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Opening Statement of Ranking Member Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.

Hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs FY 2012 Budget

March 16, 2011

Thank you for yielding Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Secretary we all are grateful for your distinguished service to our nation as a soldier, as Chief of Staff to the Army and now as Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Mr. Chairman, there is no budget more deserving of our attention than the VA. We have asked a new generation of heroes to sacrifice on behalf of our country and we have an obligation to take care of them when they come home.

Since the 110th Congress, this committee has added \$27 billion to the VA's discretionary budget. We provided a 75% increase to the Veterans Health Administration that has resulted in an additional 3,389 doctors, 14,316 nurses, 145 Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, 92 new Vet Centers, and 70 mobile Vet Centers that serve rural communities.

In addition, the Congress created advance appropriations for the three medical accounts, creating a stable and uninterrupted source of funding for medical care a year in advance. Given the difficulties we have faced passing a CR this year, having that foresight has proven to be quite valuable.

We also established a historic new GI Bill for tuition assistance, educational materials, and housing assistance for our newest generation of veterans. As of October, 2010, 442,000 students were receiving this benefit.

We provided \$13.4 billion Agent Orange supplemental funding to finance benefit payments to over 153,000 veterans and their survivors for presumptive disability claims associated with service in Vietnam.

We added 10,200 disability claims processors – resulting in a 70% increase in claims processed (from 774,378 claims processed in 2006 to 1,318,753 projected in 2011).

Mr. Secretary, the FY 2012 budget has not received a lot of attention because we have not completed the FY 2011 funding. But based upon my review, the FY 2012 budget request will provide the Department of Veterans Affairs with the resources you need to continue improving the quality and accessibility to healthcare, benefits and services for our nation's veterans.

We all know that the VA can improve the service it provides to our veterans, but as George Washington once said "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, is directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated."

Mr. Chairman, I hope that as we complete FY 2011 and move on to FY 2012, the words spoken by George Washington will resonate with this committee, and that we continue to do all we can for our Nation's Veterans.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

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