather just get on with life and get my degree. So, you know, I felt insulted that this accusation was made. The fact is, he just didn't have a full understanding, apparently, of how the school system works and what was really being asked of me to fulfill these degree requirements. How can he sit there and make these accusations that I'm out there freelancing my education when he doesn't even know what's going on? So, I think part of that is lack of understanding, too, on the veterans coordinator up at the university who I've tried to speak with on multiple occasions and who was always unavailable.

And the aid needed to navigate the school system. Like I said, apparently there's the Office of Student Services for Disabilities though I just recently found out that they could have been doing a lot more to help me get through my classes by tailoring my classes more to my needs. This is all new information. Here, I've been faking my way through my education now for 2 years just trying to get by and scrape by and get whatever little I can out of it. And here, you know, like I said, all this stress and all this trouble and failing classes could have hopefully been avoided if I would have, you know, had the additional aid and support that I felt I needed.

Speaking of voc rehab and what's disheartening about it is that under this new GI Bill—not to sound like a money-grubber, but part of the reason why I chose the voc rehab is, like I said, is for the additional support I thought I would receive as a disabled vet-

eran. And now, I mean, I might as well just have done the GI Bill and gotten the additional money so that I wouldn't have to try to work and go to school and put this all together when, you know, if I'm not getting the help, then I might as well just switch over the programs.

I mean, I can't really touch base on employment. I've found a job; I work part-time. Like I said, I've been going to school just simply because I got the job with the same company my mother works for and they've been more than gracious to give me time off for, you know, appointments and to go to class, or if I have PTSD flare-ups, as I have had recently. I've taken a leave of absence from work now for 2 weeks. So, once I lose this job or move on in the world, you know, that's something I'll have to face, but as of right now I can't really touch base on employment opportunities.

That's about it. All I can really say, too, is recently I was just contacted as part of that PTSD lawsuit saying that I was shorted on my medical board ratings. I've only been given 30 percent for PTSD when the standard was supposedly 50 percent. And so this makes me, what, you know, out of 4,300, not a large number. But I just don't understand why—you know, who's accountable for this, the fact that there's supposed to be a set standard and—to my understanding, we were all shorted. So, it doesn't really pertain to these issues, but, basically, you know, I've been getting the short end of the stick now for a little while and that's just one more way. So thank you for your time.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Roof follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF SPC ROBERT L. ROOF, USA (RET.)

To members of the Senate Committee of Veteran's Affairs, I would like to first take this opportunity to say thank you for your time, and the request to present whatever testimony I may concerning the issues that are facing today's recently discharged veterans. I appeal to you not only as disabled combat veteran myself, but also as a patriotic citizen who truly and rightfully believes in these United States.

Before I go on my tirade pointing fingers and attempting to discriminate every hole in the system I would like to mention that I do so humbly. For despite the errors of a few and the system as a whole, there have many more instances of good individuals that I have come across that have done their best to aid me in my path of recovery and transition. I would also like to acknowledge the idea that my generation of veterans has had the greatest understanding and support then any generation past. It is with the utmost respect to the warriors that have come before me, those individuals who have tirelessly helped me to navigate my recovery, and to you Senators that I dare begin to voice my "complaints."

You've asked to me to share my story of transition, particular since leaving active duty, but for the combat wounded veteran our story begins the day we are injured. To my understanding some the issues that I had to face have been addressed since they occurred but I would like to mention them because it will help for a clearer understanding of the larger issue and help shine light on why I am so qualified to share my concerns.

Briefly, I was born and raised in the communities of Fairbanks and North Pole, Alaska. I graduated from North Pole High School in 2003 and enlisted in the US ARMY Delayed Entry Program in March 2004 and shipped to Infantry School at Ft. Benning in July 2004. Upon graduation from OSUT I was stationed at Ft. Campbell, KY, with the newly stood up 4th BCT which would then be flagged the 506th RCT. In November 2005 I deployed with B Co, 1/506th In, 101st ABN DIV (AASSLT) to Ar Ramadi, Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom IV.

I loved the Army, I loved the Infantry. In the short year I was at Ft. Campbell prior to deployment I successfully earned my Air Assault Badge, my Expert Infantryman Badge, amongst other certificates and most importantly the respect of my peers and leaders. My Army career was off to an amazing start, I had yet to fail a task that the Army had given me and I took pride in playing even the smallest role in the backbone of the Army and these United States. I loved being a "Grunt."

But as a Infantryman you also know that you are expendable. That is what keeps our military as strong as it needs to be, maintaining the fighting force is a first and foremost responsibility, something I fully understood . . . the mission must always go on. Yet I had this perceived conception that if you fell in battle and were able to survive then our government would be there to help stand you back up. When America needed its sons and daughters to answer the call there I was willing waiting for my orders.

It is through this detail of my love and success that I hope to convey that I poured myself into performing the best I possibly could and put my trust in our military and government. But it is because of this that made it so difficult to accept the circumstances that I had to deal with due to my war injuries and the erosion of my belief in the way our military treats it own. The military is tough business to run but I feel that there is a certain code that should be used to conduct it if America is going to live up to the promise it has made to its warriors.

On 20 May 2006 while manning the .50 Caliber machine gun mounted to the turret of a Humvee I took a single enemy sniper round to my left chest/axilla. From there I was ground medevaced to my Battalion Aid Station where medics attended to me until I was airlifted to Al Taqqadium Air Base. From there I moved on to Balad, then was airlifted to Landstuhl where I spent my 21st Birthday, and then flown to Walter Reed. This is where my difficulties would begin.

While at Landstuhl I was able to make contact with my mother, who was instructed at that time by a member of my nursing staff that she should try to meet me at Walter Reed because that was my final destination based on all information available at the time. My mother attempted to make contact with the Army to see about getting a flight to meet me at Walter Reed she was then informed it would take nearly 10 days to process. This is something that any parent or loved one simply can't accept, so instead she was able to purchase her own tickets and bring herself and her husband to Walter Reed where they wheeled their luggage around the hospital waiting for me until they were finally able to find assistance and get lodging. To this day my mother was never able to get reimbursed and eventually gave up trying. In the scheme of things it isn't that big a deal but a matter of principle that my loved ones were told that it would be over a week before the military could help her come to my side.

My first difficulty at Walter Reed was in regards to my immediate care by my team of doctors. The resulting surgeries from my injury had left a fairly large hole in my chest/arm and when trying to discuss a treatment plan with my doctors, there was a lack of. At first it was presented to us that I would have this large whole in chest/arm for the rest of my being and that was just no getting any answers out of my doctors. Again, I know the Army has its way of doing things and that at the time I was lowly PFC, who am I to ask questions? But I did not nor do not believe that is the most beneficial approach if we are truly concerned with the mental and physical wellbeing of our injured troops. I can honestly say that it wasn't beneficial to lie in that hospital in that beginning week not knowing what was to become of me. It took my mother contacting Senator Ted Stevens office for my doctors to finally come in and answer the questions we had, which weren't many, but the simple reassurance and insight of the doctors made it a little easier to start to accept what had happened to me.

After my impatient stay I was downgraded to outpatient status and attached to the Medical Hold Company where I made it very clear that I was only "attached" and not "assigned" as I was eager to return to Ft. Campbell. I had heard the horror stories of fellow soldiers who had been at Walter Reed for years waiting to see what the Army had in store for them, and I wished not to become part of that trap. Because my mother was still at Walter Reed I was able to just stay with her at the Mologne House Hotel on the compound and therefore I didn't have to suffer the poor living conditions that others had to deal with, but I do remember listening to some of the other soldiers discuss how terrible their quarters were. My barracks at Ft. Campbell had black mold that seemed to get ignored by our chain of command, but then again none of us had open wounds we had to care for either. I was asked by a leader in my Med Hold Company if I could reschedule an appointment so that I could stand in formation for a Change of Command ceremony, something I refused to do.

After my last outpatient appointment I was reassigned to my unit back at Ft. Campbell where I served on Rear Detachment with many of the other wounded soldiers from my company. It is at this time that I began my symptoms and was diagnosed with PTSD.

It was here me and my fellow wounded E-4 and below types was asked to trim hedges and run lawnmowers by able-bodied, newly transferred, E-5 types. But let me mention that my skin graft to my chest/arm hadn't healed sufficiently enough

to provide me with the strength to properly and safely maneuver a push lawnmower. Nor do I think it was the job of my friend whose ankle was held together by bands and had a flat land walking profile to try and drag his bad leg over the uneven ground we were asked to cut. Prior to our injuries we would have willingly performed these duties, but not like this, not as we were still doing our best to heal ourselves.

We were moved 3 separate times because there were no barracks for us as our company barracks were being "reset" for the return of our company that was still in Iraq. It is also here that we "discouraged" from attending our appointments because there was painting to be done, it is here that we were punished for not showing up to formation or flag raising duties, because whatever medication many of us were on interrupted or lengthened our sleeping schedules.

Whatever lack of understanding on the part of the Rear D leadership there was, it didn't get much better when my company returned from Iraq. Since my departure from Iraq there had been changes in leadership on the company and platoon level. So now my new leaders who knew nothing of me and prior performance and I were faced with challenge of what to do with me until the Army and my injuries dictated what was next for me. As it would come to be I would eventually start my Med Board due to the permanent damage to my chest/arm and the PTSD both which interfered with my responsibilities as an infantryman.

Looking back I do want to say that I no negative feelings on the actions of the leadership and the things we were asked to do on Rear Detachment. It was simply the result of untrained leaders who hadn't been properly trained in how to deal with those of us who had these injuries. I understood it then and I understand it now. Before I was discharged, Ft. Campbell was very close to setting up its Warrior Transition Unit, and from what I have heard it addresses many of the challenges that I and others had to face post-injury with our regular line companies. I just feel it is important for me to voice how much I agree with the establishment of the WTUs and that I hope that they are making a difference in the recovery and even possibly saving the careers of injured soldiers. The worst thing that can be done is forcing someone to soldier when they haven't fully healed.

In June 2007 I was placed on the TDRL with a combined disability rating of 60%.

The process of leaving Ft. Campbell was interesting to say the least. Once I had received my Med Board findings and received my retirement orders then it was all out rush to try and check all the boxes that I had to check before I could leave, yet my doctor was a little unpleasant with the idea that I was leaving the area while my arm/chest injuries were still being treated. Since my last appointment with him at Ft. Campbell I have not had any further treatment or attention paid to my chest/arm, with the exception of brief physicals for VA C&P exams and Army Med Boards. At this point I don't believe that much there is anything that could be done besides continuing my prescription for pain medication that I have to take to help numb the daily pain. But the fact that I was doing OT at Ft. Campbell, and my doctor was concerned with me not finishing whatever he may have had in mind simply makes me wonder.

Upon leaving Ft. Campbell I returned to Alaska where I enrolled in school at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks hoping to keep myself busy and to try and move on with my life. I was able to find employment at a local liquor store with the help of my mother, as it is the same company she works for. I simply took because it was offered to me and I had made it very clear that school was my priority and that I may have occasional VA appointments to attend.

(Also upon my return to Alaska I would receive a VA pre-stabilization rating of 100%, which would eventually be downgraded to a stabilization rating of 80% due to the improvement of my hearing. I can also say that my PTSD is anything but stabilized and has gotten worse.)

My PTSD really began to give me even more trouble as I was away from my fellow wounded friends and had little support here with the exception of a few family members and friends who understood nothing of my situation, but I was able to scrape by through the use medication, some counseling, and trying to force my way through school, and I believe at one point I was making some progress.

In December 2008 I had my Army PEB re-evaluation where I was permanently retired at a stabilized 60% combined rating. But in light of recent events I have now learned that I was one of the 4,300 veterans who were shorted on my PTSD rating. Apparently a 50% disability rating is the standard when rating for PTSD, yet I among all these others were given less, myself 30%. (So I don't know what this will mean for my final rating if it will be increased or not. But why were we shorted?)

You have asked me to describe some of the difficulties I have had in the transition from active duty to being veteran and a civilian . . .

For starters the first difficulty is simply accepting the lowered social status that being a veteran is. When you wear the uniform, you are easily identifiable. It's all there . . . name, rank, awards, combat patches. As veteran you lose that, my physical scars are hidden by my clothing; my mental scars are buried even deeper and everything I worked so hard for in the Army had been taken away from me and doesn't mean anything in the civilian sector. If only it was so easy to walk around with a t-shirt that says "I have PTSD, please don't bother me." Even if it was, how can I ask society to understand something that I don't even understand?

The foremost difficulty is trying to find a place to fit in and people to relate to. I've been trying to go to school for a profession that probably isn't suited for me, yet I have been faking my way through my courses because I can't actually concentrate to learn and retain anything. When I am in class, young 19 and 20 year kids stare at me because I remain at my seat during group activities and projects. At work, I am berated on a daily basis by alcoholics and other members of societies' cesspool. I frequently am told that I need to "be more sociable and friendly." I have to listen to people get upset because I don't ask them how their day is going, but instead try focus on counting money correctly and trying check ID birth and expiration dates. At home I find myself sifting through my book, music, and movie collections trying to find something to block out the demons, but usually find myself starting off into space. The few intimate relationships I have been able to maintain are usually hindered by my bouts of depression and anxiety. My personal interactions last until the Valium wears off. It is hard to accept being a disabled veteran since the age 22 and never knowing what tomorrow is going to bring.

I have tried to use some of the resources available to me when they are available. As I have mentioned I have been trying to go to school to make something of myself but it has not been an easy process. I choose to go the route of VA Voc Rehab when deciding to use my education benefits hoping that it would be tailored to the more specific needs of disabled veterans such as myself. Yet this hasn't been case. When I first went to set up my education plan I was told to go out and find all sorts of information that was required to put together my future education goals. Naturally I wasn't really sure where to start and was further disheartened when my Voc Rehab counselor not only couldn't guide me but I felt sent me on a wild goose chase. Again I would like to remind you that I thought that by going the Voc Rehab route as opposed to the G.I. Bill route I would have access to additional resources and aid in the whole planning of my Vocational Rehabilitation. I went out and found what I thought was being asked of me and returned it to the counselor only to be told it was sufficient enough. It was only on the 3rd time that I have apparently gathered the necessary information to set up my education plan. I truly felt and still feel that there was a complete lack of communication on the counselor's part in making it clear what he needed from me. It is because of this that I spent time, fuel, and energy searching for something that should have been easier to obtain had I been given proper guidance.

I enrolled in a course one semester and again lacking information and not knowing how the course withdraw process worked I ended up failing a course I could not complete due to a flair up of my PTSD symptoms. But instead of getting sympathy, and an air of understanding, instead I got the lecture that if I fail another course then we may have re-analyze the VA's commitment in my future educational goals. Understandable, we can't have the VA dumping tax-payer dollars down the drain while I sit around trying to battle my way through my new disability. Sadly I had the misconception that I would get a little more support being a disabled veteran using the Voc Rehab program.

As per my degree requirements I have to take humanities elective. When I enrolled in this course I then received emails and phone calls from the counselor informing me that the UAF Veterans Coordinator had informed them that this course wasn't part of my degree and the comment was made that I can't just be out there "free lancing my education." Let me make it very clear that I hate school. I love learning new things, but if I had it my way, I'd be done with school already and on with life. When I tried to explain things I became extremely frustrated that such an accusation was made toward me especially considering that I was going off of the same piece of information that it had been such a pain to get a hold of in the first place. It reached the point where I decided that I wasn't going to put up with it anymore and I decided that I would pay for the course out of my own pocket because I wasn't going to deal with any more of the counselor's lack of competence in this matter.

When I contacted a supervisor about some of these issues I was basically told that it wasn't the Voc Rehab counselors' job to "hold my hand." Fair enough, but then why I am using the CH. 31 Voc Rehab benefits which provides no additional support when I might as well use CH. 33 G.I. Bill benefits where I stand to at least gain

additional monetary benefits. But that's not what I am after; I just want to get healthy enough to function. As it may not be the job of Voc Rehab resources to "hold my hand." At the same time I don't believe it's my job to hold theirs. How can accusations of how I am handling my schooling be made when these individuals no nothing more of how the university works then I do?

(But I do ask the question: Will we ever see a day when Voc Rehab compensation will match G.I. Bill compensation?)

The VA isn't the only one to blame when in regards to some of these issues though, the university has their weight to bear as well. I have yet to officially meet with an academic advisor to plan my course of action. The Veterans' Coordinator is never allowed to be seen the two times I have requested, and it is only in this past semester that I have learned the Student Services for Disabilities could have been helping me to possibly tailor my courses to fit my needs a little better. I just wish there were someone that could say, "We understand you have problems, but we are going to work the best we can to help you be successful in school, here is what is available to help you."

All of these resources, whether they be for school or for healthcare are difficult obtain at times. The first battle is even learning they exist, and then trying to access them is a whole different battle altogether. It seems like whenever I go anywhere to ask for help, there is always someone else I have to talk to first. Then when I go to speak to that person, I have first have to talk to another additional individual.

As we all know access to healthcare is probably the largest issue concerning veterans. When I have actually been able to get an appointment I haven't had too many issues, but have had issues none the less.

Mental health counseling appointments are non-existent. When I was receiving counseling it was once month until my counselor left for a new job and has yet to be replaced. Unless you are at the very moment they ask you, an immediate danger to yourself or others there are no time slots available. Instead I have maintained myself with a steady stream of Valium until I eventually slide just far enough down the spiral that I can honestly say I may injury myself or others.

I have taken time off work on multiple occasions to go to appointments to have them be canceled by the doctor without informing me before I walk through the door, or to sit and wait for hours to get in for a 10 minute visit. These are appointments requested by the doctor mind you. Or better yet I had to take time off of work, skip class, fly to Anchorage at 6AM for a 1015 appointment, only to be taken into the examination room at 1130 and be told that my medication wasn't ordered and I would have to come back the following month. So not only had I lost a half day's wage, class room time, but the icing on the cake was when the nurse also informed me that I should be sure to call next time before I fly down to make sure that VA employees had ordered my medication. Mind you I spend half my day trying to remember if I locked the house before I left it.

As far as my employment goes, as I mentioned I was fortunate to find a job that has been willing to be more then gracious in letting me take time off for school and my injury related issues. But it has come at the cost of sanity and overall wellbeing, as of writing this testimony I have in fact taken an indefinite leave of absence from my work to try to recover from a recent mental breakdown. I am doing my best to just manage my simple daily affairs and hope that one day soon I might be able to return to work providing I can get my PTSD back under control. But these are going to be real concerns if I lose this job because I can't work, or what am I going to do in the future when I can't find an employer who is willing to give me the time off I need to battle my demons and spend my time waiting for canceled appointments.

I feel terrible, for it seems that all I have provided is a laundry list of complaints, and don't feel I have addressed what was asked of me. I wish I could provide solutions instead of excerpts of whining. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers and filling holes I feel is a mighty task and I applaud the efforts given whatever they may be. As with much in life there must be some level of attrition when addressing who should receive and how much in benefits should be given out. It is sad that there are individuals out there that have found a way to take advantage of the system, while those of us who fully deserve it are forced to fight tooth and nail for what we have earned.

For me the two biggest problems facing a young, transitional, disabled combat veteran such as myself . . . is the understanding of my injuries, particularly the PTSD and the availability and utilization of resources.

I don't understand myself, society doesn't understand me, and the resources are lacking right now to help bring me back as a participating member of society

through counseling and education. What resources are available, nobody either knows about them themselves or they choose to not inform me about them.

Thank you for your time.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you, Robert, very good. I appreciate your testimony.

Lieutenant Colonel Sheehan, why don't you go next. I appreciate you being here and good to see you again.

**STATEMENT OF LTC JOE SHEEHAN, USA (RET.), CHAIRMAN,
NORTHERN ALASKA MILITARY RETIREE COUNCIL**

LTC. SHEEHAN. Good afternoon, Senator, and ladies and gentlemen. I'm Joe Sheehan, a retired Army officer, a life-long Alaskan, and a former inspector general for the Army here in Alaska.

First, sir, I want to thank you all for coming here to listen as well as for allowing me the opportunity to contribute here today. And, Senator, I'd like to also personally recognize you and thank you for your focus on veterans' and retirees' issues since you've been in office.

In the interest of time, I'll let my written submission speak for itself. It lays out the same broad issues that are unfortunately just as valid today as they were 3 years ago. And, frankly, that's truly the problem. I could tell you the horror stories of veterans with lost records, delays, and denied benefits, et cetera, but I don't want to focus on the symptoms of problems in VA. You'll hear that from others, and the VA IG report is damning enough.

Instead, I want to constructively focus instead on laying out a vision for the way ahead on systemic issues, for where to go from here. How can VA better meet its mission obligations to veterans? How can that effort also make a critical difference in this fragile but interdependent fabric of health care that we have here in Alaska with limited capabilities? And how can we leverage VA and interagency capabilities to pioneer a model for the rest of the system that might benefit everybody?

I have five key points I want to take away here. The first, Senator, is that I appreciate your determined efforts since we talked in November, toward establishing the Alaska Health Care Task Force. That is a critical effort. I can't tell you how important that is to prioritize and help develop a strategic vision up here for improving efficiencies and useful support. That can't be done from Washington, DC, in a cookie-cutter fashion; it has to be done from the ground level. It will significantly improve access to health care for the rest of Alaskans in addition to us Federal beneficiaries, of which we comprise 43 percent of all Alaskans. And there are many examples where veterans, retirees, and our active-duty family members in Alaska are unfairly denied both access and delivery of health care on a level equitable to other States, and that's a proven fact.

