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For immediate release: Friday, March 18, 2011

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Ranking Member Bishop Questions Secretary Shinseki on Claims Backlog, Homeless Veterans Issues

WASHINGTON – Representative Sanford D. Bishop, Jr. (D-GA) questioned Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Eric Shinseki about the large backlog of veterans claims and the department’s progress with remediating the homeless veterans problems during a House Appropriations Subcommittee hearing earlier this week. Rep. Bishop, the Ranking Member of the Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies, heard fresh concerns about these issues during two town hall meetings he held in his district last month.

The VA has undertaken major steps to improve their performance and customer service under the Obama Administration. Last week, the Inspector General (IG) of the Department of Veterans Affairs testified before the subcommittee and Ranking Member Bishop questioned the IG about the claims backlog, and whether the IG believed that the technology designed to reduce the problem will be successful.

At the hearing this week, Rep. Bishop also raised concerns about the department's ability to modernize the benefits and claims process, and its ability to improve the culture of customer service provided to veterans with Secretary Shinseki.

"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," Ranking Member Bishop said at the hearing. "We all know that the VA can and should improve the service and support it provides to our veterans, and we must work together to address the huge challenges facing the department."

The Milcon/VA Appropriations Subcommittee has added \$27 billion to the VA's budget since 2007, including a 75% increase to the Veteran's Health Administration. In his testimony before the Committee, Secretary Shinseki recognized that while the increased funding has helped, and the agency has made some progress, he still has much work to do.

"Our requirements have grown over the past two years as we addressed longstanding issues from past wars and watched the requirements for those fighting the current conflicts grow significantly," said Secretary Shinseki. "These needs will continue long after the last American combatant departs Iraq and Afghanistan."

He added "It is our intent to continue to uphold our obligations to our Veterans when these conflicts have subsided, something that we have not always done in the past. Not upholding these obligations in the past has left at least one generation of Veterans struggling in anonymity for decades. We, who sent them, owe them better."

The hearing also focused on the President's fiscal year (FY) 2012 budget request of \$132 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, an increase of \$5.7 billion, or 10.8 percent, over the 2010 level. Until recently, the FY 2012 budget has not received much attention because Congress has yet to complete work on the FY 2011 funding.

"Based upon my review, the FY 2012 budget request will provide the Department of Veterans Affairs with the resources it needs to continue improving the quality and accessibility to healthcare, benefits and services for our nation's veterans," said Ranking Member Bishop. "I

hope that as we complete FY 2011 and move on to FY 2012, we will remember George Washington's poignant words that '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.'"

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