

**Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
Veterans' Health: Ensuring Care for our Aging Heroes
October 3, 2007**

Thank you, Senator Smith, for holding this important hearing. Ensuring quality healthcare for our nation's veterans, young and old alike, is of great importance to us all. We welcome our witnesses and look forward to their testimony.

In combat, our veterans sacrifice their physical and mental well-being in order to defend our nation and its values, and in return, they deserve the highest standard of care from our government. The war in Iraq is creating a new generation of veterans, many of whom are in need of critical care. They are joining the ranks of older veterans who have survived wars past and are still in need of—and deserving of—our attention.

Unfortunately, some of them are simply not getting the care they need. Scandals such as the deteriorating conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center demonstrate part of the problem, but we must also consider the broader faults in the system of veterans' health care. Recent reports, notably the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors and the DoD Task Force on Mental Health, have documented complex bureaucratic processes and limited communication between government agencies that have allowed too many veterans to fall through the cracks. These problems have been around for a long time, and they will not be easy to fix.

While we work to improve treatment and healthcare for our veterans' bodies, we have learned that it is just as important to treat their minds. Too many of our bravest men and women are suffering silently from mental health problems, which can lead to personal struggles, homelessness, and even suicide. We have heard a great deal about how these problems affect the veterans returning now from Iraq and Afghanistan, but we must not forget that for many of our older veterans, time has not erased their mental battle scars. Our hope is that it is not too late to help them.

I am very pleased that our former colleague, Senator Bob Dole, is here to share his thoughts on these issues. Welcome back, Senator Dole, I am pleased you could join us. And thank you to all of our witnesses for participating.