The second critical need, meanwhile, is to take care of the low-hanging fruit, such as a few unique and simple frustrations that we have that we can't surmount because Congress must allow them an actual legislation and word of law. Some of these include things like: the inability of TRICARE managers here in Alaska to designate patients to civilian PCMs, just as most other States do; the lack of reimbursable travel provision and TRICARE for life, where

people have to travel around from our remote regions and have nothing when they get there, and have to take their families along with them; proposed distance and drive-time limits on TRICARE Prime here in Alaska, which are currently on waiver of being threatened again.

The third issue I want to discuss is that I don't want to see all of the dedicated members of VA tarred. Many wonderful people, like Linda B. over there, work daily and work very hard and there isn't a veteran in this town that doesn't know her. However, I do want to say that we do need to change the culture of VA as an agency and especially in regard to both its level of commitment and its focus of investment here in Alaska.

I'd love to get specific and I can later if you'd like, but the key concerns are in the areas of attitude, capacity, access, and outreach. VA has an unhealthy Anchorage-centric mentality in a State one-fifth the size of the United States. Rural vets do not have acceptable, let alone equitable, access to health care. Fairbanks should be a more viable VA hub for Northern Alaska and the watershed that it serves.

VA education programs should be the catalyst for spreading a homegrown health care capacity across this State and the synergy of these and other task force-style ideas would save VA a lot of money while delivering far better access to veterans, but would also grow sustainable health care services for all of our rural veterans and serve as a foundation for the prosperity of this State. We cannot fail to do that. This would be a win/win for everybody.

The fourth point is the importance to note that VA, as you well know and I know you know this, is not the only subset of Veterans' Affairs. Too often, however, hundreds of veterans' bills, quote/unquote, focus upon VA, but most of the Members of Congress don't seem to understand that these bills usually do not include or even help retirees and the families of our active-duty military. These active-duty military are on the same TRICARE and are not part of the VA system. A young specialist or young airman has to go out there and find access in the community here in Alaska while they have two kids, and they have trouble finding that, and especially doing it affordably and a lot of times things are deferred as a result of that.

However, while they're entirely separate systems, there is much to be improved by way of mutual support and shared efficiencies, and we aren't mining those now, but these must be allowed in legislation and by policy.

This brings me to my fifth and final point. With respect, sir, Congress has been part of the problem instead of being part of the solution, and that's why I appreciate your direct efforts here today and your focus on these issues. Too much of the system is based upon stovepipe parochialism and entangling regulations which restrict each agency's ability to effectively offer a best practices approach to delivering services and health care, let alone optimize efficiencies between agencies.

Then there is the annual fight to sustain things like the funding of inadequate band-aid patches for things like 21 percent Medicare that we spend all that energy on every year. And why? Often the best answer is not more money, but to truly fix the programs or

policies at hand. We need to change the paradigm at both VA and in Congress, otherwise, if we do what we always did, we'll get what we always got.

The bottom line, sir, is we can do better, we should do better, we must do better.

Senator, and ladies and gentlemen, I could cover more, but my 5 minutes are up. So, subject to your questions, this concludes my initial statement. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of LTC. Sheehan follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JOE SHEEHAN, NORTHERN ALASKA
MILITARY RETIREE COUNCIL

VA/AFAP 2010 ISSUE SHEET

FWA 2010

Two related issues submitted by the Northern Alaska Military Retiree Council:

1. ISSUE TITLE/SUBJECT: TRICARE authorization to designate patients to a civilian PCM.

SCOPE: Bottom line: Alaska TRICARE managers need authorization, like other states already have, to designate to civilian PCMs (primary care managers) for care unavailable locally or too distant for the members who are in TRICARE Prime. This greatly affects both our active duty military families and retirees in Alaska, as well as having a direct impact upon the ability of local military medical capacity to optimally manage patient requirements and demand using best practices. In addition to providing many efficiencies for the TRICARE system as well as the promised and equitable level of service/care for retirees and active duty family members, this would benefit the entire fragile interrelated fabric of health care in Alaska by supporting a more robust medical capacity in these under-served areas. TRICARE managers in other states can and do establish civilian PCMs, but Alaska has no such authority within the TMA or contract at this time, even though we are arguably in the greatest need due to remote and far flung health care facilities with very limited capabilities that are not now sufficient or mutually supportive. This is yet another example of where Alaska has been excluded, by policy, from levels of care standards equitable to that provided to the rest of the US.

RECOMMENDATION: Approve authorization for Alaska TRICARE managers to designate patients to a civilian PCM and best manage their available resources.

2. ISSUE TITLE/SUBJECT: Modify the TMA proposed rule change language which allows exclusion of Alaska's TRICARE Prime enrollees who are not within drive time waiver areas.

SCOPE: The TRICARE Management Activity (TMA) has proposed a rule change (below) which rightly codifies the current reimbursement rate demonstration project as permanent. That highly successful demo project has been sustaining our critical local rates and access to care since we asked for that as an interim band-aid solution to the access concerns of our active duty military families and military retirees who all rely upon TRICARE access. However, our concern with this current proposal is the wording at the end which would allow TRICARE to specifically exclude Alaska's Prime enrollees who are not enrolled to a military treatment facility and thus can be subject to losing eligibility for Prime based upon an arbitrary drive time (distance) concept which is inappropriate for Alaska. This problem is especially critical to both our active duty family members and retirees who are just outside this limited drive time area, which has recently been waived for now. This issue is directly related to our other submitted issue (see issue # 1, above) regarding the need to allow TRICARE managers to designate to a civilian primary care manager (PCM). The availability of care in Alaska's remote areas does not fit a cookie cutter approach appropriate for more densely populated regions of our Nation and this part of the TMA rule would be highly detrimental to Prime enrollees who truly have no other valid option for promised and equitable levels of care. They should not be forced to reduce their policy to TRICARE Standard due to location. A fair and more effective alternative solution is proven by the example of other states who can establish civilian PCMs, but Alaska has no such authority within the TMA or contract at this time. In addition to hurting our active duty family members and retirees who reside outside these drive time limits, approval of this proposed rule will result in the certain failure by TMA to allow TRICARE managers the flexibility to manage for best practices in the best interests of its patient population which must rely upon TRICARE PRIME, since there is no other equitable level of promised health care available.

TMA's Proposed Rule:

"TRICARE Management Activity published a proposed rule in the *Federal Register* <<http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2009/E9-28357.htm>> on Nov. 27, 2009, to incorporate current practices from an ongoing demonstration project as permanent changes to the administration of the TRICARE program in Alaska."

"TRICARE has recognized the unique circumstances existing in Alaska, which make the provision of medical care to TRICARE beneficiaries through the TRICARE program operated in the other 49 states unrealistic. Recognizing these unique conditions and circumstances, the Department of Defense has conducted a demonstration project in the State of Alaska since implementation of the TRICARE program under which certain exceptions have been made for administration of the program in Alaska."

"This rule proposes no change to the TRICARE benefit or to those who are eligible for it. However, the rule does eliminate the financial underwriting of health care costs in the State of Alaska by a TRICARE contractor. In addition, TRICARE Prime may be limited to those eligible beneficiaries enrolled to a military treatment facility and those eligible for TRICARE Prime Remote."

RECOMMENDATION: Modify the TMA rule proposal to specifically eliminate any potential to restrict Alaska's TRICARE Prime enrollment or coverage using a drive time limitation. Instead, specifically allow Alaska's TRICARE managers to more flexibly resolve the problem by designating these enrollees to a civilian PCM (see issue #1).

CONTACT INFO: Joe Sheehan, joe.sheehan@gci.net.

Senator BEGICH. I want to thank you, Joe, for your testimony. And just to remind folks, as you do testify and you have that written statement, that is also part of the record. Again, thank you for visiting Washington, DC, that one time. It gave me a great idea and I appreciate you sharing that number 1 choice because we moved it forward. I thank you for that.

LTC. SHEEHAN. Thank you for your efforts, sir.

Senator BEGICH. Absolutely. I'll have some questions I know on that. Ron Woolf, thank you for being here with the ESGR and a great group of supporting our employers supporting the Guard.

Oh, you know what we need to do, we need to slide that microphone over. I apologize. One, we want to make sure the people can hear you, but also that it's on the record. There we go. So, please.

STATEMENT OF RON WOOLF, CONTROLLER AT GOLDEN VALLEY ELECTRIC ASSOCIATION; AND UNIT REPRESENTATIVE, EMPLOYER SUPPORT, GUARD AND RESERVE

Mr. WOOLF. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. In my real job, I'm the controller at Golden Valley Electric Association and I volunteer to support men and women serving our Nation's National Guard and Reserve. I think I'll just read my testimony.

Senator BEGICH. Sure, please.

Mr. WOOLF. Thank you. Members of our local Employer Supported Guard and Reserve met to discuss my testimony and the message we'd like to share. ESGR is a Department of Defense organization that seeks to promote a culture in which all American employers support and value the military service of their employees.

The Nation's reserve components, referring to the total of all National Guard members and reserve forces from all branches of the military, comprise approximately 48 percent of total available military manpower. The current national defense strategy considers the National Guard and Reserve as full partners in the fully inte-

grated total force. ESGR's mission focuses on building relationships between guard members and reservists and their employers. We strive to educate employers about the Uniform Services' Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, USERRA, while promoting the benefits of hiring military personnel.

USERRA is a Federal law intended to ensure that persons who serve or have served in the Armed Forces, reserves, National Guard, or other uniform services are not disadvantaged in their civilian careers because of their service, are promptly reemployed in their civilian jobs upon their return from duty, and are not discriminated against in employment based on past, present, or future military service. The Federal Government is to be a model employer, as it says in the act.

Our experience with Fairbanks employers is excellent. As you've mentioned, we have a lot of veterans and a lot of military in Alaska. The Federal and State upper management are very well versed on USERRA, but mid- and low-level managers do not receive training on the Act's requirements. This is an opportunity where the Veterans' Affairs Committee can help our returning soldiers.

When I first started with ESGR, our mission was to educate employers about their traditional National Guard and Reserve employees who are gone for short periods of time. We've informed employers about the importance of those missions. The extended deployments now being experienced by our soldiers has created new challenges for our men and women returning to the workplace. I'd like to share the following experiences with you.

Deploying or returning servicemembers are often put in situations that make the transition difficult due to their immediate supervisors' lack of knowledge. They are not provided authorized benefits, they're excluded from consideration for promotion, and forced to provide written documentation to justify the rights they are granted under the law.

Servicemembers have had to educate their immediate supervisors on their rights. The Federal Government is to be a model employer under USERRA and yet large entities like Federal and State agencies often have the largest number of inquiries or requests for assistance after deployment due to lack of knowledge of mid- and low-level managers. Co-worker relationships are challenging for many National Guard and Reserve servicemembers. Deployed servicemembers return to a work environment that sometimes is hostile due to lack of knowledge on the part of the co-workers, co-workers who have had to pick up additional workloads or wonder why the deployed employee received a benefit or seniority when they are not at work. Co-workers hired while a servicemember is deployed often have the hardest time understanding the situation because they did not see the support the deployed worker received prior to deploying, all the effort made by the deploying servicemember to help the employer prior to their departure.

When servicemembers return to this type of workplace negativity, it is hard to readjust to their jobs and their deployment can be seen as a cause of strife in the workplace. When one local soldier returned to work with an employee that was temporarily promoted to backfill his position during his deployment, that employee enlisted the support of several other personnel in the office in an

attempt to keep himself at the higher grade. This led to a very negative work environment until several months later when the temporary replacement was moved to another position in the department.

Businesses and organizations have a difficult time temporarily replacing National Guard and Reserve members who are educated and trained for their jobs that need to be filled by other employees. Some businesses and organizations are unable to find temporary employees and will fill from within or for a current employee the opportunity to work temporarily in another position at a higher level, which still leaves the employer short of personnel.

The Veterans' Affairs Committee can help National Guard and Reserve members by rallying the support of mid- and low-level managers for our soldiers. While this is an overall task to educate all employers, you do have influence over our Federal managers and front line employees. Education will be the key to understanding perhaps federally mandating supervisor training that includes USERRA. It would benefit the employer, employee, and the co-workers.

We at ESGR have posters that identify basic USERRA rules directed primarily to the employer. We could use the same medium directed toward co-workers to provide an understanding and to obtain their support rather than a disdain for our soldiers and airmen. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Woolf follows:]



Ron Woolf
ALASKA COMMITTEE FOR EMPLOYER SUPPORT
OF THE GUARD AND RESERVE
P.O. BOX 81215
FAIRBANKS, AK 99708

February 12, 2010

United States Senate
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Washington, DC 20510

Testimony
February 17, 2010

I am grateful for your invitation to testify to the Veterans' Affairs Committee's meeting . I am the Controller at Golden Valley Electric Association and volunteer to support men and women serving our nation's National Guard and Reserve.

Members of our local Employer Support of Guard and Reserve (ESGR) met earlier this week to discuss my testimony and the message we'd like to share. ESGR is a Department of Defense organization that seeks to promote a culture in which all American Employers support and value the military service of their employees.

The nation's Reserve components (referring to the total of all National Guard members and Reserve forces from all branches of the military) comprise approximately 48 percent of our total available military manpower. The current National Defense Strategy considers the National Guard and Reserve as full partners in the fully integrated Total Force.

ESGR's mission focuses on building relationships between Guard Members and Reservists and their employers. We strive to educate employers about the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) while promoting the benefits of hiring military personnel.

The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 is a federal law intended to ensure that persons who serve or have served in the Armed

Forces, Reserves, National Guard or other "uniformed services:" (1) are not disadvantaged in their civilian careers because of their service; (2) are promptly reemployed in their civilian jobs upon their return from duty; and (3) are not discriminated against in employment based on past, present, or future military service. The federal government is to be a "model employer" under USERRA (38 U.S.C. § 4301).

Our experience with Fairbanks employers is excellent. Federal and State upper management are very well versed on USERRA, but mid and low-level managers do not receive training on the Act's requirements. This is an opportunity where the Veterans' Affairs Committee can help our returning soldiers.

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The extended deployments now being experienced by our soldiers has created new challenges for our men and women returning to the workplace. I'd like to share the following experiences with you:

Deploying and returning service members are often put in situations that make the transition difficult due to their immediate supervisor's lack of knowledge. They are not provided authorized benefits, excluded from consideration for promotion and forced to provide written documentation to justify the rights they are granted under the law. Service members have to educate their immediate supervisors on their rights. The federal government is to be a "model employer" under USERRA (38 U.S.C. § 4301) and yet large entities like Federal and State agencies often have the largest number of inquiries and requests for assistance after a deployment due to the lack of knowledge of mid and low-level managers.

Co-worker relationships are challenging for many National Guard and Reserve service members. Deployed service members return to a work environment that sometimes is hostile due to lack of knowledge on the part of their co-workers. Co-workers had to pick up additional workloads or wonder why the deployed employee received the benefit of seniority when they were not at work. Co-workers hired while a service member is deployed often have the hardest time understanding the situation because they did not see the support the deployed worker received prior to deploying or the effort made by the deploying service member to help the employer prior to their departure. When service members return to this type of workplace negativity, it is hard to readjust to their jobs and their deployment can be seen as the cause of strife in the workplace.

When a local soldier returned to work with an employee that was temporarily promoted to backfill his position during his deployment, that employee enlisted the support of several other personnel in the office in an attempt to keep himself at the higher grade. This led to a very negative work environment until several months later when the temporary replacement was moved to another position in the Department.

Businesses and organizations have a difficult time temporarily replacing National Guard and Reserve members who are educated and trained for the jobs that need to be filled by other employees. Some businesses and organizations are unable to find temporary employees and will fill from within, offering a current employee the opportunity to work temporarily in another position at a higher level, which still leaves the employer short of personnel.

The Veterans' Affairs Committee can help National Guard and Reserve members by rallying the support of mid and low-level managers for our soldiers. While this is an overwhelming task to educate all employers, you do have influence over our Federal managers and front-line employees.

Education will be the key to understanding and perhaps federally mandating supervisor training that includes USERRA would benefit the employer, employee and the co-workers. We have posters that identify basic USERRA rules directed primarily to the employer, we could use this same median directed towards co-workers to provide an understanding and to obtain their support rather than their disdain for the soldier/airman.

ESGR Testimony
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
February 17, 2010
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Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. That was very good, Ron. Thank you for your testimony. Thank you, all four of you, for your testimony and presenting it. I have some questions. I'll randomly go through them and then as I finish this, we'll have a second panel with some questions you have generated for me to ask them, which is good. That's part of the process here, and so you have given me some good thoughts.

Linda, you had mentioned several areas that claims are sent out or brokered to, but the one that really stuck out for you was San Diego.

Ms. BOISSEAU. Oh, the claims are horrible, sir.

Senator BEGICH. And is it that once they receive them, it's the process they take? Or is it a combination of things, how long it takes them to do it, or lack of communication? What are the—

Ms. BOISSEAU. It's a little bit of both.

Senator BEGICH. OK.

Ms. BOISSEAU. First of all, it's not necessarily the length of time. It's the caliber of the rating decision that they render.

Senator BEGICH. Because you said there's a high rate of appeals off of those.

Ms. BOISSEAU. Absolutely, because of—they have not looked at the evidence that was presented in the medical records. It's like they didn't even open the darn thing.

Senator BEGICH. Is there something you have at your disposal and if not I'll be asking some other folks on the next panel, but these claims get brokered out to, you said, Salt Lake, Seattle, and San Diego as examples. Do you have in your capacity to report, well, San Diego, 70 percent go to appeal? Or Seattle, 20. Do you have any of that hard data? If you don't, that's OK, I'll ask the next panel to—

Ms. BOISSEAU. No, not at this time, but the thing of it is we have to broker those claims out because we do not have the people trained in Anchorage—

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Ms. BOISSEAU [continuing]. To handle obviously the rating systems. I'm not being disrespectful and I do understand that. I'm not dinging the VA here for that, you know, because to become a rater, it's a very long process if you're worth your salt; and it's really an intense system, you know. But for some reason they have a lot—

Senator BEGICH. They always have a high appeal rate.

Ms. BOISSEAU. A very high appeal rate as compared to the other sources, yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. That's a good point. I mean part of what the process of this hearing is, is to not only look at some of the VA services, the employment services, those issues, how we can look to improve them, but this is good information. I'll—

Ms. BOISSEAU. It's like having to do the claim all over again because you're trying to start from square one because then you've got the official Notice of Disagreement. They have to go through the process, and we win anywhere from 63 to 82 percent of those claims on appeal or Notice of Disagreement. I mean, like from February of last year to this year, we have done over \$8 million in claims just for the disabled veterans in the State of Alaska.

I mean, we're out there humping and trying really hard—

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Ms. BOISSEAU [continuing]. I mean I'm just at a frustration level, which I know also for Anchorage because they don't have control over those raters from those other places.

Senator BEGICH. Other places.

Ms. BOISSEAU. I don't know that it's being brokered out until I receive the final determination on that claim. So, it's nothing like, hey, wait a minute. Should I put a note on this: Do not broker out. I can't do that. I can't do that. That would be ludicrous.

Senator BEGICH. Right. But you don't get noticed on when they—

Ms. BOISSEAU. I get no notice until the claim comes back.

Senator BEGICH. Until completion.

Ms. BOISSEAU. Absolutely. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. So you don't know where it's actually being dealt with at that point?

Ms. BOISSEAU. Correct.

Senator BEGICH. Let me ask you one other question and that is—I thought it was interesting—the Call Center. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but what I heard was your concern that the Call Center, when there are questions they may not be aware of some of Alaska's, kind of unique situations—

Ms. BOISSEAU. Absolutely.

Senator BEGICH [continuing]. Like the property tax exemption is a great one.

Ms. BOISSEAU. Absolutely.

Senator BEGICH. And you're right, it's 170,000.

Ms. BOISSEAU. Uh-huh.

Senator BEGICH. And, you know, how does that work?

Ms. BOISSEAU. Hunting, fishing license, all the other stuff that goes with it.

Senator BEGICH. Right. The hunting license, the fishing license.

Ms. BOISSEAU. But they can't get any of that without that letter stating, you know, that—

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Ms. BOISSEAU. You know. And they have to be handled in a timely manner, by the 31st of March. And if it's not, then—

Senator BEGICH. Yeah, you lose the year.

Ms. BOISSEAU. Absolutely.

Senator BEGICH. There's no two ways about it.

Ms. BOISSEAU. They do not acknowledge the property tax like, let's say that somebody filed in January of this year. It was granted, you know, all the way. But I mean retroactively they still have to pay those taxes. So I mean—

Senator BEGICH. That's right, yeah.

Ms. BOISSEAU [continuing]. For that delay, it's a big loss of revenue for the veteran's family.

Senator BEGICH. And is it your sense, and I'll ask this as we get to the next panel, but is it your sense that maybe some additional training for those call centers—

Ms. BOISSEAU. Perhaps on Alaska's unique situation. I don't—

Senator BEGICH. Right, for those that handle Alaska calls.

