

Michaud Holds Congressional Field Hearing on Veterans Issues in Sanford, Maine

Sunday, April 20 2008

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"It is appropriate that we had this hearing in Maine - our state is home to about 154,000 veterans," said Michaud. "Maine is a very rural state and because of this we face many unique challenges in providing health care to our veterans. Many have to travel long distances for care, creating a significant burden for veterans and their families. When the United States made a commitment to care for veterans, we made the commitment to care for all veterans - male and female, urban and rural."

Recent statistics put out by the Department of Veterans Affairs show that, nationwide, nearly 40% of veterans live in rural areas. This number is expected to grow in the near future, as an even higher number soldiers in the Guard and Reserves are from rural areas. Providing access to healthcare to rural veterans poses some unique challenges to the VA. Long distances and travel times, the economic burden of transportation and lack of easily accessible specialty care are a few of these challenges.

Women comprise about 14% of current active duty and Guard and Reserve forces and the ratio of enrollment for female veterans to male veterans has increased over the last decade. In FY 2007, women comprised 5.2% of all veteran users nationwide and VA has projected that this percentage will increase to 8.1% by 2011. Approximately 42% of OEF/OIF women veterans are enrolled in VA healthcare and 28.5% used VA healthcare in 2007.

Women veterans present the VA with some unique health needs, different from their male counterparts. For example, gynecological

services, mammography and cervical cancer screening are health needs unique to women. Women are also much more likely than men to have experienced military sexual trauma.

"The VA has instituted some innovative programs to provide much needed services to our veterans, but we need to make sure they have the authority to cover all needs. These programs need to work for the veteran," said Michaud. "I appreciated the thoughtful and compelling testimony from all of the witnesses today. As I have said in the past, the best insights and solutions can most often times be found outside of Washington. This was a very productive hearing. There is no doubt that I will take much of what was discussed here today back to Washington."

Michaud has passed a number of important provisions into law which helps rural veterans. Legislation that he authored established a VA Office of Rural Health Care and required the VA to develop a plan to improve the access and quality of care for enrolled veterans, including measures for meeting the long-term care and mental health needs of veterans through community based outpatient clinics. Michaud also authored a provision which requires the VA to conduct an extensive outreach program to veterans who reside in rural communities and who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. To specifically improve access locally, Michaud passed language into law that requires VA to develop business plans for enhanced access to outpatient care in Maine. Michaud is also a cosponsor of a bill introduced by Congressman Allen that will help veterans applying for disability compensation for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"Today's hearing offered Maine veterans a voice in their struggle to obtain the physical and mental health benefits they have so richly earned," said Congressman Tom Allen. "It is our job in Congress to give the VA what it needs to address the physical or mental health problems of our veterans, and we in Congress must continue to work to remove the bureaucratic red tape that allows suffering veterans to slip through the cracks."

The Health Subcommittee has had an ambitious schedule this Congress. Chairman Michaud has held hearings on Traumatic Brain Injury, PTSD, mental health, long-term care, women and minority veterans, access to care in rural areas, and Gulf War exposures. For more information on the activities of the Health Subcommittee, visit their website at <http://veterans.house.gov/health/>.

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Witness List

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Subcommittee on Health Hearing on

"Women, Rural, and Special Needs Veterans"

Panel 1

Dana Doliber

Veteran, Maine

Panel 2

Peter W. Ogden

Director, Bureau of Veterans Services, State of Maine

Gary I. Laweryson

Chairman, Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee

Kelley J. Kash

Chief Executive Officer, Maine Veterans' Homes

David Hartley, PhD, MHA

Director, Maine Rural Health Research Center

Professor, Muskie School of Public Service

University of Southern Maine

Panel 3

Joseph E. Wafford

Supervisory National Service Officer, Department of Maine

Disabled American Veterans

Donald A. Simoneau

Past Department of Maine Commander

The American Legion

John Wallace

Maine State Council President

Vietnam Veterans of America

James Bachelder

Maine Department Commander

Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Panel 4

Brian G. Stiller

Center Director, Togus VA Medical Center

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs