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2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074
FACSIMILE (202) 225-3974
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<http://oversight.house.gov>

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Opening Statement

Rep. John F. Tierney, Ranking Member

Subcommittee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations Hearing on "Taking Care of Our Veterans: What is the Department of Veterans Affairs Doing to Eliminate the Claims Backlog?"

July 18, 2012

Thank you, Chairman Chaffetz. And thank you to our panel of witnesses for being here today.

Several years ago, when I was first chairing this subcommittee, we conducted hearings at Walter Reed Medical facility. Those hearings led to substantial improvements in the physical plant at Walter Reed and other similar facilities across the country, as well as an ongoing effort to oversee improvements and hold the department accountable for the highest level of program service to our returning warriors. The coordination between DOD disability determinations and VA determinations was a problem then and remains so today, and we appreciate Chairman Chaffetz's willingness to periodically assess progress, just as he is doing here.

With this effort, we are told that employees at the Veterans' Affairs are doing their part. That they are processing more claims more quickly than ever before. We should all recognize their efforts, which are responsible for a substantial increase in the number of claims processed—from 440,000 in 2000 to more than one million claims last year.

But the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have produced an even greater increase in the number of claims filed by veterans. Since 2008, the number of pending disability claims has grown 48% to 1.2. million claims, of which nearly half form a backlog of hundreds of thousands of claims.

To his credit, Secretary Shinseki has announced more than 40 initiatives to help VA process claims more quickly and accurately in the future. An integral part of the transformation plan is the more than \$500 million investment in a paperless Veterans Benefits Management System, which will replace the VA's legacy and outdated paper systems. If the Secretary's initiatives are successful, the VA will cut in half the amount of time it takes to evaluate claims while achieving 98% accuracy.

I hope the Secretary is successful. With more than one million troops projected to leave service over the next five years, the VA cannot afford to fail.

As claims are re-opened, existing files will be scanned into the system. We need to follow this strategy to ensure it is an adequate way to move forward, and remain vigilant across the board to oversee what will hopefully be consistent progress.

Thank you again Chairman Chaffetz for convening this important hearing. I look forward to learning more about these issues and understanding how we can ensure that our veterans receive the benefits to which they are entitled.