Ms. BOISSEAU. It should not be that difficult. But who is to say? The VA may take it any time and say, OK, we're not going into Phoenix anymore on the 1-800 number; maybe we're going to go to blah, blah, blah. So it's an easy fix, but it's frustrating because the veterans are not getting that paperwork in a timely manner.

It's a simple, easy fix if the training includes, "Alaska is unique with the property tax exemption ladder." It shouldn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out—to make sure that if it says Alaska, let's just say, OK; Alaska, the benefits associated with 50 percent or higher. That's an easy fix for a telephone person.

Senator BEGICH. Yeah. And the good thing about Alaska is we just have one area code, so it's not complicated to figure—

Ms. BOISSEAU. No, it's not.

Senator BEGICH. I'm learning that in DC, you can be calling just a few miles and have a whole different area code.

Ms. BOISSEAU. I'm not trying to be mean about it, but it does—

Senator BEGICH. No, no, that's good information.

Ms. BOISSEAU. It does need to be fixed. I mean, these little things add up to frustration levels at—

Senator BEGICH. Yeah.

Ms. BOISSEAU. But, I mean, \$170,000. I would be chewing somebody's foot off. OK?

Senator BEGICH. Yeah. No, I hear you. Thank you, Linda. That was very good. That helps me with some additional work. But let me ask Robert.

You did a great job. You had good testimony. You clearly are anxious to be productive, have a job, work, get educated, do all the things that you want to do to be successful in life.

I noted you found additional services through student services within the university that you were unaware of, but not until later down the road, where you had a veterans' coordinator maybe not as aware of some of those services. Is that a fair statement or am I—

Mr. ROOF. Well, she works in financial aid. It's just one of those things that you—

Senator BEGICH. Two different—

Mr. ROOF. You tag "veterans" onto something and so automatically I say, oh, that's for me. You know, like that's who I think I should be talking to—

Senator BEGICH. Gotcha.

Mr. ROOF [continuing]. Naturally. Because like I said, navigating this whole system, that's all I spend my time doing, you know, trying to find some guidance. So I've tried talking to them, you know, as far as asking is this the correct paperwork I'm filling out; is this what I need to be doing?

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Mr. ROOF. Is there anything else I need to know as a student, as a disabled veteran going to UAF, is there anything else I need to know that can help me be successful? Like that's all I'm trying to do, is get on with my life and move past, you know, these things that have happened to me. I don't regret any of this, but I'm trying to now make a new path in life and any help I can have doing that—and, like I said, in dealing with all these things—I'd be more than grateful.

And not knowing about them until after all this time—you know, I've probably taken years off my life just stressing out about this stuff; and it's unfortunate to me, I feel, that I've had this much trouble in trying to—like I said, I'm not looking for handouts, I'm not looking for people to sit there and do my homework for me.

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Mr. ROOF. But just tailoring these classes—I mean, I don't know how to learn some of the ways some of these other students do. I mean, everybody has different learning styles, but coupled with the PTSD and my own learning style, it's very frustrating. Like I sit in class, yet I can't concentrate and just—

Senator BEGICH. Well, let me ask this, Robert. Was the assumption that when you saw the veterans' coordinator, you had a broader sense of what they were offering, but learned it was really about financial aid.

Mr. ROOF. Correct.

Senator BEGICH. And when you went to student services, it was much broader and suddenly you saw some opportunity there.

Mr. ROOF. Well, all that I really got out of student services—my VA counselor at the time had told me that, you know, the university has something, but basically all that was, was I went in and they asked, oh, what is it that you feel? And I said, well, I have terrible anxiety. You know, there's times where I may just need to get up and walk out of class because I'm having whatever issues. And so, it's basically a letter that's written up and you get two

choices. It says this student might choose to leave class for a few minutes to, you know, bring himself back together and then return; or this student likes to work in smaller groups because he can't deal with large groups at this time. And that was all it was. There was no additional explanation that I have these difficulties concentrating and, you know, whatever. I wasn't informed that there could be more that was done.

Senator BEGICH. Sure.

Mr. ROOF. Say I was, you know, an autistic student or, you know—

Senator BEGICH. Well, let me ask you this, Robert, if I could. Would it have made a difference if when you walked in to the university for the first time and you wanted to be a student, that there was a person that said they work with veterans and they worked on everything: financial aid, services, stuff that students need. They said I'm going to be your partner while you figure out what you want to do and help you through this early stage of getting started. Would that have made a difference to you?

Mr. ROOF. Sir, what's the voc rehab program for? That's my question. That's what I thought I would be getting from them. That's why I elected to use the voc rehab program. And I may be wrong. I—

Senator BEGICH. Well, we're going to ask some folks next up, so—

Mr. ROOF. Apparently, I was wrong because when I—I failed to mention before, but when I made a call to the supervisor explaining that I was basically told that they—the voc rehab program—weren't there to hold my hand. So, therefore, I feel that it's not my job to hold voc rehab's hand.

Like why am I going out and being sent to find all this information and all these inner workings of the school system when—and constantly, you know, being forced to prove that I'm doing the right thing, like I don't have enough problems going on. I don't need to be harassed by people that are supposed to be helping me.

Senator BEGICH. Right, right.

Mr. ROOF. So yes, basically, it would be nice if there was someone there at the university or in-house at the VA that says, OK, this is your goal, this is what we want to do, this—you know, make you a productive member of society again. And, say these are the necessary steps that you'll be taking.

Senator BEGICH. Right. Kind of guide you.

Mr. ROOF. Right.

Senator BEGICH. To give you the freedom to figure it out, but also be there to kind of say, well, here's the 20 services that are available for you. Kind of help you select, but yet at the end of the day you're ultimately responsible for it, though helping guide you through that.

Mr. ROOF. Right. Well, just being aware of the information. Like I said, I just now found out about the whole disability thing—

Senator BEGICH. Sure.

Mr. ROOF [continuing]. And the tailoring of this. To say these are certain things someone that better understands. That's just it; I think part of the problem with voc rehab is he doesn't fully understand the whole—

Senator BEGICH. The whole picture.

Mr. ROOF. The whole picture of my disabilities and the school system. Like I said, when you put those two things together there's a reason why I failed my class. It's not because I didn't show up or I didn't want to be there or I didn't do the work. It's because I had other issues going on. I have symptoms, flare-ups, or whatever, and things happen. It's not me wanting to go burn, you know, taxpayer dollars and freelancing my education, as they put it. I'm just trying to get on with life.

Senator BEGICH. Yeah. That's very good, Robert. Thank you very much for some of that information.

Let me go to Joe. When you were in my office, you were like, bam, bam, bam, and once again you are consistent with that, which clearly shows your military background; that is, about mission, accomplishment, and goals.

So, I want to pick one of them out and comment on one. I agree with you on the efforts of—on the issue of the Congress and how they can really mess things up because there are multiple jurisdictions; they try to, you know, package a little bit here, package a little bit here—stovepiping.

So, in your situation of your description, the culture change which is probably the most difficult to do in any organization—military/non-military, government/non-government—what would be the one thing that you could say here's that would make a difference to really help change the culture of the VA to understand what we need to be doing? This may be a bigger question than you can answer in a very simple way, but could you try to do that? Give me a thought there.

LTC. SHEEHAN. Yes, sir. I honestly don't know if I'm in a good position to judge that. I can give you a spectator's viewpoint—

Senator BEGICH. Sure.

LTC. SHEEHAN [continuing]. And I think that would give a fair assessment. I would say, you know, it's a large and ponderous bureaucracy that's tied down by politics and cultural inertia, if you will, which is not anybody's fault in particular. You've got some wonderful people leading it: General Shinseki and General Peake before him at the very top. In the trenches every day, like I said, there are wonderful people like Linda B., who, you know, are caring and dedicated, are making it happen, and they know where the rubber meets the road, what they need on the ground.

Unfortunately, what you have in between there, and I don't want to tar everybody, is a lot of people who are invested in the status quo and there's rice bowls to protect and there's budgets that come down from Congress, and it's the typical thing in any typical bureaucracy.

Senator BEGICH. Organization, yeah.

LTC. SHEEHAN. And I don't mean that as a pejorative. I mean it as a—

Senator BEGICH. No, no, no, that's good.

LTC. SHEEHAN [continuing]. As a definition of a bureaucracy. And so the question is, are you listening? Do you have a cycle and a process for self-improvement? And even if you do, are you able to fit that into the paradigms that are given to you by Congress and the mandates for roles and missions and say this is what you

must do and you can't cross money over to other agencies and everything like this.

So it's real easy to tar people with saying they're not doing whatever, and I think in many ways people have their arms tied behind their backs yet there are some people who outright need to be fired. I'll just give you that perspective. On the other hand, you know, 99 percent of them out there are working hard and they have effective leadership. They just need to have the sort of task force effort we've been discussing—

Senator BEGICH. Right.

LTC. SHEEHAN [continuing]. To be able to say—

Senator BEGICH. To kind of shake it up a little bit.

LTC. SHEEHAN [continuing]. How can we make this work on the ground? What kind of culture do you have? And going back to, you mentioned my military background, so this is my perspective. How can you win the battle if you know that you're losing it and you aren't listening to your commanders out there on the ground who are decisively engaged every day? That's what they've got to do. We don't do that well, I'll tell you, which is a charitable way of saying it.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Ron, I just wanted to comment and then you can comment if you want to. I was very intrigued by your comments about the Federal Government and that we could be doing more with our mid-level management regarding education on the importance of the program. It seems like what I was hearing is there's just an information gap. Is that—

Mr. WOOLF. Exactly. I think the training needs to go down to the managers that are on the front lines that deal directly with our deployed soldiers. Get some education for them plus something that would give the rest of the employees understanding of what's going on and the rights that their fellow employees who choose to be in the guard and reserve—

Senator BEGICH. I want to ask at a later time, maybe not during the hearing here, but for my staff to follow up on a question. And that is, I know when I was mayor of Anchorage, every Monday we had new employee orientation. You know, we'd have a high turnover rate in one department, low in others, but generally you have new people always coming in. And because of the conflicts we're engaged in, how engaged everyone is, I'd be very curious as we talk to the Federal workforce what kind of orientation do they offer at that first point of entry for a new employee, for example. Because there are all ranges, everything from the entry-level staff to management and everything in between.

So you've given me some real good food for thought here. I greatly appreciate that.

Mr. WOOLF. Thank you.

Senator BEGICH. Let me end this panel. Again, thank you all very much. You did a great job in helping shed some light on the positives and the negatives and where we can make some improvements. So thank you very much.

We're going to switch out panels. Again, thank you all for being here, absolutely.

[Pause.]

Senator BEGICH. If the next panel can line up, that'd be great. As the next panel is coming up, I want to say we're going to run a little bit behind, so I want to keep things rolling along here. We have five presenters, some with additional staff. Go ahead and take your seats, those that are participating in the next panel.

This next panel will be five individuals: the Assistant Secretary of Labor, Ray Jefferson, Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training; Mark Bilosz, Director, Anchorage Regional Office, Veterans Benefits Administration, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Verdie Bowen, Sr., Administrator, Office of Veterans Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, State of Alaska; Belinda Finn, Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations, Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; and Dr. Susan Pendergrass, Director of the VISN 20, Veterans Health Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs.

We have other folks who will be joining them for the question portion if there are questions that they need to answer.

What I'd like to do at this time, if Borough Assembly Member Hank Bartos is still here. He was here earlier. We want to thank him for joining us in this presentation and meeting today.

We will lead off with Assistant Secretary Ray Jefferson. Ray, you have been around a little bit in the last couple days and I really appreciate you coming here to Alaska. For those that are unaware of what enthusiasm is, you are about to feel it and see it. I'm always nervous now going to meetings with Ray because I always thought I was impromptu with ideas and getting things done. He, by far, exceeds me by light years.

So, Ray, you're on.

Mr. JEFFERSON. All right.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much for coming here, Mr. Secretary.

STATEMENT OF HON. RAYMOND JEFFERSON, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Mr. JEFFERSON. Thank you, sir, it's my pleasure. So, Senator Begich, thank you very much for the invitation. And to those behind me, veterans and citizens of Alaska and the Fairbanks community, I'm thrilled to be with you here today.

Let me tell you a little bit about who we are and what we do and how we can be helpful. Myself, a veteran, served with one of the ranger battalions, through the ranger bat, and also 1st Special Forces Group. I lost my hand in the line of duty trying to protect some colleagues from a hand grenade, went down through the voc rehab program through the Department of Veterans Affairs, and right now I have the privilege of serving with this great agency.

What we do is we proudly serve veterans and transitioning servicemembers. We prepare and guide them in their quest for meaningful employment; we protect their employment rights; we maximize their employment opportunities. How do we do that? We have 240 people around America, so we do it in partnership with Congress, sir, with the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs, ESGR and State workforce agencies, the veterans

service organizations, the private sector, and nonprofits and other government agencies around America.

So, what are some of the programs that we have that are relevant here and can help veterans in Alaska? First let's start with a program that we call Jobs for Veterans State Grants. In simple terms, we have 2,000 employment representatives around America; 13 of them are in Alaska and 8 of those 13 can be accessed through Anchorage or through Fairbanks. So if you're a veteran who is seeking employment or who wants to make a change, contact one of our 13 employment representatives. Tom Hall, I'm going to quickly ask if you could just stand up. This is my State director. This is the go-to person in Alaska for employment opportunities.

Number 2, homeless veterans. We do one stand-down a year. It is in Anchorage, but we can connect you with opportunities if you are a homeless veteran. Three, Rob Roof, I hope you're still here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER. He stepped out.

Mr. JEFFERSON. All right. I would like to connect him with a program we have called America's Heroes at Work. If you know a veteran who has PTS or PTSD or TBI, we have a program that can help them find meaningful employment. It gets rave reviews from the servicemembers who are in it and also from the employers. I also want to connect Rob and any other veteran taking advantage of the new GI Bill in Alaska with Student Veterans of America. Sir, this is a new veterans service organization. Their whole job is to make sure that when veterans like Rob hit campus that they can assimilate easily to the culture, the programs, the resources there. That's what it's set up for and it's a great dynamic new, young veterans service organization.

Let's shift to Native American veterans. I, myself, am part Penobscot. My great-grandfather was 100 percent Native American. This is an issue that's near and dear to my heart. We've recently invited a core group of tribal leaders to the U.S. Department of Labor. The Secretary and all the agency heads were there to begin learning how we can better serve tribal leaders throughout America. But that's what's happening in Washington.

Right here in Alaska this morning we met with a variety of Native Americans and Native American veteran business leaders, and we are doing an assessment right now to determine the best ways to serve Native American veterans in America. And, as of today, I am instructing that team to make contact with the tribal council leaders in Alaska to make sure that the issues, recommendations, and suggestions of tribal council leaders here are heard. Sir, I want to thank you for bringing me to that meeting this morning.

We are also going to be out more on the tribal lands and to the major convening events and conferences of Native Americans and Native American veterans this year, 2010.

Next, rural outreach. You know, it's great if you have a lot of fancy companies in your city, but suppose you're in Kotzebue where we're going tomorrow, or in the villages? So we want to be exploring the power of e-commerce and Internet-based home businesses to provide employment opportunities for veterans in rural America, and, sir, as you've educated me, highly rural Alaska.

Two more quick things—USERRA, protecting employment rights. You know, I was very glad to know that the employer community

in Alaska is very supportive of the guard and reserve. In this entire State with this tremendous number of veterans, there's only five to six complaints a year. That's incredible. But we also know that there's tremendous stress being placed, so we want to look at how we can work to help employers that have very small numbers of employees where some of those are guard and reserve that are going for extended deployment. We are meeting with the head of ESGR in DC to begin a dialog to try to get to some action items and see if there are some things we can do even as a demonstration project.

Finally, we have 165,000 servicemembers who leave the military every year. They go to a 3-day transition assistance program. I'm really changing this to a transition acceleration program. The bottom line is this program hasn't been modernized in 17 years. Right now it's a 240 slide Power Point show over 3 days. You can imagine how exciting that is. We're going to go ahead and transform the entire thing, bring in best practices, improve the facilitation. We want to make it economically relevant, immediately useful, more engaging, and even fun—let me bring that word in—for participants.

So this is my first trip to Alaska. I'm a kama'aina of Hawaii. Hawaii is home. I look forward to this being the beginning of a relationship, this being the beginning of a journey; and also the opportunity to learn from all of you here in this room regarding decisions of Alaska and how we can do a better job.

Thank you, sir.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jefferson follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RAYMOND M. JEFFERSON, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR
VETERANS' EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

Senator Begich and Distinguished Members, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today to discuss the employment assistance and outreach services provided to the Veterans in Alaska.

The mission of the Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS) is to provide Veterans and transitioning Servicemembers with the resources and services to succeed in the workforce by maximizing their employment opportunities, protecting their employment rights, and meeting labor market demands with qualified Veterans.

We accomplish our mission through three distinct functions: 1) conducting employment and training programs; 2) enforcing relevant Federal laws and regulations; and 3) providing transition assistance services.

VETS' PROGRAMS

VETS administers a formula grant program to States that directly meets the goals of its mission. The Jobs for Veterans State Grants (JVSG) program funds two occupations, the Disabled Veterans Outreach Program specialist (DVOP) and the Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER). DVOP specialists provide outreach services, and intensive employment assistance to meet the employment needs of eligible Veterans. LVER staff conducts outreach to employers and engages in advocacy efforts with hiring executives to increase employment opportunities for Veterans, encourages the hiring of disabled Veterans, and generally assists Veterans to gain and retain employment. In Alaska, VETS funds six LVERs and seven DVOPs. Of these 13 individuals, eight are accessible in Anchorage and Fairbanks.

To meet the needs of homeless Veterans and help reintegrate them into the workforce, VETS administers the Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Program (HVRP). In Alaska, VETS sponsors one stand-down each year in Anchorage for homeless Veterans. The stand-down provides basic services, medical care, food and clothing for Alaska's homeless population. Veterans with significant barriers to employment or service-connected disabilities are also served through the Veterans' Workforce Investment Program (VWIP)—a focused and innovative training program that coordinates services available through other VETS administered programs.

Both the homeless and workforce investment Veterans programs are funded through a competitive grant process. This year, for the first time ever, VETS will issue a Solicitation for Grant Applications (SGA) for homeless women Veterans. We also will soon issue an SGA to reinstitute the Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program (IVTP) to assist Veterans who will be transitioning back to society from incarceration. Additionally, we are in the process of developing an SGA for both HVRP and VWIP. Service providers for these deserving populations in Alaska are encouraged to apply for these competitive grants.

NATIVE AMERICAN VETERANS

To meet the needs of Native American Veterans, especially those on tribal lands, Secretary Solis hosted—and VETS participated in—a Summit of Tribal Leaders at the Department of Labor late last year. We discussed the challenges facing Native American Veterans and potential solutions. This event began the process of better serving this community. VETS will also participate in a number of major Native American outreach events in 2010. Furthermore, we are conducting a study on the employment needs of Native American Veterans living on tribal lands to identify best practices for serving this population.

USERRA

Our compliance programs investigate an average of five or six complaints per year filed by Veterans and other protected individuals in Alaska under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA). We also assess complaints alleging violations of statutes requiring Veterans' Preference in Federal hiring, and implement and collect information regarding Veteran employment by Federal contractors.

One of our commitments to Veterans is to increase awareness of USERRA, thereby increasing our ability to protect vulnerable populations. To improve USERRA's impact, VETS recently completed a Lean-Six-Sigma quality enhancement and process efficiency assessment of USERRA, with a view toward streamlining, improving quality, and increasing responsiveness to our Veteran clients. The goals of the assessment were to: 1) identify ways of ensuring a consistent, high standard of investigations; and 2) determine other steps to improve the program and its outcomes. We have begun work on identifying an electronic case management system to eliminate the paper-centric aspect of investigations and improve efficiency. Access to this system will be shared with our Federal enforcement partners. We are also working closely with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to ensure that the Federal Government serves as a role model for honoring USERRA.

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

VETS' transition assistance services are offered through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP), which provides employment workshops and direct services for separating military members, including those who are seriously wounded and injured.

TAP is a Department of Defense (DOD) program that partners with the Department of Labor (DOL), the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). TAP has four components:

1. Pre-separation counseling—this is mandatory for all transitioning Servicemembers and is provided by the military services;
2. TAP employment workshops—these are voluntary on the part of the transitioning Servicemember and are administered through DOL and its state partners;
3. VA benefits briefing—these briefings are also voluntary and administered by the VA; and
4. Disabled Transition Assistance Program—also voluntary and administered by the VA.

TAP EMPLOYMENT WORKSHOPS

Since 1991, when DOL began providing employment workshops pursuant to section 502 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 (P.L. 101-510), we have provided employment and job training assistance and other transitional services to more than one million separating and retiring military members and their spouses. DOL was further directed to provide these services at overseas locations by section 309 of the Veterans Benefits Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-183).

VETS began facilitating TAP workshops at overseas military installations where, by previous interagency agreement, the DOD had provided TAP workshops since the program's inception. We are currently conducting TAP employment workshops at 55 sites overseas, including Germany, Japan, Italy, Korea, Guam and the United King-

dom. Our mission is to provide TAP at every location requested by the Armed Services or National Guard and Reserve Components.

