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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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Shinseki Admits Cuts to VA to Occur Under Sequestration

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Today, at a joint hearing of the House Veterans' Affairs and Armed Services Committees, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Eric Shinseki, confirmed that under sequestration, VA would face cuts, possibly affecting the administration of veterans' benefits and services, stating, "VA is exempt from sequestration except for administrative costs... I don't have a definition of administrative costs right now."

"President Obama publicly said Monday at the VFW Convention that VA is exempt from sequestration, yet the Secretary conceded today that VA would face cuts early next year if a sequester takes place," stated Rep. Jeff Miller, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "Since last August, I have been asking this question and until today, I have received nothing but double speak. I am now demanding that VA and the President define 'administrative costs.' Does this mean closing veterans' hospitals, fewer claims processors to help veterans with their disability compensation, longer wait times for veterans suffering from the invisible wounds of war or those having to bury a loved one, not to mention the possible impact on homeless veterans' programs and research to care for our wounded warriors? Congress, and more important, our veterans, deserve an honest, straight-forward answer."

In the first joint hearing of the two Committees in recent history, Members also addressed serious concerns that the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs were not working fast enough toward a seamless transition for servicemembers leaving the military. Secretary Shinseki noted that "over the next five years, there is the potential for one million serving men and women to either leave military service or demobilize from active duty," raising numerous questions on the already convoluted transition process for veterans.

Wait times for the Integrated Disability Evaluation System, which assists wounded warriors transition from DoD to VA, are already at record highs, the disability claims backlog has tripled in the past four years, and a majority of veterans seeking mental health evaluations wait an average of two months for an appointment.

"Despite repeated assurances from VA and DoD to provide a 'warm handoff,' it is clear that is not happening. Unfortunately, what we heard today, we have heard before. And what is clear is that there are still no tangible results demonstrating that the silos between the departments have been broken down," Miller said. "American know-how put a man on the moon in less than a decade, but 50 years later we can't produce single electronic medical database for our military and veterans in the same span of time? There is clearly something wrong with this system, and the time has come to see real change and real results."

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