

## **STATEMENT OF SENATOR GORDON H. SMITH**

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging  
“Veterans' Health: Ensuring Care for our Aging Heroes”  
October 3, 2007

Good morning and thank you for being here today.

There is no greater obligation than caring for those who have served this country with their military service. We would be remiss if we did not ensure that the health care of our heroes in arms is the finest medicine has to offer. While much of the focus in the media has been centered on the state of health care for our returning vets, it is the responsibility of this committee to not forget those who served in the wars of our past.

It was exactly three months ago today when in Oregon I chaired a hearing on the topic of veterans' health.

At that time we looked at the provision of mental health services for aging veterans. While that will remain a focus of today's discussion, I also look forward to hearing testimony on all aspects of veterans health care.

As I made clear in July, we must ensure that our aging veterans are not left behind. In our nation today, we have nearly 24 million veterans, about 40 percent of whom are age 65 and older. The Veterans Health Administration serves about 5.5 million of them each year and employs 247,000 employees to attend to their care. I draw attention to these numbers to emphasize not only the scale of the system – and therefore the noted difficulties in meeting all needs at all times in such a large system – but also to reiterate that there are a large number of veterans to whom we owe an enormous debt.

We also know that too many veterans are falling through the cracks. Today we will hear from the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General that wait times for outpatient care are actually longer than have been reported by the Department. This report is important as we work to ensure that veterans, particularly those with time sensitive health needs, are seen quickly.

Today, we also will hear about the number and needs of homeless veterans in our nation. We know that nationally 23 percent of all homeless persons are veterans. In Portland, Oregon, that number could be as high as 30 percent. They suffer disproportionately from poor health, including mental health and substance abuse challenges. We are fortunate to have wonderful community-based groups, such as the Central City Concern in Portland, working to help those who are homeless to get the help and support they need; but we must do more.

We also will hear today about the risk of suicide for our nation's veterans. As was reported earlier this year by Dr. Kaplan from Portland State University and, subsequently, in various news reports, veterans in our nation are at twice the risk of suicide as non-veterans. With the number

and needs of veterans ever-increasing in our nation, we must ensure that our mental health infrastructure is prepared to handle their unique needs. I will continue to work with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and our community-based mental health network to ensure that the needs of our veterans are met.

I know that SAMHSA and the VA, earlier this year, worked to address the unique needs of veterans who call the national suicide hotline. For instance, when veterans call the hotline, they will be linked to professionals who specialize in the needs of veterans. Since the implementation in July, there have been nearly 8,000 calls made by veterans looking for a lifeline, including 177 from my home state of Oregon.

I also look forward to hearing testimony on the needs of our aging veterans as it relates to long-term care. We know that in our nation, almost two-thirds of people receiving long-term care are over age 65, many of whom are veterans. We also know that this number is expected to double by 2030. There are many demands and constraints on the VA system, as well as the Medicare and Medicaid systems, to ensure that aging veterans' health needs are being met.

The Senate Special Committee on Aging has a long and distinguished history of leading the Senate on issues of great importance to our aging population. We have an opportunity today to focus the on-going and critical needs of our new and aging veterans and their physical and mental health needs.

To help us to better understand this need, we will first hear from Senator Bob Dole, a friend of mine and a great American patriot. Senator Dole served and was injured twice during World War II while serving in Italy. For those injuries, he was hospitalized for more than three years. He was a distinguished legislator in this body and in the House for many years where he was a strong supporter of veterans' issues, including a pivotal role in the creation of the World War II memorial on our National Mall. Most recently, he served as co-chair of the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors.

I have only known Senator Dole to speak from the heart on these issues and I look forward today to hear his personal story and recommendations on how we can care for our aging veterans.

With that, I will turn it over to Senator Kohl.