VETS provides employment search workshops based on projections made by each of the Armed Services and DHS, for the U.S. Coast Guard. DVOPs and LVERs are the primary source for TAP Employment Workshop facilitation stateside. However, because of the distance between many state employment offices and the military installations, as well as the rapid increase in Workshop participants, contract facilitators were added in early FY 1992 and supplemented by Federal staff in FY 1996. Alaska currently does not use contract facilitators.

DOD recently set a goal for TAP Employment Workshop participation of 85 percent of separating servicemembers. Eighty-one percent of active-duty transitioning Servicemembers currently attend the DOL TAP employment workshops, a 30 percent increase in participation since 2001. TAP employment workshop participation is expected to increase over the next year, and we plan to target workshop delivery to spouses and family members of separating Servicemembers, including those with limited English proficiency.

VETS is committed to ensuring a consistently high level of instruction, service and quality for all Servicemembers and spouses attending TAP Employment Workshops. Therefore, VETS requires that all TAP facilitators receive training conducted by the National Veterans Training Institute (NVTI) at the University of Colorado in Denver. NVTI provides competency-based training to further develop and enhance the professional skills of Veterans' employment and training service providers throughout the United States.

An Alaska DVOP or LVER representative attends each TAP workshop session here to discuss their respective roles and responsibilities in providing job search assistance. Since most transitioning Servicemembers return to some other state, this information is provided to help the Servicemember contact the DVOP and LVER representative in their respective states to assist them directly with their re-integration into the local job market in their areas.

Alaska averages more than 60 TAP employment workshops annually with approximately 1,500 transitioning Servicemembers in attendance. This includes about one workshop per quarter with the Coast Guard. There are four major TAP sites, encompassing all military service branches plus the U.S. Coast Guard with an additional four sites that vary in size and frequency according to need.

National Guard and Reserve personnel in Alaska are informed that they can attend TAP for up to 180 days after they complete their active duty commitment. An individual DVOP or LVER can facilitate a TAP employment workshop, or they may do so as a unit.

The Alaska DVET (Director of Veterans' Employment and Training) meets annually with the DVOPs and LVERs who facilitate the TAP employment workshops to discuss transitioning Servicemember's feedback and curriculum updates based on the input provided by these TAP recipients.

In addition to presently reviewing TAP's performance and impact, we are also working to modernize the workshop, increase its effectiveness and improve participants' employment outcomes. Specifically, we want the content to be more economically relevant, immediately applicable, and engaging for participants. Thus far, we've solicited input from external content experts and service providers to help us determine what should be included in a best-practice employment transition program. We are working in close cooperation with our partners at DOD, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in this endeavor.

Late last year, our three agencies engaged in a weeklong working group to develop a joint, multi-year, strategic plan for TAP. We're all committed to ensuring the plan is action-oriented and will have a direct, positive impact on our transitioning Servicemembers. The plan will involve an increased emphasis on the employment needs of the Reserve components and Servicemembers who have been wounded or injured, or who are ill.

RESERVE COMPONENT AND NATIONAL GUARD EMPLOYMENT WORKSHOP

Global military commitments have necessitated a mobilization of Guard and Reserve members that is unprecedented in modern times. The longer mobilization periods result in these Servicemembers now being eligible for Veterans' benefits, including TAP. The employment workshop is available for Guard or Reserve Members, along with all other Servicemembers, at one of the 215 transition offices located on military installations in the United States as well as overseas locations.

However, Reserve and National Guard members usually transition at fewer locations, referred to as demobilization sites. Typically the demobilization process is

rapid, taking a matter of days once the Servicemembers arrive back in the United States from overseas. During demobilization, Servicemembers may be expected to participate in many separate briefings and activities. This leaves little or no time for a full two and one-half day employment workshop. Nevertheless, we have found that many National Guard and Reserve Servicemembers would benefit from such transition assistance. Our State Directors have coordinated with each State Adjutant General, and they work directly with the individual Reserve and National Guard commanders to make special arrangements following demobilization in order to present a modified TAP employment workshop to Guard and Reserve Servicemembers. Based on requests from Reserve Component Commanders or Adjutant Generals and through coordination with our VETS' state directors and local VA staff, VETS has offered to tailor the workshops to the identified needs of the transitioning Reserve and National Guard members.

In fact, since 2001 VETS has provided transition services to over 146,000 National Guard and Reservists. These transition services range in size and content from mobilization and demobilization briefings to the full-scale TAP employment workshops. They are provided in 43 states and the District of Columbia. In some states, National Guard and Reserve members have been allowed to attend the regular TAP for Active Component Servicemembers. The services provided to the National Guard and Reserve are tailored to the needs and requests made by DOD.

To meet the transition needs of the National Guard and Reserves, in FY 2007, DOL directed the NVTI to develop a modular version of the TAP employment workshop. The traditional TAP employment workshop was turned into a 15-module menu from which Reserve and National Guard commanders may select relevant services for their unit members. This modular TAP menu includes a mandatory module that covers local labor market information, USERRA, the One-Stop Career Center system, small business opportunities, and the risks of homelessness. The other 14 modules consist of the current TAP employment workshop curriculum broken down into logical and connected blocks of instruction. This is not a new or separate curriculum for the Reserves and National Guard; rather it has been packaged to better serve this community.

USERRA briefings are conducted upon request and through outreach by VETS' staff. This year, VETS already has provided TAP briefings and USERRA outreach to the State of Alaska Army and Air National Guard units, as well as Marine Corps Reserve.

In closing, I again thank you for allowing me to address you today on this very important issue.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. I have to tell you, when you mentioned that Power Point yesterday, I could not imagine sitting in a training program, seeing 240 Power Point slides and thinking that's going to get me excited. So I thank you for that. Ray also learned today that when he asked the question how many people have been to Hawaii, I whispered in his ear, that's our second home. So many Alaskans visit Hawaii. So thank you again for being here.

The next person I'd like to hear from is Belinda Finn, Assistant Inspector General for Audits and Evaluations, Office of Inspector General, who did the report in regards to the VA Anchorage Regional Office. She'll give a summary of that.

STATEMENT OF BELINDA J. FINN, ASSISTANT INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS, OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY BRENT ARRONTE, DIRECTOR, BENEFITS INSPECTIONS DIVISION, OFFICE OF AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS

Ms. FINN. OK. Can everybody hear me? OK.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. This is much better than the Anchorage assembly room, I want you to know.

Ms. FINN. Yes, it is.

Senator BEGICH. You hear that, Fairbanks, what I said?

Ms. FINN. Senator Begich, thank you again for the opportunity to be here today and testify about our inspection of the VA Regional Office in Anchorage. With me today is Mr. Brent Arronte, who is the director of our Benefits Inspection Division.

The Benefit Inspection Program is a recent initiative to ensure that our Nation's veterans receive timely and accurate benefits and services. The OIG had been scheduled to review all 57 regional offices during the 5-year cycle, but we recently began a hiring initiative that will allow us to review the offices in 3 years.

During our inspections, we review functional and operational activities in each VARO using five protocols that cover claims processing, data integrity, management controls, information security, and public contact. We report on our results of each inspection as a snapshot in time.

In the summer of 2009, we conducted an inspection of the Anchorage VARO focusing on the 14 operational activities and found that the office had problems meeting standards in 13 of those areas. We concluded that the management team has challenges in the oversight of the operational activities; improving insufficient network capacity to support the business processes; providing training to staff; and managing an internal claims brokering process. We felt that two issues specifically contributed to the challenges in management oversight at the office.

First, the office did not have a Veterans Service Center manager for approximately 8 months in fiscal year 2009 and the manager had just recently come to the office when we did our inspection. Additionally, the VARO director manages the office from afar; he is currently located in Salt Lake City. Both of these positions are key to managing the effective operations of any regional office.

As a result of the network capacity issues, the regional office employees had difficulty consistently accessing the computer applications required to perform their jobs and employees told us this problem had been occurring for over a year.

During our review, we noted that the director had moved many claims from the Anchorage office to offices in Fort Harrison, MT, and Salt Lake City, UT. This movement of claims made it difficult for the staff to manage workload and associate mail with the corresponding claim folder. Because of this, we compared the staffing levels between Anchorage and the Boise VA Regional Office. Our analysis showed that Boise had about 22 more full-time employees for a comparable inventory of rating and non-rating claims.

I'd also like to add that my office is currently working on a national review of VBA's claims brokering process and we hope to report out later this year on results from the national program.

In conclusion, we recommended that the VARO director improve oversight of the quality assurance process, develop a mail routing guide to ensure proper mail processing, research the cause and solutions to improve network capacity, and provide additional training. The director concurred with all of our recommendations and provided responsive comments and action plans to our recommendations.

Senator, that concludes my oral testimony today. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here. Mr. Arronte and I would be pleased to answer any of your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Finn follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF BELINDA J. FINN, ASSISTANT INSPECTOR GENERAL FOR AUDITS AND EVALUATIONS, OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Begich, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Office of Inspector General (OIG) report, *Inspection of the VA Regional Office, Anchorage, Alaska*. I am accompanied by Mr. Brent Arronte, Director, Benefits Inspection Division, Office of Inspector General, Department of Veterans Affairs.

BACKGROUND

The Benefits Inspection Program is a new OIG initiative to ensure our Nation's veterans receive timely and accurate benefits and services. The Benefits Inspection Division contributes to the improvement and management of benefits processing activities and veteran services by conducting onsite inspections at VA Regional Offices (VAROs).

Under the current organizational structure, the Benefits Inspection Division, consisting of two teams, will complete a review of all 57 VAROs during a 5-year cycle, performing 12 inspections annually. The OIG recently implemented a new hiring initiative to create a second Benefits Inspection Division. Tentatively, this new division will be operational by the end FY 2010. This initiative would allow the OIG to complete a review of all VAROs within a 3-year period.

For each inspection, we issue a report describing VARO performance as measured against current VBA and VA policy. The scope of our inspections allows for a narrow review of work performed at each office and our reports represent a "snapshot" in time. Currently, we perform our reviews using five protocols focused on distinct functional areas and specific operational activities within the VARO. The protocols are claims processing, data integrity, management controls, information security, and public contact. We designed these protocols based on a risk analysis of previous OIG national audits and Combined Assessment Reviews, VBA's Compensation and Pension Site Visit reports, Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports, and information provided by the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees. Our plan is to review the protocol areas annually to identify new high-risk areas and adjust as necessary.

ANCHORAGE VARO RESULTS

In late July and early August 2009, we conducted onsite work at the Anchorage VARO. Our inspection focused on the following 14 operational activities within the 5 protocol areas:

- Processing of disability claims for specific service-related conditions—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, diabetes and disabilities related to herbicide exposure, and *Haas* claims. A *Haas* claim is a claim affected by a U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims decision that involves veterans who served in waters off Vietnam but did not set foot in Vietnam and whether those veterans are entitled to the presumption of service connection to herbicide agents.
- Integrity of VBA's Claims Management Data—Establishing correct dates of claim and properly tracking veteran's claims folder using VBA's Control of Veterans Records (COVERS) database.
- Management Controls over Claims Processing—Systematic analysis of operations (SAO), a management driven analysis of key business activities designed to identify existing or potential problems; systematic technical accuracy review (STAR), an integral part of VBA's quality assurance program designed to measure VARO performance in processing claims; and accountability for VARO date stamps and usage of the claims process improvement business model. This business model requires employees to rotate between the different teams within the VARO to maintain skills required to process claims.
- Security of Veterans' Information—Mail handling procedures and controls for the safeguarding of veterans documents to prevent unauthorized destruction
- VARO Public Contact Functions—Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS), VA's internet based public message system that allows beneficiaries a means to communicate with VA electronically.

During our visit, we interviewed the VARO Director, Veterans Service Center Manager (VSCM), supervisors, and employees responsible for processing claims and providing benefit services to veterans and their dependents. We reported the Anchorage VARO management team faces challenges in providing benefits and services to veterans. These challenges include addressing oversight of operational activities,

improving insufficient network capacity to support business processes, providing training to staff, and managing an internal claims brokering process. The VARO did not meet VBA's standards for 13 of the 14 operational areas inspected.

Our analysis of disability claims processing revealed a 29 percent error rate at the Anchorage VARO. The error rate represents our analysis of 78 disability claims and not the entire caseload of the VARO. Of the 78 claims reviewed, processing errors occurred in 23 claims, of which only three errors directly affected veterans' benefits. The VARO underpaid two veterans, one for \$288 and one for \$4,758. The other error did not involve monetary benefits. The majority of processing errors involved claims for PTSD and *Haas* claims. These errors occurred because of a lack of training for Rating Veterans Service Representatives (RVSR) responsible for making disability determinations.

Of those 13 operational areas that did not meet VBA standards, 9 occurred because of a lack of management oversight. These areas were: tracking veterans claims folders, establishing the correct dates of claim, correcting errors identified by VBA's STAR quality assurance program, completing SAOs, safeguarding VARO date stamps, safeguarding veteran's personally identifiable information (PII), properly handling claims related mail, responding to electronic inquiries submitted by veterans, and, responding to congressional inquiries.

For approximately 8-months during FY 2009, the VARO had no manager for its Veterans' Service Center, a key management position affecting many operational areas in the Anchorage VARO. Further, the VARO Director geographically residing in Salt Lake City may have also attributed to diminished oversight. For example, the Director could not observe the effectiveness of SAO recommendations designed to improve station performance and delays in implementing several SAOs occurred while waiting for the Director in Salt Lake City to approve the plan.

In addition to the 14 operational areas inspected, we identified serious concerns regarding network capacity to support current business processes. Employees reported difficulty maintaining consistent access to certain VBA applications required to perform their jobs. These difficulties included applications being unresponsive and the need for employees to restart their computers several times a day. The employees informed us this problem had already existed for over one year. We estimated the Anchorage VARO might lose 7.5 productive hours per rating specialist a month due to network capacity problems.

The VARO Director implemented an internal brokering plan that moves rating-related claims between Anchorage, AK, Ft. Harrison, MT, and Salt Lake City, UT. VBA normally brokers work between VAROs because of insufficient resources to process certain types of work. The Anchorage VSCM informed us it is difficult to create a workload management plan and to control the workload of pending claims brokered to other VAROs. A supervisor from the Anchorage VARO indicated brokering impacts mail handling procedures and it is difficult to associate claims related mail with claims folder located at other VAROs. Currently, the OIG is performing a national audit to determine the effectiveness of claims brokering across all VBA regional offices.

Because the Anchorage VARO was moving so much work to other VARO's, we compared staffing levels between the Anchorage VARO and the Boise VARO to determine if the staffing level was commensurate with similar VARO's. Our analysis revealed the Boise VARO has 22 additional full-time employees while maintaining a comparable inventory of rating and non-rating claims. We based this comparison on the total number of actual claims pending in each office. We believe this provides the best comparison of actual workload, rather than the number of veterans who reside in each state or those veterans who might file claims.

The Benefits Inspection Division completed 6 VARO inspections during FY 2009. A comparison of the percentage of claims processing errors revealed the highest error rate occurred at the San Juan, PR VARO, (41 percent), followed by Anchorage, AK (29 percent), Roanoke, VA (25 percent) Baltimore, MD (20 percent), Nashville, TN (19 percent) and Wilmington, DE (11 percent). These error rates represent our analysis of a sample of disability claims and not the entire caseload at each VARO. None of the VAROs inspected complied with 100 percent of the operational areas we reviewed. The Baltimore office had the highest rate of non-compliance with VBA standards followed by Anchorage, San Juan, Nashville, Wilmington, and Roanoke.

We recommended the Director improve oversight of the quality assurance process for several of the operational areas that did not meet standards, develop a mail routing guide to ensure proper processing of mail, research the cause and solutions to improve network capacity issues, and train staff to maintain required skills. The VARO Director concurred with all of the OIG's recommendations in the inspection report.

SUMMARY

Although our inspection found the Anchorage VARO management team faces many challenges in providing benefits and services to veterans, we believe the Director's comments to our recommendations are responsive. The Benefits Inspection Division has not performed any follow-up regarding the implementation of these recommendations at this time.

Senator Begich, thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you both very much for being here and I will have some questions. I won't make it Groundhog Day where it's the same questions as yesterday.

Ms. FINN. That's good. Thank you.

Senator BEGICH. You betcha. So the next person to present is Mark Bilosz, who is the director of the Anchorage Regional Office, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Administration.

STATEMENT OF MARK M. BILOSZ, DIRECTOR, ANCHORAGE REGIONAL OFFICE, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY WILLIE C. CLARK, SR., WESTERN AREA DIRECTOR; AND PATRICK KELLEY, VETERANS SERVICE CENTER MANAGER, ANCHORAGE REGIONAL OFFICE

Mr. BILOSZ. Thank you. Senator Begich, it's my pleasure to be here today to discuss our efforts in meeting the needs of veterans residing in the State of Alaska. Accompanying me here today is the Western Area VBA director, Mr. Willie Clark, and the Veterans Service Center manager in Anchorage, Patrick Kelley.

I will discuss important benefits and services provided to veterans living in Alaska, as well as discuss concerns about the Anchorage Regional Office addressed in a recent VA Office of Inspector General report. The Anchorage Regional Office administers the following benefits and services: disability compensation and pension for veterans; vocational rehabilitation and employment assistance; and outreach for all veterans and survivor benefits. Our goal is to deliver these benefits and services in a timely, accurate, and compassionate manner. This is accomplished through the administration of comprehensive and diverse benefits programs.

Currently, a total of 34 employees work in the Veterans Service Center and 7 employees in the vocational rehabilitation and employment division within the regional office. Employees at the Anchorage regional office are very motivated and are providing excellent service to Alaska veterans. Performance indicators reveal the Anchorage Regional Office is performing much better than in the past, completing a greater number of claims each month, while improving accuracy.

As the outbased director of the Anchorage Regional Office, I visit Anchorage at least once quarterly and have daily discussions with division management to maintain an open line of communication and provide direction and oversight. A new VHA clinic is scheduled to open in May 2010 and VBA has secured space at the new site. The Anchorage Regional Office is looking forward to moving into this new space, as it will provide us with improved working space.

In June, a new Veterans Service Center manager reported for duty in Anchorage. The Veterans Service Center manager position

was previously vacant for approximately 8 months. This position was vacant due to the difficult task of recruiting an experienced person to the Anchorage area.

Additionally, the Anchorage Regional Office recruited and hired two new supervisors. The appointment of the new supervisors has had a positive impact on the overall management and performance of the office this fiscal year, as the station is making strides toward improvement in many performance measures. For example, rating inventory has trended in a positive direction every month this year. Compared to December of last year, Anchorage completed 226 more claims this year—an increase of about 156 percent. In addition, rating and authorization quality have both showed improvements. In fact, due to the focus on internal training, rating quality in Anchorage exceeds the national average.

The Anchorage Regional Office vocational rehabilitation division is one of the top performing divisions in the Nation and it was identified and awarded a Tier II level award last year. In addition to the improvements in quality, the management team has successfully implemented several policies pertaining to the workflow that I'd like to highlight here today.

A policy for timely corrective actions of errors identified by the Veterans Benefits Administration's National Quality Review Program was implemented. A policy outlining control and tracking of claims folders was implemented. This policy provides for better control of the location of claims folders. The management team has implemented a consistent local quality review process to complete timely quality assurance reviews that ensure veterans service representatives establish the correct date of claim. The most recent review in January showed only a 1 percent error rate. As VBA has an ethical and legal responsibility to maintain adequate controls over all date stamps throughout our facilities, two new electronic date stamps with locking devices are now in place and kept in secure locations.

The Veterans Service Center has also taken action to more efficiently safeguard veterans' personal identifiable information. All employees receive training on the proper safeguard and destruction of materials, desk inspections of work stations and common areas are performed regularly. In September a new workflow plan was implemented to ensure Veterans Service Center staff properly control and process all mail.

To ensure congressional inquiries are processed in a timely and accurate manner a new policy for handling congressional inquiries was implemented. Our goal is to complete inquiries within 5 days and so far this fiscal year we're completing them within 4.3 days.

The Office of Inspector General conducted an investigation during the summer of 2009. The Office of Inspector General report recommended 12 areas of improvement. Action has been taken to correct the deficiencies identified by the Office of Inspector General and those items have been addressed in my oral testimony and my written testimony that you also have today.

With the help of the OIG report findings, specific shortfalls at the Anchorage Regional Office have been identified and action plans are in place. VA senior leadership is committed to providing the necessary resources, funding, employees, and facilities to the

Anchorage Regional Office to ensure the best possible service is provided to Alaska veterans and their families. I also am fully committed to continuing to improve the claims processing in Alaska.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony and I greatly appreciate being here today and look forward to answering any of your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bilosz follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARK M. BILOSZ, DIRECTOR, ANCHORAGE VA REGIONAL OFFICE, VETERANS BENEFITS ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Senator Begich and Members of the Committee, it is my pleasure to be here today to discuss our efforts in meeting the needs of Veterans residing in Alaska.

The Anchorage Regional Office (RO) serves Veterans throughout the state. We also provide outreach services to Veterans in Fairbanks, Fort Wainwright, Fort Richardson, Elmendorf Air Force Base, and Eielson Air Force Base.

