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## Serving Our Veterans

April marks the anniversary of both the beginning and the end of the Civil War. In the midst of that war, the newly re-elected President Abraham Lincoln delivered his second inaugural address, one that will live through the ages. He concluded it by calling on his countrymen to "bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

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Almost a century and a half later, the divisions of that war are well behind us, but our obligation to our nation's veterans remains very much before us.

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Ohioans know this. This past week, I got the chance to meet a handful of the nearly 800 people who together volunteered more than 70,000 hours of service to the Chillicothe Veterans Administration Medical Center last year. Approximately two-thirds of these volunteers are veterans themselves.

These volunteers demonstrate that our communities are strengthened when we serve those who have served us. In many ways, veterans across Ohio represent the very character of our nation – sacrificing in times of war and returning home to become teachers and police officers and business and

civic leaders.

But too many of our veterans face difficulties in transitioning from soldier to citizen, or struggle to attain the benefits and services they earned. Veterans in Appalachian Ohio, for example, struggle with access to information about health care and education benefits and job training assistance.

As a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I convened a field hearing in Cambridge on Monday to examine how the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) can better serve veterans in rural areas across Ohio and the nation.

Veterans testified about the lack of information on who actually qualifies as a veteran, and therefore, what resources are available to them when recovering from a service-related injury or returning to school to earn a college degree.

An Army veteran from Belmont County explained that many veterans travel 60 to 100 miles for the nearest VA medical center – in Pittsburgh. Many more veterans, she indicated, are

unaware of local veterans' service offices that can help with utility bills or job training opportunities. Many of these centers provide information on the earned income tax credit (EITC), the low-income home energy assistance program (LIHEAP), or other resources to help veterans during a difficult economy. Veterans in larger cities and suburbs face similar challenges. Veterans with service-connected injuries wait an average of five months to have a disability claim processed. Our state is home to the nation's tenth-largest population of veterans who receive disability compensation, and last year, Ohio's 92,000 veterans received more than \$909 million in disability benefits in 2009.



I'm working closely with U.S. Secretary of Veterans' Affairs General Eric Shinseki to make sure Ohio's veterans get every penny they have earned and deserve. That's why I introduced the Benefit Rating Acceleration for Veterans Entitlements (BRAVE) Act, which would allow veterans who qualify for total disability through the VA benefits rating system to qualify for Social Security benefits as well. I also introduced the Veterans Disability Fairness Act, which would require the VA to address disparities in disability claims ratings.

Secretary Shinseki and I are working to improve the disability compensation for Ohio's veterans by streamlining the outdated processing systems that have created the backlog of claims. Reducing the backlog can also help improve access to VA medical care.

On Wednesday, Secretary Shinseki and I were in Cincinnati to meet with hospital staff and veterans at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center, which serves a veteran population of 143,000 throughout 17 counties in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.



The Cincinnati VA Medical Center, like VA centers across Ohio and the nation, provides some of the best medical care in the nation. But we also know access to that care is a great challenge.

When President Obama and Congress took aggressive steps to rescue the economy – including enacting the Recovery Act – we made historic investments in our nation's VA system.

Because of the Recovery Act, eligible veterans received \$250 to help them and their families during the tough economy. The VA also used Recovery Funds to hire and train 1,500 claims processors to help reduce the backlog and improve the delivery of benefits – this means more staff for Ohio's veterans' agencies.

Secretary Shinseki and I toured the Cincinnati VA Medical Center to see how Recovery Act funds are making long-term infrastructure improvements to VA medical systems. The Cincinnati VA Medical Center will receive millions of dollars to improve its veterans' patient care and services. These investments will help ensure that Ohio veterans receive the comprehensive medical care they need – while creating jobs by rebuilding our nation's infrastructure.

Since President Lincoln's remarks in 1865, Ohio has been a leader in veterans' services. Columbus is home to one of the nation's first chapters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Dayton established the nation's first VA hospital. Ohio has an extraordinary system of county veterans' service offices.

The volunteers in Chillicothe, the veterans in Cambridge, and the VA medical staff in

Cincinnati all carry on this legacy of selfless service to our veterans.

We serve and honor our nation's veterans by making sure that whether he or she lives in a big city or small town in Ohio, a veteran gets the same care and benefits available anywhere else in our nation.

The Veterans' Administration's mission statement should be one we all embrace: ***"To fulfill President Lincoln's promise 'To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan' by serving and honoring the men and women who are America's veterans."***



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