



Chairman Hal Rogers

House Committee on Appropriations

**FY 2017 Subcommittee Markup - Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related
Agencies Appropriations Bill
March 23, 2016
Opening Statement As Prepared**

Chairman Dent, thank you for yielding. I would like to congratulate you and Ranking Member Bishop on working together to craft the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill for Fiscal Year 2017. This is the first bill out of the gate in the FY17 appropriations cycle, and I commend this subcommittee for working through their hearings expeditiously and putting this bill forward in such a timely manner.

The members of this subcommittee have produced a balanced, bipartisan bill that provides essential services and benefits to our veterans, and ensures that we move forward with important construction priorities for the Department of Defense. This bill provides \$81.6 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs and our Military Construction accounts, \$1.8 billion over FY2016 enacted levels. As we all know, our servicemen and women, and their families, depend on the programs funded in this bill. After serving honorably in the armed forces, our veterans deserve access to quality medical care, educational opportunities, job transition services, housing and other important programs. They deserve to know that these services will be there when they finish their tour of duty, and that they will be able to access them in a timely and efficient manner.

In recent years, VA has missed the mark on providing our veterans with the services, programs and care they have been guaranteed by our government. The patient waitlists at VA hospitals, reports of pain prescription mismanagement, and the backlog of disability claims are just some examples of the unacceptable developments we have recently witnessed at the VA. This Committee is working hard to provide the VA with the tools it needs to reverse this trend and offer veterans the standard of care and responsiveness they deserve.

There are several provisions that I am particularly pleased to see included in this bill. First and foremost, I appreciate that the Committee is prioritizing our longstanding initiative to reduce the disability claims backlog. This bill provides \$2.8 billion for this effort, including \$180 million for paperless claims, \$153 million for the digital scanning of health records and \$27 million for centralized mail. This bill also makes the requisite investment in speeding up the disability claims appeals process by providing a \$46 million increase in funding for the Board of Veterans Appeals. In addition, this bill will also hold VA accountable for ensuring that its electronic health record system is fully interoperable with DoD's corresponding system. While the bill provides \$260 million for the modernization of the VA electronic health record, it also clearly states that this funding will not be made available to the VA until it certifies that its system is interoperable with DoD's and provides Congress with a clear plan for modernization of the current system.

Finally, this bill includes several provisions aimed at increasing oversight and accountability at the VA. We have all heard reports of wasteful spending, construction cost overruns and negligence at our VA hospitals. I am particularly concerned about the mismanagement of pain medication prescriptions by VA health professionals and the troublesome news that proper prescribing protocols were not always followed. We know now that this gross negligence has led to the death of at least one veteran. This Committee has long fought the over-prescription and abuse of opioid medications, and the news that the VA system has contributed to this epidemic is unacceptable. This bill provides the necessary resources for VA to end the abuse and mismanagement of opioid prescriptions and ensure that our veterans receive responsible pain management care, subject to the appropriate treatment protocols.

This is a good bill that we can all support, and I urge the subcommittee to report this bill to the full Committee in short order. Thank you and I yield back.

#####