The Anchorage RO administers the following benefits and services:

- Disability compensation and pension for Veterans and dependents;
- Vocational rehabilitation and employment (VR&E) assistance; and,
- Outreach for all Veteran and survivor benefits.

Our goal is to deliver these comprehensive and diverse benefits and services in a timely, accurate, and compassionate manner.

The Anchorage RO is responsible for delivering non-medical VA benefits and services to over 76,400 Veterans and their families in Alaska. Approximately 14,000 of these Veterans receive disability compensation. In fiscal year 2009, the Anchorage RO completed more than 2,100 decisions on Veterans' disability claims.

The Denver Regional Loan Center (RLC) administers VA home loan services to Alaska Veterans. Alaska Veterans are served by a full time RLC employee who is stationed at the Anchorage RO. Most Native lands are leasehold estates, which qualify for VA's guaranteed loan program. VA has guaranteed 65,575 home loans in Alaska with a cumulative loan amount of over \$9 billion.

STAFFING

The Anchorage RO hired five employees as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The employees are making direct contributions to improving claims processing by assisting with development of claims and mail processing. Currently, 34 employees work in the Veterans Service Center (VSC) and 7 employees work in VR&E.

Employees at the Anchorage RO are very motivated and provide excellent service to Alaska Veterans. Performance measures indicate that the Anchorage RO is performing well, completing a greater number of claims each month while improving accuracy.

MANAGEMENT TEAM

As the out-based Director of the Anchorage RO, I visit Anchorage at least quarterly and hold weekly videoconference calls with division management to maintain open lines of communication. In addition, I hold a weekly conference call with the Veterans Service Center Manager (VSCM) to provide direction and oversight. I also communicate regularly with the Anchorage VA Medical Center Director, as the Anchorage RO is currently co-located with the Medical Center.

A new VA clinic is scheduled to open in May 2010, and the Veterans Benefits Administration has secured space at the new site. The Anchorage RO is looking forward to moving into this new space as it will allow VSOs and all claims files to be located in the RO. The new facility will also include a large training room.

In June 2009, a new VSCM reported for duty in Anchorage. The VSCM position was vacant for approximately eight months due to the sometimes-difficult task of finding an individual with the right leadership and managerial skills to fit the position. Many times relocating an employee and his/her family to Alaska is difficult.

Additionally, the Anchorage RO recruited and hired two new supervisors. The appointment of the new supervisors has had a positive impact on the overall management and performance of the office this fiscal year.

For example, rating inventory has trended in a positive direction every month this year. Compared to December of last year, the Anchorage RO completed 226 more claims this year, an increase of 16 percent. In addition, rating and authorization

quality have both improved. Rating quality at the Anchorage RO exceeds the national average.

A new training plan was developed and implemented in September 2009. Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs) receive weekly training from the Decision Review Officer. Training topics are aimed at eliminating the errors found during various reviews. All RVSRs attend the monthly Systematic Technical Accuracy Review calls to discuss commonly found errors and to prevent future errors.

The Anchorage RO's VR&E division is one of the top performing divisions in the Nation. Identified as a top performer in fiscal year 2009, the VR&E division was awarded Level II performance award.

OUTREACH EFFORTS

Our employees conduct an average of 580 personal interviews per month, and last year conducted 47 Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) briefings for 1,078 servicemembers. VR&E personnel provide monthly DTAP briefings at Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Wainwright.

The Anchorage RO conducted two significant rural outreach initiatives in 2009. In February and March, the RO participated jointly with the Alaska VA Health Care System to offer Alaska VA Education Forums. Teams traveled to Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Nome, Dillingham, Ketchikan, Juneau, and Sitka to provide benefits information and counseling to Veterans and medical providers.

We also participated in two Homeless Standdowns at Fort Richardson and in Fairbanks in August 2009. An RO representative provided information and VA benefits counseling at these events. Earlier this month, a Standdown was held to introduce Veterans to the VA Domiciliary facility in Anchorage.

In October 2009, the Anchorage RO teamed with the Medical Center to staff an information booth for 500 Veterans and family members via the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). AFN is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska. Its membership includes 178 villages (both federally-recognized tribes and village corporations), 13 regional Native corporations and 12 regional nonprofit and tribal consortiums that contract and run Federal and state programs.

As of December 31, 2009, 134 servicemembers were participating in the DOD/VA Disability Evaluation System Pilot at Ft. Wainwright, Ft. Richardson, and Elmendorf AFB. This pilot is instrumental in streamlining disability processing for separating servicemembers.

IMPROVEMENTS IN SERVICE DELIVERY

The new management team successfully implemented several new workload management and quality assurance policies and procedures.

A policy for the timely corrective action of errors identified by VBA's Systematic Technical Accuracy Review Staff was implemented in November 2009. The VSCM tracks all errors and corrective actions. A review process was established to ensure Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) correctly enter claims data into our processing systems. Refresher training was provided to all claims assistants and VSRs. Weekly training is held on scheduled topics and errors identified in quality reviews.

A policy outlining the use of COVERS, VBA's system to control and track claims folders, was also implemented in November. This policy requires claims folders to be "COVERed" every Monday and also requires supervisors to perform weekly spot checks.

Systematic Analyses of Operations (SAOs) are now completed accurately and timely. A tracking mechanism is in place to monitor the status of required SAOs and training on SAO writing techniques was provided.

The VSC has also taken action to more efficiently safeguard Veterans personally identifiable information. All employees received training from the Records Management Officer in August 2009 on the proper safeguard and destruction of materials. Inspections of workstations and common areas are performed regularly. Two new electronic date stamps, with locking devices, are now in secure locations.

In September 2009, the Triage Workflow Plan was implemented to include a mail routing guide to ensure VSC staff properly control and process the mail. The Triage Coach provides the VSCM with a monthly summary of all mail actions as well as any required follow-up actions. Triage training is conducted every Thursday to ensure the workflow plan is being properly implemented.

An Inquiry Routing and Information System (IRIS) Quality Review Policy was implemented in November 2009 to improve quality assurance reviews. The IRIS system is the electronic method Veterans use to communicate with VA. The Public Contact supervisor reviews a minimum of five IRIS responses per employee every month. The supervisor also discusses errors during weekly training sessions with

individual employees to ensure the highest level of quality and accuracy is maintained.

To ensure Congressional inquiries are processed in a timely and accurate manner, a new policy for handling Congressional correspondence was implemented in November 2009. The Public Contact Team maintains a log of all Congressional correspondence where inquiries are annotated within one day and assigned to an employee to review and complete. The individual receiving the assignment has two working days to present a response for approval by the VSCM. Our goal is to complete Congressional inquiries within five days.

The Anchorage RO reports the results of internal brokering to VBA leadership monthly. The Western Area Office is informed monthly of any transfers of work. Brokering claims, or sending claims to another RO, is done to provide better service to our Veterans. Brokering is a short-term strategy to assist ROs with workflow challenges.

VA OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORT

The VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) conducted a review of the Anchorage RO from July 28, 2009 to August 6, 2009. The five areas examined were disability claims processing, data integrity, management controls, information security, and public contact. The OIG report recommended 12 areas of improvement. Action has been taken to correct the deficiencies identified by the OIG.

The Western Area Director and staff conducted an on-site review of the Anchorage RO from January 6, 2010 to January 7, 2010. A major part of this visit was to evaluate compliance with the OIG's recommendations. All action plans implemented in response to the OIG's recommendations were reviewed for compliance and effectiveness. The Western Area Director found the Anchorage RO had implemented the required actions to be fully compliant with all 12 of the OIG recommendations.

CONCLUSION

VA leadership and the employees of the Anchorage RO are committed to ensuring the best possible service is provided to Alaska Veterans and their families. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I greatly appreciate being here today and look forward to answering your questions.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Thank you for your testimony. The next person to present is Dr. Susan Pendergrass, who is the director of the VISN 20, Veterans Health Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs. Dr. Pendergrass.

STATEMENT OF SUSAN PENDERGRASS, DrPH, NETWORK DIRECTOR, VISN 20, VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS; ACCOMPANIED BY ALEX SPECTOR, DIRECTOR, ALASKA VA HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Dr. PENDERGRASS. Thank you very much, Senator Begich. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you and discuss VA health care of Alaskan Northwest Network. I'm accompanied today by Mr. Alex Spector, who is the director of the Alaska Health Care System. I would like to thank you for your leadership and the advocacy on behalf of veterans and Alaskan veterans. You have continued to show that commitment and we are very appreciative of all of the assistance that you have given us.

My written testimony has been submitted and I will focus my remarks on several issues that are important to the Alaskan veterans including TeleHelp, rural help outreach, and the Veterans Beneficiary Travel Program.

We provide access to health care to eligible Alaskan veterans through an integrated delivery system which consists of clinical care sites, joint ventures of DOD facilities, and contract care. We have continued to see an increase in the number of veterans using VA health care. It has grown by close to 14 percent since 2005.

We have clinics and Vet Centers in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai, and Wasilla, and we are providing primary care including preventative services, health care screenings, and mental health services at all of those sites. Our inpatient care is provided through the DOD Joint Venture Hospital on Elmendorf Base, contracts with Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage, and we purchase care from community hospitals throughout the State.

In addition, we have two outreach clinics. Outreach clinics are not clinics that are open 5 days a week, but several times during the week, and those are in Homer and Juneau, AK. We are expanding the Juneau outreach clinic, which is currently under construction and will be completed by mid summer, and the hours of that clinic will then expand. We have a new construction replacement of our main clinic in Anchorage and that will provide expanded capacity to serve the veterans.

By the end of 2010, we will have a VA clinic presence that will serve more than 88 percent of enrolled veterans, who will have the care in the borough with which they reside. So 88 percent of those veterans will have access to care in their boroughs.

We have specialty services and have continued to improve our care with homeless veterans. We have inpatient mental health services that are provided by contract care and we also have specialty VA programs. We use the Lower 48 State veterans service capability. We have active programs here and long-term care in both for institutional and non-institutional services.

What we are doing also is to have an active coordinated home care TeleHelp program, where 31 percent of the TeleHelp users live in highly rural areas, 16 percent live in rural areas, and 53 percent in the urban areas. This enables us to place an assistant device in the home that the individual can utilize to monitor help information, provide that information to the VA so they do not have to come in for a visit. We have been using that primarily to monitor chronic diseases, but we are now expanding to help monitor some conditions such as PTSD, substance abuse, and some psychiatric disorders.

The Alaskan VA health care system has recently also expanded TeleHelp in several specialty areas. We have implemented a Tele-retinal Diabetic Screening program. This enables an individual with diabetes to get an eye exam, it's read, and the monitoring of any effects of eye disease as a result of their diabetes. We also have instituted teledermatology so that a picture can be taken of a lesion and read by a dermatologist remotely and provide for treatment and consultation so that the individual does not have to travel for that specialty service.

We have just recruited a psychiatric nurse practitioner for a tele-medicine mental health provider. We have just connected this month that provider with Anchorage and the Fairbanks clinic and through TeleHelp we will allow a VA neuropsychologist to screen veterans for TBI. Again, it's very difficult to provide these specialists within some of the rural and remote areas. So using tele-mental health and telemedicine is one of our primary options.

We are also exploring options to partner with other groups such as the American Native Health Consortium, the Bristol Bay Area Health Consortium, and the Maniilaq Health Corporation. We've

hung great promise in increasing the use and availability of mental health care resources to the Alaskan veteran system and the veterans in Alaska.

We have also established several rural health pilots that are reaching out into the Yukon-Kuskokwim area and it is a pilot in which we are able to try to enhance primary care to rural veterans and be able to contract that service through the Tribal Health Consortium. We've also placed tribal veteran representatives to assist in outreach to the Alaskan Native veterans and in training other VA health care providers of VA benefits.

We have a special outreach to the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium organizations and a major deployment with—and also we have the deployment of the Alaskan National Guard in our OEF/OIF outreach. We have a Memo of Understanding with the State of Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs to meet the needs of the returning servicemembers.

Our final benefit I would like to address is the VA Beneficiary Travel Program. In 2009, we spent over \$4 million to transport Alaskan veterans by ambulance, car, van and air travel, as well as mileage reimbursement. Approximately 50 percent of travel expenses were airline tickets for travel; 77 percent of that was within Alaska and the remaining were to VA facilities in the Lower 48.

In summary, we continue to increase access to meet the needs of the Alaskans residing in—the veterans residing in Alaska. We have included not only clinical services, but additional sites of care to try to improve that access, and we have maintained a high performance rating and quality of care, access standards, patient satisfaction, and employee satisfaction.

I thank you again for the opportunity to testify at this hearing.
[The prepared statement of Dr. Pendergrass follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF DR. SUSAN PENDERGRASS, DIRECTOR, VA NORTHWEST NETWORK (VISN 20), VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Good Morning Senator Begich and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss VA health care in the Northwest Network (Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 20) and Alaska. I am accompanied today by Mr. Alex Spector, Director of the Alaska VA Healthcare System (AVAHS).

First, Senator Begich, I would like to thank you for your leadership and advocacy on behalf of Alaska's Veterans. During your tenure on the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, you have consistently demonstrated your commitment to Veterans and to improving the care and benefits they receive.

Today, I will briefly review the VA Northwest Network and the Alaska VA Healthcare System. I will also discuss several issues important to Alaskan Veterans, including telehealth, rural health outreach, and VA's beneficiary travel program.

VA NORTHWEST NETWORK (VISN 20)

The VA Northwest Network (VISN 20) includes the states of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, most of Idaho, and one county each in Montana and California. Our 135 counties cover approximately 23 percent of the United States land mass. Eighty-six (86) percent of our total counties are classified as medically underserved areas or containing medically underserved populations.

Our network of health care facilities is composed of 6 medical centers (including 2 complex care hospitals), 1 independent outpatient clinic (Anchorage), 1 rehabilitation center, 33 operational community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) or part-time outreach clinics and 2 mobile clinics. Other services include 5 nursing home care units, 2 homeless domiciliaries and 16 readjustment counseling centers (Vet Centers), as well as 4 mobile Vet Centers operating in Washington, Idaho and Oregon.

Approximately 1,180,000 Veterans live in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, 29 percent of whom received health care services from VA in fiscal year (FY) 2009. Our medical centers currently operate approximately 1,655 inpatient beds, including acute medical/surgical, domiciliary, mental health, nursing home and rehabilitative care, and VISN 20 facilities recorded approximately 33,000 hospital admissions and 2.7 million outpatient visits in FY 2009. VISN 20's patient population has an average age of 60.8 years, and 46.6 percent of our patients are service-connected Veterans. Approximately 9.5 percent of our patients are women.

The VA Northwest Health Network continuously strives to improve access, quality, patient satisfaction and wellness to better serve the Veterans of the Pacific Northwest. Two of our health care systems have major academic affiliations and our Network hosts a significant number of Centers of Excellence, while also supporting a large and broad research portfolio that was funded in excess of \$33 million last year. We also have expansive and collaborative relationships with the Department of Defense (DOD), including two highly successful partnerships in Alaska.

The VA Northwest Network has not only exceeded inpatient and outpatient satisfaction goals, but its employee satisfaction scores are also strong. For each of the past several survey cycles, VISN 20 has received some of the highest scores in the country. We recognize that employees who feel challenged and valued are more productive and healthier, and we continually strive to make VISN 20 an employer of choice. For the second year in a row, VISN 20 ranked highest among networks for Diversity Acceptance. Other top satisfiers included: Type of Work, Coworkers, Senior Management, Work Conditions, Customer Satisfaction and Praise.

Given VISN 20's large and diverse geographic nature (including rural or frontier lands and remote islands), access to care is a priority. In FY 2010, the Network will activate five new sites of care in three states (California, Oregon and Montana). In FY 2009, we also hired two new full-time employees to support Tele-Health and Rural Health efforts across the Network.

ALASKA VA HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

The Alaska VA Healthcare System (AVAHS) provides access to health care to eligible Alaskan Veterans through an integrated delivery system consisting of clinical care sites, joint venture DOD facilities and contract care. By FY 2009 estimate, there were over 76,400 Veterans living in Alaska; 26,708 are enrolled in VA. AVAHS has continued to increase the number of Veterans seeking health care, growing by 13.6 percent since FY 2005. In FY 2009, AVAHS provided services to more than 15,000 Veterans; this consisted of 142,246 outpatient visits and more than 60,000 visits to private sector providers. This latter effort amounted to approximately 38 percent of the FY 2009 budget for VISN 20. AVAHS was home to 488 full-time employees in FY 2009 and received a five percent increase in its operating budget for a total of \$118.1 million, with a 5.44 percent increase for FY 2010.

The AVAHS provides medical care to Alaska Veterans through VA clinics in Anchorage, Fairbanks, Kenai and Wasilla. These cities are also home to VA Readjustment Counseling Centers, or Vet Centers, which provide counseling, psychosocial support and outreach to Veterans and their families. AVAHS provides or contracts for a comprehensive array of health care services. AVAHS directly provides primary care, including preventive services and health screenings, and mental health services at all locations. AVAHS inpatient care is provided through the VA/DOD Joint Venture Hospital located on Elmendorf Air Force Base, as well as through a contract with Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage. Inpatient care in outlying communities is provided through purchased care from local hospitals. AVAHS has hired specialists in general surgery, podiatry, orthopedics, urology, cardiology, ophthalmology, and inpatient medicine. Specialists in dermatology and neurology travel from the Lower 48 and hold clinics at the Anchorage VA facility. The Anchorage facility also has a small dental clinic and an audiology clinic. Audiologists travel to VA CBOCs and Coast Guard clinics in Southeast Alaska to provide better and more convenient care to Veterans.

In addition, we provide care through two VA outreach clinics in Homer and Juneau, Alaska. The Homer outreach clinic is an extension of the Kenai CBOC and serves Veterans once a week at the South Peninsula Hospital under a contract agreement for space and ancillary services. The second VA outreach clinic provides care once a month under a sharing agreement with the Coast Guard in the Juneau Federal Building. Currently, Anchorage-based primary care providers travel to Juneau to staff this clinic. Additional space for the Juneau VA outreach clinic is currently under construction, and VA expects this will be completed by mid-summer. The expanded space will allow for a full-time primary care and mental health staff and be operational on a daily basis. AVAHS also is constructing a new replacement

clinic in Anchorage that will offer expanded capacity. It will be located just outside the Muldoon Gate entrance to Elmendorf Air Force Base, and it will be connected to the Third Medical Group Hospital by a secure, enclosed access point. Access to the VA clinic will be outside the Air Force Security checkpoint, and the clinic is scheduled currently to open in May 2010. VA has located its sites of care in areas of the state with the largest concentration of Veterans. By the end of FY 2010, more than 88 percent of enrolled Alaskan Veterans will reside in a borough with a VA clinical presence.

Area	FY 2009 Vet. Pop.	FY 2009 Enrollees	% Veterans Enrolled
Anchorage	31,301	12,426	39.7%
Fairbanks	13,182	4,200	31.9%
Mat-Su	10,157	3,414	33.6%
Southeast	7,798	1,827	23.4%
Kenai	5,951	3,414	57.4%
West/SW Alaska	4,308	804	18.7%
Northern Alaska	1,144	112	9.8%
Kodiak	1,343	320	23.8%
Valdez/Cordova	1,259	337	26.8%

AVAHS also participates in one of nine nationally recognized VA/DOD joint ventures at the 3rd Medical Group (MDG), Elmendorf Air Force Base, and an Inter-Service Sharing Agreement with Bassett Army Community Hospital at Fort Wainwright. If a Veteran requires care that is unavailable at an AVAHS clinic or a VA/DOD facility, VA refers the patient to the nearest VA facility, the VA Puget Sound Health Care System (VAPSHCS) in Seattle, WA, or contracts for care with a local provider. VA is required by law to ensure such fee-for-service care is consistent with the care provided in the contiguous United States.

AVAHS offers a comprehensive continuum of care for homeless Veterans. VA provides outreach and a 50 bed Domiciliary for Homeless Veterans, along with programs in Compensated Work Therapy and Veterans Industries, Compensated Work Therapy Transitional Residence, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD/VASH) program in Anchorage. This program expanded to Fairbanks in December 2009. AVAHS also provides oversight for two grant and per diem programs awarded to the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Program in Anchorage and the Rescue Mission located in Fairbanks.

Inpatient mental health services are provided through contract care in local community psychiatric facilities and hospitals, as well as specialized programs at VA facilities in the Lower 48. There is an active contract nursing home program and other non-institutional care programs, including adult day care, respite, home-maker/home health aide, and skilled nursing. AVAHS started a Home-Based Primary Care program in July 2009 that serves more than 60 Veterans within a 20 mile radius of the Anchorage VA Clinic.

ACCESS

AVAHS exceeded VA's national performance goals for primary care access in FY 2009. Nationally, VA requires that 99 percent of Veterans will be scheduled within 30 days of the desired date for an appointment. AVAHS has continually exceeded this measure, as less than 0.12 percent of Veterans waited more than 30 days in FY 2009. In FY 2010, AVAHS has continued to exceed these standards.

For most of FY 2009, AVAHS was not meeting the national performance measure for mental health access. VA's national standards require prompt evaluation of new patients (those who have not been seen in a mental health clinic in the last 24 months) with mental health concerns. New patients are contacted, within 24 hours of the referral being made, by a clinician competent to evaluate the urgency of the Veteran's mental health needs. If it is determined that the Veteran has an urgent care need, appropriate arrangements, e.g., an immediate admission, are to be made. If the need is not urgent, the patient must be seen for a full mental health diagnostic evaluation and development and initiation of an appropriate treatment plan within 14 days. Across the system, VA is meeting this standard 95 percent of the time. However, AVAHS was not meeting this performance measure for most of FY 2009. In response, AVAHS performed an analysis to identify barriers and conducted a systems redesign to remove obstacles and provide timely care for these patients. After implementing these corrective action plans, AVAHS met or exceeded

the measure for the last few months of FY 2009, and through January in FY 2010, 100 percent of new mental health patients are seen within 14 days of their initial evaluation and 97 percent of established mental health patients are seen within 14 days.

TELEHEALTH

Coordinated Care Home Telehealth—AVAHS has an active Coordinated Care Home Telehealth (CCHT) program with 223 enrolled Veterans throughout the state. Thirty-one (31) percent of telehealth users live in highly rural areas, 16 percent live in rural areas and 53 percent live in urban areas. Veterans enrolled in the CCHT program receive a device that uses a standard phone connection to send information from their home to CCHT staff in Anchorage. Types of information sent by patients include blood pressure, pulse, weight, blood sugar, and oxygen measurements. Patients also answer health-related questions. The CCHT registered nurse staff reviews the information on a daily basis and can identify early warning signs or “out of bounds” measurements before the patient even begins to be symptomatic. Initially, CCHT was focused on working with Veterans with chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, congestive heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or depression. In recent months, however, AVAHS has explored uses of home telehealth to monitor other conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), substance abuse and bipolar disorder. Additionally, Veterans who are at risk of losing their independence are receiving special attention from CCHT care coordinators.

Through the daily use of the home telehealth technology, Veterans are improving their ability to live in their own home safely, healthfully, and for a longer period of time. CCHT results have been impressive. Ninety-five (95) percent of CCHT users with diabetes have improved their blood sugar control and 93 percent with high blood pressure have improved blood pressure control.

Tele-Retinal Imaging—AVAHS implemented a tele-retinal diabetic screening program in FY 2009. This program allows Veterans with diabetes to be screened for diabetic eye disease. Images are captured at the Anchorage, Fairbanks or Kenai clinics and forwarded to analysts at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System for interpretation. These analysts later forward a consultative report with recommendations back to the patient’s primary care provider for implementation. During FY 2009, 280 patients received these services, and through January FY 2010, 108 patients have been cared for through this technology.

Tele-Dermatology—AVAHS started a tele-dermatology program in November 2009. This program employs technology to facilitate timely dermatology care to Veterans in Alaska. Images of skin lesions are captured while the patient is in clinic. Those images, along with a request for consultation, are forwarded to the VA Puget Sound Health Care System for interpretation. There, a dermatologist writes a consultative report with recommendations and forwards this information to the primary care provider. Interpretations and recommendations are received within 24 to 48 hours. Thus far, 37 consults have been completed this fiscal year.

Tele-Mental Health—During FY 2009, AVAHS successfully recruited a psychiatric nurse practitioner for a new position as a tele-mental health provider. Currently, a Tele-Mental Health Clinic is held with the Kenai CBOC by videoconference 3 to 5 days per month. Approximately 60 unique patients are being seen through this clinic, and four to six additional Veterans are being seen each month.

VA will open a new Tele-Mental Health this month to connect Anchorage and the Fairbanks CBOC to allow a VA neuropsychologist to screen Veterans for Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). A PTSD Tele-Mental Health Group Clinic was initiated on January 7, 2010, by a VA psychologist/PTSD specialist for Veterans in the Anchorage DeBarr Clinic and the VA Domiciliary in mid-town (Anchorage). As a result of the successful deployment within the city, AVAHS plans to expand this service to its CBOCs in the near future. In addition, AVAHS has assembled a working group to explore the best method for expanding group counseling opportunities to its CBOCs.

AVAHS tele-mental health services have been offered to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) in Bethel, AK. A video-conference for staff consultation between Anchorage and Bethel has been held with educational and screening instruments shared. YKHC has requested peer-to-peer consultation with VA professional staff as needed. VA has visited both YKHC and Maniilaq Health Corporation in Kotzebue to educate local health care providers about AVAHS’ tele-mental health resources.

A recent VA presentation to the Alaska Federal Healthcare Partnership Telehealth and Technology committee resulted in positive contacts with staff from the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation, and

Manilaq Health Care Corporation. This venue holds promise for spreading the message about tele-mental health resources at AVAHS.

RURAL VETERANS

AVAHS has initiated several programs to meet the needs of Veterans living in rural Alaska, including:

Rural Veteran Liaison—This is a 3-year pilot program to hire a full-time VA employee to be a local community-based contact for VA questions on health care and benefits. In June 2009, VA hired a Bethel-based liaison to perform outreach to the Yukon-Kuskokwim area. AVAHS has continued to recruit for a Kotzebue-based position since December 2008 and recently added Nome to the recruitment announcement. So far, there have been no qualified applicants for the position to cover the northern area of the state, but VA continues to advertise and respond to inquiries.

Rural Health Care Pilot Project—This project is a 1-year pilot program that began in August 2009. The goal of the pilot is to enhance primary care for rural Veterans through contract care. The pilot areas are the Bethel census area, Bristol Bay Borough, Dillingham Census Area, Nome Census Area, Northwest Arctic Borough, Wade Hampton Census Area, and the city of Cordova. Under the pilot, Veterans may be authorized three primary care visits and two mental health visits within a 6 month period. If the Veteran requires additional visits, the Veteran or health care provider may contact VA to request additional care as needed. VA sent letters to 548 enrolled Veterans in the pilot areas inviting them to participate, and through January 2010, approximately 20 percent have enrolled and 10 have requested appointments (eight for primary care and 2 for mental health care).

Tribal Veteran Representative (TVR) Program—The TVR program uses local community volunteers to assist VA in reaching out to Alaska Native Veterans. A TVR is an Alaska Native Veteran or recognized individual appointed by an Alaska Native health organization, tribal government, tribal council, or other tribal entity to act as a liaison with local VA staff. The representative is a volunteer unless paid by the Alaska Native entity who selects the individual to represent them. Collaborative training is provided by VA health care and benefits staff. VA has completed two annual trainings, one in Anchorage and the other in Southeast Alaska, and as of January 25, 2010, 12 people have completed the TVR training.

Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Outreach—AVAHS made special efforts to reach out to Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium organizations upon the first major deployment of the Alaska National Guard in OEF/OIF. A multi-disciplinary group of VA staff traveled to rural areas to provide education on PTSD, TBI, and Suicide Awareness and Prevention. Audiences included providers, nurses, mental health staff, community health aides, behavioral health specialists, and village-based counselors. In addition to the educational aspect of these sessions, VA staff and Alaska Native Tribal health staff focused on providing a pathway of care for each system to work together to ensure returning servicemembers and other Veterans living in rural areas could seamlessly access their Alaska Native health benefits as well as access their benefits through the VA health care system. The presentations on the pathway of care focused on the VA enrollment, eligibility, and fee authorization process to assist Veterans in accessing VA health care and how to bill for reimbursement from VA should their health corporation seek authorization to provide services to Veterans. Packets of information with contact names and phone numbers were given to each participant, and information tables were staffed in community settings such as post offices, grocery stores, and community gatherings to raise awareness within the general community.

AVAHS has signed a memorandum of understanding with the State of Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs that outlines a partnership to work together to meet the needs of returning soldiers. OEF/OIF staff members regularly attend Post Deployment Health Re-Assessment (PDHRA) events and Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program events to deliver information about VA benefits to servicemembers and their families. AVAHS actively participates in pre- and post-deployment events for active duty servicemembers. VA also participates in outreach with the National Guard's "Reconnection Veterans" program, which has a goal of sending its liaisons to all 237 villages in Alaska within a single year. The Rural Veteran Liaison and OEF/OIF staff members have accompanied these liaisons on a number of trips to rural Alaska to provide information about various VA programs and benefits.

BENEFICIARY TRAVEL

Beneficiary travel benefits are a limited benefit for Veterans who meet specific eligibility criteria outlined in Federal statute. In FY 2009, AVAHS spent \$4 million

for travel for Alaskan Veterans. Types of travel include ambulances, cabs, wheelchair vans, mileage reimbursement, and air travel. Approximately 50 percent of travel expenses were for airline tickets for travel within (77 percent) Alaska and to VA facilities in the Lower 48 (23 percent). VA purchased almost 3,900 tickets at an average cost of \$552 per ticket.

Veterans are eligible for beneficiary travel benefit if they:

- Are rated 30 percent or more service-connected;
- Are rated less than 30 percent service-connected, but only for travel in connection with treatment or care of their service-connected condition;
- Are receiving VA pension;
- Have an annual income below the maximum applicable annual rate of pension (\$11,830 for a single Veteran); or
- Are traveling for a scheduled compensation and pension examination.

CONCLUSION

In summary, AVAHS has continued to increase access to meet the needs of Veterans residing in Alaska. These have included not only clinical services but additional sites of care. AVHAS has maintained a high performance rating in quality of care, access standards, patient satisfaction, and employee satisfaction. Senator Begich, thank you again for the opportunity to testify at this hearing.

ADDENDUM

To: The Honorable Senator Ted Stevens
The Honorable Senator Lisa Murkowski
The Honorable Congressman Don Young
The Secretary of the Veterans Administration, LTG (RET) James B. Peake, M.D.

Subject: Alaska Veterans Health Care Issues

MAY 22, 2008

Purpose: To seek your understanding, support and action to constructively resolve the major health care challenges for military veterans and retirees in northern, interior and rural Alaska.

Issues: Alaska military veterans and retirees face some unique challenges for access to the promised health care that they deserve. There are many interrelated systemic details to consider, but the military veterans and retirees of Alaska are united that these five basic issues must be quickly addressed and resolved:

1. Access to Affordable Health Care

- Health care access across Alaska was already challenging. Fairbanks and rural northern areas are now facing a train wreck of systemic health care problems due to increasing demand, limited available providers, rising costs, inadequate reimbursement rates, the pending rollback of MEDICARE rates, reliance upon an Anchorage-centric hub system, lack of key specialists and the expected loss of many critical physicians in Fairbanks within the coming year

- Veterans and retirees face additional access challenges due to inadequate capacity at VA and at Basset Army Community Hospital (BACH), increased troop populations, wounded warriors and veteran demands, loss of deployed providers, loss of alternate providers in Fairbanks, erosion of TRICARE reimbursement rates and the necessity to travel for health care. DOD TRICARE and VA are entirely separate systems, but each face interdependent challenges related to access.

2. Prevent Cuts to Critical MEDICARE and TRICARE Reimbursement Rates

- We need our CODEL to support legislation to reverse the impending cuts to MEDICARE reimbursement rates in July 2008 and TRICARE in 2009. Cuts to these pilot program rates will devastate Alaska's entire fragile health care system, including access for veterans, retirees and the families of active duty service members. With all access issues ultimately tied to the MEDICARE rates, this means a downward spiral of less access to care, with fewer providers and additional disincentives to support the recruiting / retention of the number and quality of providers needed in Alaska. This means higher costs to DOD, VA and private programs. TRICARE is still amongst the least desirable of payees and needs an Alaska rate indexed above MEDICARE, like VA has.

3. Increase VA Capacity, Access and Outreach

- VA needs to improve current efforts to develop better, seamless and more efficient outreach to veterans near Fairbanks and across rural Alaska. In addition to increasing its own capacity, VA

should expand collaborative efforts to leverage State, Alaska Native, DOD, private and local capabilities. The VA in Alaska should be a model for innovative outreach, partnership and access.

- The VA staff in Fairbanks should be increased to better and more efficiently serve the needs of northern Alaska. The Fairbanks VA clinic relies upon expensive transportation to and from an Anchorage-centric hub for pharmacy and to provide care unavailable in Fairbanks. Circuit riders from Anchorage or Seattle could more efficiently contribute some critically needed sub-specialist care and services that are not available at BACH or in Fairbanks. VA could also reciprocate the partnership support it gets from BACH by assisting DOD with some much needed coverage of their current shortfalls. Fort Wainwright also needs VA psychiatric support for the Wounded Warrior program and the Warrior Transition Unit to begin assisting soldiers before transition.

4. TRICARE Issues and Access.

- Fix TRICARE For Life "Over 65" Travel. There is no travel provision in TFL or MEDICARE Part B for patients or required attendants who must travel to seek care unavailable locally. For far less than \$100K per year for airline tickets (like VA and TRICARE Prime), this could be resolved on behalf of our "over 65" retirees who currently pay out of pocket. Current legislation and TFL provisions prevent payment for travel and per diem. This is low hanging fruit.

- TRICARE Retiree Dental Program. TRDP coverage does not meet the needs of older retirees. TRDP reimbursement rates are the least attractive / lowest payee programs and we need a higher rate pilot program to allow better access to care in Alaska for retirees and family members.

- Keep our Promises. Support legislation to keep our promises for benefits to all our military veterans and retirees, regardless of era. Prevent "means testing" applied to benefits and increases in enrollment rates, prescription drugs or co-pays beyond reciprocal pay increases above COLA provided to retirees. Provide full recognition and benefits to the members of the Alaska Territorial Guard and other valid veterans groups who honorably served our nation during World War II.

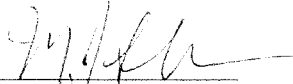
5. Develop a Strategic Vision and Leverage the Synergy of Interagency Partnerships.

- We need a strategic vision and effective plan for improving health care access across Alaska as well as for our veterans and retirees. We need innovative and collaborative solutions to increase capacity and better leverage the mutual support of existing agencies, infrastructure and technology. The Alaska Federal Health Care Partnership has had some success, but could be expanded to better fulfill this role. This will require Congressional support, mandates and funding, plus a willingness by all partners to bridge their traditional paradigms and establish an innovative new model for Alaska. Fairbanks should be a regional hub to better and more efficiently support northern Alaska.


Summary We can and should fulfill our obligation to military veterans and retirees by providing better access to health care in Alaska. We request that our Congressional Delegation assist veterans and retirees to quickly resolve these issues while establishing a more effective strategic health care plan and vision. We request that the Secretary of the VA consider the need for increased capacity, access and outreach for veterans in Alaska by better leveraging partnerships with other health care agencies and by establishing Fairbanks as a more effective and capable hub.

We appreciate your support and would like to discuss our many concerns and ideas on these issues in detail with your staff to constructively work toward better understanding and resolution

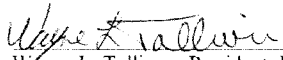
With unified respect, concern and resolve toward these issues, we submit this letter as the representatives of our respective interior Alaska veterans organizations as well as on behalf of 70,000 Alaska military veterans, 9600 retirees, our active duty service members and the affected families of these groups



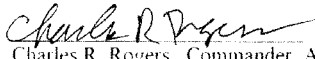
Joe Sheehan Chairman, Military Retiree Council, President, Alaska Chapter of the National Assn of Uniformed Services (NAUS).



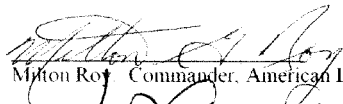
Benno H. Cleveland President, Alaska Native Veterans Assn.



Wayne L. Tolliver President, Polar Bear Chapter, Association of the U S Army (AUSA)



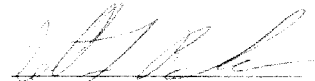
Charles R. Rogers, Commander, American Legion Post 11.



Milton Roy, Commander, American Legion Post 57



Wallace R. Cox, Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 3629



Robert L. Boles Sr. Commander, Disabled American Veterans, Fairbanks Chapter 2.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Our last person on this panel is Verdie Bowen who is the administrator, Office of Veterans Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs for the State of Alaska. Good to see you again, Verdie.

STATEMENT OF VERDIE BOWEN, ADMINISTRATOR, OFFICE OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR THE STATE OF ALASKA

Mr. BOWEN. Thank you, Senator, for inviting me here. I have a couple of things that I'd like to address today and the first one is the prescription drug coverage that we have at the Pioneer Homes;

and the next area I'd like to highlight is the GI Bill and some of the issues that we have experienced in the State.

First of all, I want to really let you know that your staff, especially C.W. Floyd, have been a world of help on most of the stuff that we have done. He's sitting back there smiling, but it's actually the truth. When I—

Senator BEGICH. Don't get his head to grow too large.

Mr. BOWEN. No, I won't. When I was appointed to this position in May of last year, I think I was in the office about 20 hours before my first phone call came in about the denial of prescription drugs—VA prescription drugs—to members within our VA home. And it specifically dealt with veterans, which at that time we had 14 veterans in the homes that the Pioneer Home had refused to administer the medications that came to them free. They wanted veterans to purchase the medications through the pharmacy. It took probably about 3 weeks to determine that the reason they had stepped back in time was because someone had unearthed a policy that was covered with dust in the corner which said that they could not administer medications to those people that are unable to administer medications themselves from pharmacies outside of the Pioneer Home. I thought that this would be an easy fix, that we should be able to just sit down and open up the bottles and hand the pills out. But, apparently, you know, it shows you how inept I am at administering medications, especially in this case.

We sat down and had a roundtable before the end of that month and I thought we had a work-around where we were bringing in a part-time physician assistant to help with these issues, and that lasted about 2 weeks. Then I went back through the process and I—at that time, the unique experience that I had was that I discovered that we had 60 representatives in the State of Alaska. At that time, I didn't know, but before that time they had always spoken to me.

I had also spoken to probably 20 retired State representatives. The last person that called me was Mayor George Wuerch to let me know that his neighbor was involved with this process as well. But the unique thing about this was it fell under the Department of Social Services. Next, I spoke to the commissioner of social services, then we had a complete roundtable. Bill Hogan, who was outstanding, stepped in and put in a large fix. He wrote an Administrative Order to fix the law so that they could receive their medications.

Currently, as I speak today, I am glad to announce that the State House has taken ownership of this and it's passed into State law so that this will never happen again. And what is going to occur for our veterans in the home is that if this ever does come into effect, then the State itself will take on the cost of the medications, not the patient. But in this process, we also uncovered the fact that our patients that were in the homes that fell under Indian Health Care Services that were receiving medications would also be denied theirs as well if they were incapacitated. So this law will also fix that.

Currently, like I said, it is through both committees in the House and Senate and it's now in the Finance Committee to get its final review. To me it took too long, really. It gives you a point to under-

stand that when you have State and Federal agencies involved, there's a lot of bureaucratic nightmares that you have to follow through to try to fix. A problem so simple as that should have taken just a few hours; instead, it took probably about 7 months. So it gives you an idea that some of the problems that we're facing within the VA system itself are virtually that same kind of nightmare and ownership as you trace each one of the problems back to the end of their programs.

The next thing I'd like to talk about is the new GI Bill in its current status. I'm a firm believer that if you're in Muskogee, OK, today and you're unemployed it's because you choose to be. General Shinseki has done such a wonderful job of fixing some of the issues that we have with the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The first thing I really want to point out about the Post-9/11 GI Bill, which is probably the greatest thing that has occurred for veterans since the GI Bill that was introduced after World War II, are the values that the veteran receives, especially here in the State of Alaska—and I'll give you some examples.

Here in Alaska, a veteran will receive up to \$159 per credit hour, which means if they go to UAA, it's free. They receive \$13,429 in fees that are covered. That allows them to go to the aeronautical school at UAA and it covers all of their fees. They get \$1,000 each year for their books, for their fees for their books. And this is something that's unique that a lot of people won't point out, but in rural Alaska where you have less than six people per square mile, this program will give you \$500 to fly into the schools. Also in the State of Alaska, we're blessed to have 16 of our universities that are located here to be part of the Yellow Ribbon Program, and what that means is that if their tuition is higher than the \$159, then they will utilize the Yellow Ribbon Program to cover that extended cost. Who is covered under this cost is any person that has accomplished 36 months past 9/11.

This here, like I said, is an outstanding program. But, you know, there are some issues that we have that need to be addressed. Robert brought these up and this is something that you won't find in my memos, but he did bring up something about voc rehab. Voc rehab is probably half of—

[Microphone feedback]

Senator BEGICH. There we go.

Mr. BOWEN. Maybe that's not a good sign. Voc rehab virtually is about half of the payment to the veteran. When you're dealing with your monthly stipend, if I had my book—I bet you Miss B has her book that will tell you that voc rehab is probably around six to eight hundred dollars a month stipend that they receive, versus the amount that they receive through the Post-9/11 GI Bill. You see, under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, they receive \$1,836 for their monthly living stipend. Under the voc rehab program, I, too, was under the impression that voc rehab would provide them the services that they need—the extended services that they need—to help them get through the programs if they have special needs.

I spoke to the guidance counselor at UAA, Mr. Floyd, several months back and we discussed some of the needs and resources available for disabled veterans. He was under the same understanding—that the voc rehab program could provide these guys

special assistance. We have disabled veterans currently enrolled under the Post-9/11 program that need special counseling, that need special tutoring and things like that, which are not provided under the new Post-9/11 GI Bill. So, this is probably something that we need to look into, bringing the benefit levels under the voc rehab program up to the level that Post-9/11 is currently.

This concludes my testimony and I want to thank you for having me speak before you.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you very much. Our time is running short, but I want to walk through a couple things. I'll just start first with Ray. We've had lots of opportunities already, so I'll just ask you a couple of quick things if I could.

Mr. JEFFERSON. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. I thought this was interesting on the young student vets. Can you expand on what that is within the university, not only for me to understand, but also Robert is still here and others to kind of hear—explain that to us a little bit more.

Mr. JEFFERSON. Sure. So, as you know, sir, there's a variety of veterans service organizations. Some of them have, you know, a long history: American Legion, Vietnam Veterans, et cetera.

Senator BEGICH. Sure.

Mr. JEFFERSON. One of the newer ones is Student Veterans of America and I would encourage people to go to the Web site. It is an organization created by and created for this youngest generation of veterans from OEF/OIF. What they really focus on is helping this young generation of veterans take full advantage of the new GI Bill, but also I would say to deal with all of the potential challenges of going—

Senator BEGICH. Like a mentor to—

Mr. JEFFERSON. Well, sir, a few things. You can find a mentor, you can—they will help you—they are on many campuses. So, for example, the way it works is if Robert—if there's a Student Veterans of America coordinator of the University of Alaska campus, you contact this person. And it was exactly what he said. You know, I want to call someone and say, hey, I'm here; I came from OEF/OIF, you know, how do I transition here? How do I get help with the courses? How do I just navigate this huge campus system. And, by the way, when I lost my fingers to a grenade, I went through the same process at the University of Hawaii, and it takes a while to adjust to being in a room with folks who maybe are a few years younger than you who have come straight from high school, you know, and you've been doing all these other things in the military.

So Student Veterans of America help with that transition, that translation, to make sure that whatever needs you have are addressed and they serve as a bridge between the new GI Bill and the veteran and the resources and programs of that university. So, I would highly encourage folks to take advantage of it to connect. I don't know for a fact that they're in Alaska. I believe they're in all 50 States. I would say they're very dynamic, they're growing, and they're very action-oriented.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Now, that's something that we can obviously, from our office, too, follow up to see if Alaska has—

Mr. JEFFERSON. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH [continuing]. Someone at our university.

Mr. JEFFERSON. And we can connect. We have a great relationship with the president, sir, so we can make that connection this week.

Senator BEGICH. Fantastic. That'd be great. The second thing real quick, if I can, you mentioned the American Vets at Work.

Mr. JEFFERSON. Yes, sir. American Heroes at Work.

Senator BEGICH. American Heroes at Work. Can you, for the audience that's here and because I didn't ask you this yesterday, just describe a little bit about how that works.

Mr. JEFFERSON. Absolutely. We had a chance, sir, to dialog on that yesterday.

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Mr. JEFFERSON. One of the programs that we have is designed to help veterans with PTS and/or TBI and/or PTSD find meaningful employment. What we found is the accommodations that these veterans want and need tend to be very normal, easy accommodations, but the employers themselves just need to be educated. So this program connects a veteran with an employer and educates the employer on the accommodations.

And here is what's so interesting about the accommodations. Many of them are things such as: I want to be able to get up and walk around for, you know, 10, 15 minutes a few times a day; please don't walk up behind a veteran, you know, and grab him or her from behind or on his shoulders; please don't place them in areas where there's lots of loud, unexpected noises or very bright lights. When employers hear what the accommodations are, it's the same thing anyone would want a great percentage of the time.

The other thing I'd say is we brought the employers and the veterans together and they rave about this program. It's called America's Heroes at Work. I will connect with your office, sir, so you will have access to that. Robert, if you're still here, I'd love to connect you with our director for this program and also anyone else here in the building.

And, again, our access point directly is Tom Hall. Tom, would you stand one more time, please. You're getting some good exercise with me. It's a great program, sir. We just need to raise awareness of it. I want to do a lot more with it.

Senator BEGICH. That's great. I mean, you told me about it a little bit and that's why I wanted you to kind of expand a little bit here. But, again, thank you for that. That's a great access point and I know people will take advantage of it. Robert is here and he's patiently watching and listening. So thank you.

Mr. JEFFERSON. All right.

Senator BEGICH. Thank you, Ron. Now Belinda, I promised you I wouldn't have the same questions as yesterday. One thing that intrigued me was an item I think you added today and that's of a national brokering process review you're doing. You've done a pretty significant review on the Anchorage Regional Office in a variety of areas, but on a national level you're taking a look at brokering as a whole.

I know Linda B. brought up a lot of issues about brokering. Is that what you're looking at, the whole system and trying to figure

out what's good, what's bad? Is that—it will go on automatically [referring to the microphone]. Yeah.

Ms. FINN. Yes. We're looking at brokering from a number of aspects. One of them is to try to determine how much the brokering process improves the timeliness of claims processing. We would also—I'm not sure whether we've been planning to look at error rates or appeal rates, so I've been making notes on that to possibly add.

Senator BEGICH. Yeah. Why I wanted to ask this question is because what I hear from a lot of folks, at least so far in this process we've been going through in the last few days, is timeliness is not as significant coming from the broker, and it's less timely if they get it and then there's an error on it, which is like they're repeating the workload.

To me, the great measurement will be—I'll use the example I was given that San Diego sends ratings back and yet of those 53 to 60 percent, I forget the exact number, are being turned right over into being approved, yet 9 out of 10 are being appealed. And then you compare that to Salt Lake and Seattle where that's not occurring. Why is that?

You know, that's an interesting question. Is that worthwhile to look—I mean I'm not into the appeal process, I don't understand all the details, but it sure seems on the surface that would be worth looking at.

Ms. FINN. I would agree, it does sound like it's worthwhile. I will mention, about a year ago we looked at the National Quality Assurance Program in VBA and one of the things we noted was that brokered claims were not included in the quality reviews and not included in the national quality rates.

Senator BEGICH. Really?

Ms. FINN. Yes. And so we recommended that VBA establish a process to review those brokered claims for accuracy and include that in the rate. They agreed with that recommendation, but I don't know right this second what action they have taken to make that happen.

Senator BEGICH. Could you—and maybe someone else might have a comment on that—but could you at least at a minimum, if we don't hear the answer to that when I move through the panel here, get us an answer? See what has happened from that recommendation from a year ago.

Ms. FINN. Yes, sir. I will do that.

[The information requested during the hearing follows:]

Deliverable 3: Discussion with Ms. Boisseau on quality concerns at the San Diego RO, and an update on findings

Response: On Friday March 5, 2010, Mr. Kelley spoke with Ms. Boisseau to address her concerns on brokering claims to San Diego and to gather specific quality examples. Ms. Boisseau could not provide specific claim numbers or additional information on the issue of quality. She did not report any outstanding issues or complaints, as Mr. Kelley had addressed all her concerns. Mr. Kelley provided his contact information to Ms. Boisseau and requested she contact him with future issues or for additional information on Anchorage claims.

The San Diego RO manages the largest Resource Center (RC) in VBA. In FY 2009, the RC processed approximately 15,500 cases, including 300 for Veterans in Alaska. The San Diego RO is committed to providing quality rating decisions by ensuring that all employees complete training requirements and that supervisors conduct regular quality reviews. All training is targeted to improve errors found in the quality review process.

Senator BEGICH. I think that would be very interesting. The second question is in regards to, you said, the challenges in the network. Is that the communication network? I'm trying to think of how you described that, and I'm now reverting back to the Anchorage regional office. You talked about the challenges in the network. Can you—

Ms. FINN. Yes, sir. It's the challenges in the network access to—I'm not sure whether it's over the Internet or just the VA network.

Senator BEGICH. OK.

Ms. FINN. But the VBA applications that are needed to process claims, many of these are run obviously not out of Anchorage, but in other locations. And if the folks working in Anchorage couldn't access the applications, it's very hard to do the job.

Senator BEGICH. So it may not be as computerized, in essence, is what you're saying?

Ms. FINN. I believe it was problems with the network bandwidth in Anchorage.

Senator BEGICH. Right. And, C.W., he's kind of like Radar O'Riley on M.A.S.H. C.W. hands me the word "bandwidth."

Ms. FINN. Yes.

Senator BEGICH. So I have a feeling that may be the issue. Is that part of it?

Mr. ARRONTE. Yes, that—when we were on site, correct, it's bandwidth.

Senator BEGICH. OK.

Mr. ARRONTE. It was a T1 line and I think the director had indicated that there were going to be three or four additional T1 lines brought in. It should help that connectivity problem.

Senator BEGICH. Has that occurred, Mark?

Mr. BILOSZ. Yes, I think there were three T1 lines that were added and it has improved things dramatically. And we're also expecting when we move into the new building in May it will even be better. So it has improved.

Senator BEGICH. Great. I know in the simple world I live in, my mother-in-law just went from dial-up, if you can believe this, to cable and you can only imagine what that's like. You know, she can actually get a photo in seconds rather than hours. That's interesting.

That's what I was trying to understand. I wasn't real clear on that, but now it makes a lot of sense.

And the last question is you mentioned accessing computer issues. Is that the same thing? You had mentioned accessing computer issues. Is that similar to—

Ms. FINN. Yes, accessing the applications.

Senator BEGICH. It's all the same.

Ms. FINN. It requires bandwidth.

Senator BEGICH. OK. Same thing. The bandwidth isn't strong enough, so therefore the applications weren't as robust as they could have been. Is that a fair—

Ms. FINN. Yes, they couldn't access them.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Well, again, on the national brokering, it is exciting that you're doing that and I think this hearing, hopefully, brought some ideas to the table that we can incorporate. And please let us know, is that progressive? It sounds like, you know, several months from now you might be down the path on it, but let us know how that progresses. I think the Committee would be very interested. As you know, appeals have been an issue that percolates at the Committee level on a regular basis.

Ms. FINN. Yes, sir. We will. As a matter of fact, I'm just going to take a second to say—

Senator BEGICH. Sure.

Ms. FINN [continuing]. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here and out in the field and here with the issues from veterans. We work real hard to make sure that when we look at an issue, we answer the questions that are important, you know, and the issues that need to be fixed. So this has been a great opportunity for me and I've been taking a lot of notes.

Senator BEGICH. Great. Thank you very much. Thanks to you and your team. Mark, again, thank you and your team that's here with you. I want to ask you, and I know I asked you this in Anchorage, but I want to make sure the Fairbanks folks also hear this. And that is, the issues that were brought up in the report and the items of concern, there is no disagreement to fix those problems; you agreed with the recommendations. Is that a fair statement?

Mr. BILOSZ. Yes.

Senator BEGICH. And that you're taking active steps to move forward to—as you identified in your written testimony in more detail than your verbal, but you basically are taking steps to get this process cleaned up and moving in the right direction. Is that a—

Mr. BILOSZ. Yes, we—

Senator BEGICH. I don't want to put words in your mouth. I just want to make sure the Fairbanks folks hear exactly what we talked about in Anchorage also.

Mr. BILOSZ. Yes. We implemented action items to address all of the issues and we're monitoring those, and they are having a positive impact on our performance.

Senator BEGICH. We agreed yesterday when I asked Belinda the question on, you know, when their next site review might be, she had indicated that since they have more resources, they can go from 5-year review cycles down to 3 years, which is great. And what I have asked is that you report back to me and the Com-

mittee by June the progress that you have had in all these metrics of measurement. That is still a commitment that you're comfortable with making?

Mr. BILOSZ. Yes, sir, I had a note.

[The information requested during the hearing follows:]

Deliverable: Updated metrics on the Anchorage Regional Office's (RO) performance by June

Response: The performance of the Anchorage RO continues to improve, as indicated in the information below.

- Rating inventory reduced from 1,435 claims at the beginning of FY 2010 to 1,328 claims in April 2010. Over the same period of time, the percent of rating inventory pending for more than 125 days dropped from 44 percent to 38 percent.
- Average days pending dropped from 131.8 days at the beginning of FY 2010 to 125.6 days at the end of April 2010.
- Claims completed increased from 78 per month in FY 2009 to 160 per month in FY 2010. In April, the Anchorage RO completed 287 claims.
- "Average days to complete" rating claims was 203 days in April 2010, the lowest month in the fiscal year.
- Rating accuracy improved from 83.7 percent in April 2009 to 85.8 percent in April 2010.

Since the 2009 VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) review of the Anchorage RO, all 12 recommendations were addressed. All new and revised station policies are in place, and continued oversight ensures policy compliance.

Anchorage brokered claims to both the Salt Lake City and Fort Harrison ROs. Brokering assistance, combined with increased production in Anchorage, contributed to the 7.5 percent reduction in rating inventory this fiscal year.

The Anchorage RO hired nine employees as a result of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. These employees assist with mail processing and development of claims. Two new supervisors were appointed this year, and they are positively impacting performance. Both the Veterans Service Center Manager and Decision Review Officer will be leaving the RO over the summer, and recruitment efforts are underway to fill these positions.

The Anchorage RO moved to a new facility, which opened on May 10. The RO is now part of the 184,000 square-foot VA Outpatient Clinic, a two-story building located outside the Muldoon Gate adjacent to Elmendorf Air Force Base. Located on the second floor, this office is significantly larger than the previous facility and provides bigger training facilities, increased file storage, and enhanced information technology and video teleconferencing.

Senator BEGICH. OK. Good. Again, that was for the Fairbanks audience to know that, you know, sometimes we have these great reports and they're not—you know, in a lot of ways they're criticisms, but they're also about how to improve the system because no matter what we do in life, there's always room for improvement. And what happens sometimes is those reports kind of move on and then people will do their own work, and the next thing you know the report isn't reviewed by the public and they then call us and say, well, what happened? And then we say, good question, and

then we call and they say, well, geez, there's—of those 13 items, seven of them got implemented, we don't know why the other six didn't.

So this process of bringing it back in June will allow us a chance to publicly say here's a success or here are areas that just aren't working out as well as we thought. Is that fair?

Mr. BILOSZ. Fair—very much so, yeah.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Again, I want to thank you for the willingness to kind of step up to it. Rating qualities is, I think, the phrase you used. How do you measure rating quality or rating qualities? I may not have written that down exactly the way you said it, but I remember that phrase.

Mr. BILOSZ. Yeah. We have a National Quality Review program that's located in Nashville and every month a series of rating decisions gets sent to that facility.

Senator BEGICH. Is it a random selection of those?

Mr. BILOSZ. It's a random selection. Every regional office in the country sends files there.

Senator BEGICH. So they send them off to this location?

Mr. BILOSZ. Yes, and they have a group of folks there with experience review the files and determine if there are errors or if there aren't errors. Some errors, just as the IG found in their inspection, some errors affect payment, others are just administrative type of errors. But they report that back on a monthly basis to the regional office and in my office, for example, we use that data to train people to make sure that those mistakes aren't repeated.

Senator BEGICH. I know you and I talked about this yesterday. In your office, and I didn't see it, but you pointed it out to me, and that is you keep a wall chart basically to make sure people understand what the measurements are that we're measuring for success.

Mr. BILOSZ. Yes. You know, it's vital that we are providing quality service to veterans, timely service to veterans, and if our employees don't know what that is, then they can't perform to the level that they need to. So we update that daily with our performance measures and it allows our employees to know how what they do day in and day out affects the veterans in the State of Alaska.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. Dr. Pendergrass, I'm going to move to you, if I can. I appreciate the shopping list of items you're working on, and it is impressive. One thing I'd love to get if I could—again this is very parochial, obviously, it's Alaska and I'm more interested in Alaska issues and what's good for Alaska veterans—but I think this would be also important for many of my colleagues on the Committee who are from rural States.

I'd be curious if you could give us, not right now, but later, more of a written report on the several demonstration projects we have with you, especially with the Tribal Health Consortium, with Maniilaq and other organizations we're doing work with. Because one of the things that I am hopeful for is that we will be able to prove that a veteran in a small village can go to an Indian Health Services facility, get the services they need rather than having to fly or be transported all the way across to maybe Fairbanks or to Anchorage or to Seattle or wherever else they might have to be sent. There might be a facility right next door to their home that

is run by Indian Health Services, paid by the same taxpayers as the VA, and available.

A good example of that is in Nome. The Indian Health Service will be building \$170 million health care facility, brand new, starting this spring. It will be a state-of-the-art Indian Health Service provider. It would be a shame to have a veteran who lives literally right there to be forced to go to another place because we don't have arrangements with IHS. And I know you are using Alaska as kind of a pilot. As Ray and I talked today, if you can do it in Alaska, you can do it anywhere. That's our attitude here.

So I'd be curious, if you'd give a report to the Committee on how these demonstration projects are working and how they've been implemented. Because one of the complaints I've heard is it's taking a while to get through the bureaucracy which I know is because of the stovepiping that goes on, and we want to make sure these move forward if they are successful. Do you have any quick comment?

Dr. PENDERGRASS. Well, in my—I have a briefing document from last week that we didn't present, but—

Senator BEGICH. Because of a little snow—

Dr. PENDERGRASS [continuing]. I do have it. I do have an expanded version—

Senator BEGICH. Excellent.

Dr. PENDERGRASS [continuing]. Of what the rural initiatives are. The challenge for us is both access and efficiency of the VA system and balancing that with VA's—it's similar to an HMO in that we have very specific internal services and capabilities that we need to use first. And sometimes that requires—and sometimes we are prohibited from providing services outside of our system.

[The information requested during the hearing follows:]

State of Alaska
VHA Rural Health Initiatives

Rural Clinic Expansions

- Juneau Outreach Clinic – currently open part-time in temporary space; anticipate moving to permanent space by late summer 2010
- Homer Outreach Clinic – opened December 2009
- Mat-Su CBOC (Wasilla) – opened April 2009

Telemedicine Expansion

- **Teledermatology** - VISN 20 has implemented a teledermatology consultation system using store and forward technology and a consistent, defined curriculum of basic precepted training and continuing education for Primary Care providers. The goal of this training is to render the individual rural facilities self sufficient in providing dermatology on site with support from networked practitioners located in Seattle. The program has been implemented in Anchorage, and will expand to the Fairbanks and Kenai clinics in FY 2010.

- **Care Coordination Home Telehealth (CCHT)** - CCHT programs are designed for patients who are frequent clinic attendees and require urgent hospital admissions. These VHA programs have demonstrated reduced hospital admissions, clinic and emergency room visits. VHA employs a range of technologies in the home that vary in their levels of cost and sophistication to match the needs of the Veteran patient. The Alaska VA Healthcare System (AVAHS) has an active CCHT program with 221 enrolled Veterans throughout the state. Thirty-one (31) percent of Telehealth users live in highly rural areas, 16 percent live in rural areas and 53 percent live in urban areas. Veterans enrolled in the CCHT program receive a device that uses a standard phone connection to send information from their home to CCHT staff in Anchorage. This alleviates the need for frequent "in-person" visits to a VA Clinic and allows the Veteran to be monitored closely.

The AVAHS has been a leader in the Alaska Federal Health Care Partnership's (AFHCP) rollout of this technology to the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium clinics. AVAHS serves as a consultant to the AFHCP and to those in rural clinics. As the program was initiated in the rural areas, the AFHCP hired a nurse that was embedded with the AVAHS staff to serve as a mentor for their program.

- **Teleretinal Imaging** - The prevalence of diabetes in the Veteran population makes the timely assessment of diabetic retinopathy a major VA health care need. To address this need, VHA has implemented a comprehensive teleretinal imaging program nationwide. The Kenai CBOC recently received funding to obtain imaging equipment and started offering this service.

Rural Pilot Project

- The AVAHS is conducting a pilot project which focuses on collaborations with existing Alaska native tribal health corporation facilities and federally supported community health centers to provide primary care and mental health services. Its goal is to enhance primary care for rural Veterans through contract care. The pilot areas are the Bethel census area, Bristol Bay Borough, Dillingham Census Area, Nome Census Area, Northwest Arctic Borough, Wade Hampton Census Area, and the City of Cordova. Under the pilot, Veterans may be authorized three primary care visits and two mental health visits within a six month period. If the Veteran requires additional visits, the Veteran or health care provider may contact VA to request additional care as needed. VA sent letters to 548 enrolled Veterans in the pilot areas inviting them to participate, and through January 2010, approximately 20 percent (N=108) have enrolled and 10 have requested and been granted authorizations for care (ten for primary care and two for mental health care).

Rural Partnerships

- Rural Veteran Liaison – This is a pilot program to hire a full-time VA employee to be a local community-based point of contact for VA questions on health care and benefits. In June 2009, the AVAHS hired a Bethel-based liaison to perform outreach to the Yukon-Kuskokwim area. The AVAHS has been recruiting for a Kotzebue-based position since December 2008 and recently added Nome to the recruitment announcement. So far, there have been no qualified applicants for the position to cover the northern area of the state. VA continues to advertise and respond to inquiries. The liaison has also traveled with the National Guard “Yellow Ribbon” team to communities in Western Alaska as well as Cordova. The Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation provides office space for this position.
- Peer-to-Peer Telemental Health Project – During FY 2009, the AVAHS successfully recruited a psychiatric nurse practitioner for a new position as a Telemental health provider. Currently, a Telemental Health Clinic is held with the Kenai CBOC by videoconference three to five days per month. Approximately 60 unique patients are being seen through this clinic, and four to six additional Veterans are being seen each month.

The AVAHS' Telemental health services have been offered to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) in Bethel, AK. A videoconference for staff consultation between Anchorage and Bethel has been held with educational and screening instruments shared. YKHC has requested peer-to-peer consultation with VA professional staff as needed. VA has visited both YKHC and the Maniilaq Health Corporation in Kotzebue to educate local health care providers about AVAHS Telemental health resources.

A January 2010 VA presentation to the Alaska Federal Healthcare Partnership Telehealth and Technology committee resulted in positive contacts with staff from the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation, and Maniilaq Health Care Corporation. This venue holds promise for spreading the message about Telemental health resources at AVAHS.

- **Tribal Veteran Representative (TVR) Program** – The TVR Program uses local community volunteers to assist VA to outreach to Alaska Native Veterans. A TVR is an Alaska Native Veteran or recognized individual appointed by an Alaska Native health organization, tribal government, tribal council, or other tribal entity to act as a liaison with local VA staff. The representative is a volunteer, unless paid by the Alaska Native entity, who selects the individual to represent them. Collaborative training is provided by VA health care and benefits staff. VA has completed three annual trainings, two in Anchorage, and one at the Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall in Juneau, AK. As of January 25, 2010, 12 people have completed the TVR training. The next training is scheduled for April 20-22, 2010, in Ketchikan, AK. It will be held at the Ketchikan Indian Community Clinic.
- **Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) Outreach** – The AVAHS made special efforts to reach out to Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium organizations upon the first major deployment of the Alaska National Guard in OEF/OIF. A multi-disciplinary group of VA staff traveled to rural areas to provide education on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Suicide Awareness and Prevention. Audiences included providers, nurses, mental health staff, community health aides, behavioral health specialists, and village-based counselors. In addition to the educational aspect of these sessions, VA staff and Alaska Native Tribal health staff focused on providing a pathway of care for each system to work together to ensure returning service members and other Veterans living in rural areas could seamlessly access their Alaska Native health benefits as well as access their benefits through the VA health care system. The presentations on the pathway of care focused on the VA enrollment, eligibility, and fee authorization process to assist Veterans in accessing VA health care and how to bill for reimbursement from VA should their health corporation seek authorization to provide services to Veterans. Packets of information with contact names and phone numbers were given to each participant, and information tables were staffed in community settings such as post offices, grocery stores, and community gatherings to raise awareness within the general community.

The AVAHS has a signed Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Alaska Department of Military and Veterans Affairs that outlines a partnership to work together to meet the needs of returning soldiers. OEF/OIF staff members regularly attend Post Deployment Health Re-Assessment (PDHRA) events and Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program events to deliver information about VA benefits to service members and their families. The AVAHS actively participates in pre- and post-deployment events for active duty service members. VA also

participates in outreach with the National Guard's "Yellow Ribbon" program, which has a goal of sending its liaisons to all 237 villages in Alaska within a single year. The Rural Veteran Liaison and OEF/OIF staff members have accompanied these liaisons on a number of trips to rural Alaska to provide information about various VA programs and benefits.

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Senator BEGICH. That's only a function of the laws that people like myself can pass.

Dr. PENDERGRASS. Yes, that's right.

Senator BEGICH. And so, I guess, here's why. I think you will find in Alaska, those who are familiar with our Indian Health Services here, it is a robust and very successful program. It's run by Tribal Consortium.

Dr. PENDERGRASS. Right.

Senator BEGICH. It is very unique in its delivery system. There's a program in our facility in Anchorage called Nuk which is a holistic medicine program. It has reduced emergency care injury by 68 percent, a great statistical data. And because it provides such good quality service, they get incredible reviews across the country. So, it just seems that there's an opportunity here.

So, I would say to you don't limit what the potential is if there's a law that says you can't cross the line because the real end product here is about service to the veteran.

Dr. PENDERGRASS. Right. And I think the task force group will be able to—

Senator BEGICH. Help us.

Dr. PENDERGRASS [continuing]. Sort that out because the pilot is a pilot, and it would require some legislative changes.

[Update to the requested information, dated June 2010, follows:]

Deliverable 2: Update on rural health pilot initiatives in Alaska

Response: Travel to rural areas in Alaska is impacted by limited airline schedules, extreme weather patterns, and high transportation costs. Due to these factors, the Anchorage VA Regional Office (RO) does not maintain a regular visitation schedule.

Despite these challenges, the Anchorage RO conducted two significant rural outreach initiatives in 2009. In February and March, the RO participated jointly with the Alaska VA Health Care System to conduct Alaska VA Education Forums to Veterans in several remote villages. The RO also sent a Veteran Service Representative to the following locations to provide benefits information and counseling to Veterans and medical providers: Kotzebue, Fairbanks, Nome, Dillingham, Ketchikan, Juneau, and Sitka. In March 2009, the RO completed a training session for eight Tribal Veterans Representatives to assist with Veterans' issues in rural Alaska.

In October 2009, the Anchorage RO teamed with the Alaska VA Medical Center to staff an information booth providing outreach to 500 Veterans and family members via the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN). AFN is the largest statewide Native organization in Alaska. Its membership includes 178 villages (both federally recognized tribes and village corporations), 13 regional Native corporations and 12 regional nonprofit and tribal consortiums that contract and run federal and state programs.

As the RO conducts outreach events in conjunction with the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), the RO relies on the Anchorage VHA Public Affairs Office to advertise outreach efforts. In Kotzebue and Nome, radio spots were aired before and during the arrival to let the local Veteran population know where the information would be available. In the communities of Sitka and Ketchikan, notification of the outreach was provided at the local medical clinic.

Senator BEGICH. Exactly. Well, I'll look forward to that. One last thing, just a quick question on mental health service professionals. What are you finding in recruitment in a sense of trying to get folks to be in that service? Because what I hear, it's a problem.

Dr. PENDERGRASS. It's—

Senator BEGICH. In all areas, not just—

Dr. PENDERGRASS. It is a major problem. We have not been able to entice the professionals up here full-time. We're using opportunities for traveling up for short periods of time. We did that to do some of the mental health C&P exams.

Senator BEGICH. Is it—

Dr. PENDERGRASS. We're using locums.

Senator BEGICH. Is it—and, you know, you can be very frank here. Is it because they have to go to Alaska or is it because of the cost, or that the income is not as great as they could get doing it elsewhere, or it's a family—what's the draw here? What's the—

Dr. PENDERGRASS. Well, it's a number of factors. First of all, the supply of professionals—

Senator BEGICH. Is already small?

Dr. PENDERGRASS [continuing]. Is small. The compensation that working for a private or even a State facility—state salary is different than private sector, and so the salary is an issue.

Senator BEGICH. Not competitive.

Dr. PENDERGRASS. It's not competitive. And then you're in a very rural, highly rural, medically underserved area which is a problem—

Senator BEGICH. It's tough.

Dr. PENDERGRASS [continuing]. Across a number of States, but Alaska especially.

Senator BEGICH. Brian Rogers just walked in. He's our chancellor for the university here. Where did he go? Oh, there you are, over there. I point that out only because I think what we have to figure out is what we can do in the education arena to try to entice people, one, to enter the field at the front end because if we can create the supply then at least some who still don't want to, you have a larger supply to work from. This is something that I know I'll see the Board of Regents tonight at a reception and maybe it's an idea which we can have more discussion.

Dr. PENDERGRASS. The VA has an ability to help offset some of the student loans as part of the employment. It may be additional incentive to that, working in a rural area.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. That's a good point. I again apologize because of the timing. We're real close, but Willie, did you have some additional comments? [Gesturing to the microphone.] That's about as far as it will go; so you just speak and you'll be OK.

Mr. CLARK. OK. All right. Good. Thank you, sir, for allowing me the opportunity to speak.

Senator BEGICH. Sure.

Mr. CLARK. I am Willie Clark. I'm in charge of VA Benefits Operations for the Western U.S., which includes Mr. Bilosz' office and now Mr. Kelley's office here in Anchorage.

Three things quickly I'd like to bring up. You talked about the—or asked a question about brokering quality.

Senator BEGICH. Yes.

Mr. CLARK. We started that last year. So as a result of the IG report, we are measuring quality on our brokered cases.

Senator BEGICH. Excellent. Good.

Mr. CLARK. The second thing is the San Diego office that Linda brought up—

Senator BEGICH. Yes.

Mr. CLARK. The San Diego office, believe it or not, is one of our best performing stations in VBA. This is the first that I have heard of that. I asked Mr. Bilosz and Mr. Kelley.

Senator BEGICH. Well—

Mr. CLARK. They had not heard anything from Linda. So what we're going to do—

Senator BEGICH. You have today.

Mr. CLARK. Well, we're certainly going to talk to her about that and we will address any concerns that she has.

Senator BEGICH. Will you share that with the Committee?

Mr. CLARK. Yes, sir. We'll certainly do that. Last, we talked about the call center in Phoenix.

Senator BEGICH. Yes.

Mr. CLARK. At all of our call centers we have State benefits books that speaks to tax exemption letters, a license, and the full gambit for each State. So I—that's another one that surprises me. I will certainly get with the Phoenix office, that's under my responsibility as well, and make sure that they are trained and providing those letters.

Senator BEGICH. Let me ask you quickly, on the books that you provide to those trainers, are those—before the trainers utilize

them for those States like in Alaska, are people like Linda at that level reviewing them to give you—to make sure—because they—you know, sometimes what we do is—and I had this actually with the VA recently in a Committee hearing. They were saying, well, we notify veterans, we put the legal notice in the paper and so forth. And I said, well—

Mr. CLARK. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH [continuing]. You know, no one pays attention—

Mr. CLARK. Yes, sir.

Senator BEGICH. No offense. I mean, my father-in-law is a retired colonel.

Mr. CLARK. I understand, I understand.

Senator BEGICH. You know, he's not looking in the want ads for classifieds by the VA, he's looking, you know, elsewhere.

So do you kind of reverse it back and say, you know what, here's the book, let's go back to the people on the front line in Alaska. Have them look at this; how would you use it? Is there something missing here? Or even how it's laid out to make sure it's readily usable. Do you do that?

Mr. CLARK. Well, we have certain people that we do it with. I don't know at Linda's level what happens.

Senator BEGICH. OK.

Mr. CLARK. But, certainly, in this case because, again, all States are different.

Senator BEGICH. Absolutely, oh, yeah.

Mr. CLARK. These call centers, they're set up to get a call from any State, so they must know. And all they do is open the book to that particular index that speaks to that State—

Senator BEGICH. Right.

Mr. CLARK [continuing]. And then they are to give out those letters. But I will check that to be sure that in all cases, but specifically Alaska, that we have the correct information.

[The information requested during the hearing follows:]

Deliverable 4: Confirmation that the Alaska state information book is current, and notification to Sen. Begich

Response: In 2008, VBA began consolidating the general benefits toll-free line from 57 ROs to eight National Call Centers (NCCs). Employees at the NCCs provide benefits information and claims assistance to callers nationwide, as NCC employees have access to the same systems and information used by the 57 ROs. NCC employees utilize the State Benefits Reference System (SBRS) to answer questions from Veterans regarding state benefits. As such, SBRS contains information pertaining to state benefits offered to Alaska Veterans, such as the real estate tax exemption. SBRS outlines features of the benefit to include eligibility requirements, the application process, and contact information for the Anchorage Property Appraisal Division for additional questions.

Upon review, an error was noted in the eligibility requirements for real estate tax exemption for Alaska Territorial Guard Members. SBRS is in the process of being updated to reflect the proper eligibility requirements. It is anticipated that this information will be corrected in SBRS within the next 60 days. The Alaska state property exemption values are correct.

Senator BEGICH. Very good. And I'm just a big fan of encouraging because we have—it's no criticism to the VA; it's a criticism to kind of our bureaucracy of how we do business. Sometimes we get closed in and we forget that the person on the line may get that exact same index and say, you know what, you know, they're never going to find it the way you have it listed here. Because they see it from a different perspective of the caller who is going to make that call.

So I would just encourage, as I do with all agencies, you know, I do it through the Commerce and others that this is a technique I used when I was mayor and it made a big difference in usability of the documentation.

Mr. CLARK. OK, sir.

Senator BEGICH. Just a little thought there.

Mr. CLARK. Yes, sir. We'll do that.

Senator BEGICH. The only thing I'll say and end here, which, Verdie, I have two parts. One is to say thank you for the work I know you did along with C.W. on the ATG, making sure those individuals received the benefit that they justly deserve that was taken away for a short period of time.

And I want to thank you for the hard work you did to kind of plow through it, find these folks, find the recipients, find their dependents. I know between you and the work you did out of your office, through our office with C.W. and some others that were really helpful there. I just want to say thank you for doing that.

Mr. BOWEN. Thank you, sir.

Senator BEGICH. And you laid out some good thoughts here. So I'm going to not burn up time here, but I do want to have some follow-up on the voc rehab which we'll do through our office and your office.

Mr. BOWEN. Yes. As a matter of fact, sir, I wrote myself a note here that my voc rehab person will send a memo over to C.W. and compare the two programs.

Senator BEGICH. That would be great, so we can kind of see what we need to do to improve on it.

Mr. BOWEN. Yes.

Senator BEGICH. Let me end there. Again, to the panel, thank you all very much. As we try to—as I attempted to do in the last 2 days in these hearings is to bring out ideas and not—you know, we can spend a lot of time pounding on each other, which is not hard to do in the world we live in it seems today; but it's better to find those ideas, see where we can improve, recognize criticism is not a negative, but it's a positive to improve a system that's delivering service to thousands, and in this case millions, around the country.

And so I thank you all for your public service. Thank you for your willingness to step up and say here's what we can do to make it better.

Also I think an example that, Belinda, you laid out which I really appreciate that you like these field hearings because it gives you a little food for thought and that's why I like them: to get out and hear what people have to say. So thank you all for being here.

Thank you to the audience that is here. We are going to go next door? Right through that door. We're going to do a press event in regards to the folks that are signing on to support our Guard and

their employment. It's just another opportunity to highlight the great work that our business community is doing.

So, again, thank you all very much. This meeting is adjourned.

A P P E N D I X

STATEMENT SUBMITTED AT HEARING BY WILLIAM "LADD" MCBRIDE,
SENIOR CHIEF PETTY OFFICER, USNR (RET.)

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Anchorage and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Name: William "Ladd" McBride Phone Number: [REDACTED]
Address: P.O. Box 23567 Cell Number: _____
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Questions or comments:

I AM PRESENTLY COVERED UNDER TRICARE FOR LIFE (TFL) ^{TFL} MEDICARE, AND I PAY FOR A THREE DOLLAR SUPPLEMENT ^{TO} COVER EYES AND DENTAL. I WAS TOLD WHEN I ENLISTED IN 1952 THAT IF I HONORABLY SERVED FOR A MINIMUM OF 20 YRS AND RECEIVED AN HONORABLE DISCHARGE, MY TRICARE AND I WOULD RECEIVE NO COST MEDICAL CARE FOR THE REST OF OUR LIVES. I SERVED A TOTAL OF 40 YEARS, 5 MONTHS, AND 15 DAYS IN THE ARMY AND NAVY ON ACTIVE DUTY AND RESERVE STATUS. I RETIRED IN SUMMER 1992 AND UPON REACHING AGE 65 I WAS SWITCHED OVER TO MEDICARE ONLY. IN 2001 ^{TFL} ~~TRICARE~~ BECAME AVAILABLE BUT MEDICARE REMAINED PRIMARY. THE TRICARE PROGRAM COVERS DENTAL AND EYE. HENCE WE HAVE TO BUY SUPPLEMENTAL INSURANCE (BLUE CROSS). PROVIDERS IN OUR AREA DO NOT WILLINGLY ACCEPT MEDICARE. WE ARE FORTUNATE TO RECEIVE.....

SEE BACKSIDE

Referral:

VHA VBA CASEWORK OTHER

MEDICAL CARE FROM Basset Army Community Hospital BUT TREATMENT OF ACTIVE DUTY PERSONNEL COMES FIRST. NOT ALL MEDICAL DISCIPLINES ARE AVAILABLE AT BASSSETT ARMY HOSPITAL OR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY SO I HAVE TO TRAVEL AT MY OWN EXPENSE TO ANCHORAGE AND/OR THE LOWER 48 FOR MEDICAL CARE. PLEASE NOTE, I AM NOT ELIGIBLE FOR ANY VA CARE, NOR DO I WANT TO BE CONSIDERING THE PROBLEMS THEY ARE HAVING AT THIS TIME.
WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

- 1) PASS LEGISLATION WHICH WILL COVER RETIREES OVER AGE 65 TO AUTHORIZE PAYMENT FOR TRANSPORTATION, ROOM, BOARD, ETC IF TRAVEL TO ANOTHER CITY OR STATE IS REQUIRED FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT NOT AVAILABLE IN OUR HOME TOWN. PRESENTLY THOSE UNDER AGE 65 HAVE THIS BENEFIT ALSO, NAMELY THAT THE PATIENT REQUIRES TO HAVE A SPOUSE OR CARETAKER TO TRAVEL WITH THEM.
- 2) DIVORCE TEL FROM MEDICARE AND PAY PROVIDERS RESPONSIBLE FEES. WITH NATIONALIZED (SOCIALIZED) MEDICINE BEING PRESENTLY DISCUSSED, CUTS OF \$500 BILLION HAS BEEN TALKED ABOUT WHICH WOULD DESTROY MEDICAL CARE FOR MILITARY RETIREES.
- 3) PROVIDE EYE AND DENTAL CARE WHICH WAS PROMISED WHEN I ENLISTED IN 1952.
- 4) THERE HAS BEEN A LARGE AMOUNT OF MONEY EXPENDED/SPENT ON VA PROGRAMS AND RIGHTFULLY SO, BUT THERE ARE MANY RETIREES IN THIS COUNTRY WHO ARE NOT ELIGIBLE FOR VA AND TO DATE WE HAVE RECEIVED THE SHORT END OF THE STICK!

STATEMENT SUBMITTED AT HEARING BY CHARLOTTE M. DAVIS,
VIETNAM-ERA VETERAN

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Anchorage and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

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Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes No

Questions or comments:

I am a 17 year Vietnam Era veteran and a nurse practitioner in private practice. I am a geriatric NP + my co-workers + family NP. For our VA patients (very few) the practice must obtain permission for them to be seen + for reimbursement. Even w/ that permission, often we do not get reimbursement. We cannot get reimbursement for Medicare Home so our patients WAIT until they are Medicare eligible to be seen. In turn we have to ration Medicare slots d/t that reimbursement problem. When our patients are home bound +/or at end-of life, we are ^{the} only practice providing primary care service at home!

Referral:
VHA VBA CASEWORK OTHER

I take care of Korean + Vietnamese
 Vets who use mdcr/maib/retirement
 insurance because it takes so long
 to get an appt. if ill. I have two who
 private pay when they are ill as they
 cannot get an appt. My focus is on
 education about chronic dz +
 prevention of complications.
 Today, I saw a 75 yo. Korean vet
 retired who said "I love my
 country + I was ready to die for
 my country but I cannot trust
 my government". Such a sad comment!!
 He was "promised health care at
 govt hospitals" and that was
 "wiped out w/ stroke of a pen".
 Then "I had to pay for Tricare" +
 then I paid for civil service
 insurance." He is now Medicare
 so is one of the lucky ones as
most primary care providers in this
 area are not accepting new mdcr pts.
 Even funding a provider for
 consultation is difficult. I have
 another 73 yo. veteran who refused
 a pacemaker after being sent to
 Anch 3 times w/o any decision
 or outcome.


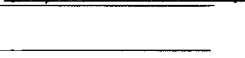
~~David AMP~~
 Mr. David AMP
 Vet 1974-80

STATEMENT SUBMITTED AT HEARING BY WILLIAM McDONALD, COLONEL, USAF (RET.)

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Anchorage and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

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Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes No

Questions or comments:

Please find a way to ensure that the smaller military retiree population are included in the larger group called veterans. Congress assumes that all retirees are under VA or taken care of under provisions for military retirement. That is true until a military retiree goes over 65 and falls under Medicare (and by default is under Tricare for Life).

Note: All military retirees over 65 are space available eligible for military treatment facilities. If no space they are over to medicare/tricare for Life. It is important to note that UNLESS they are under the VA system military retirees over 65 are not eligible for VA care.

Please ensure military 65 plus retirees are not forgotten as you try to provide for veterans.

VHA

VBA

CASEWORK

OTHER

Military Dept
Senate Armed Services
Committee

STATEMENT SUBMITTED AT HEARING BY HUGH TWIG TORDOFF

UNITED STATES SENATE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Anchorage and Fairbanks Hearings

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Name: ^{Hugh} TWIG TORDOFF Phone Number: [REDACTED]

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Would you like to receive our newsletter? Yes _____ No _____

Questions or comments:

Why are we making regulations stricter to the point of excluding volunteers and personnel that were qualified 40 years ago. - The VA is short funded but has enough money to get rid of volunteers at the Vet Centers, why?? IF it is because of legal reasons - ~~rewrite~~ Rewrite the laws or devise a legal document for these individuals so they are covered by whatever Confidential requirements are needed.

Why are fewer providers accepting VA??

Referral:

VHA VBA CASEWORK OTHER
