

Thank you Chairman Runyan and Ranking Member McNerney for allowing me to participate in today's hearing. I also want to thank you for holding this hearing—the topics covered today are extremely important, as the welfare of our veterans' mental health and the disability and mental health system that cares for them should be one of Congress's highest priorities.

Military sexual trauma continues to be a pervasive problem in our Armed Forces. DoD data shows that roughly 19,000 *reported* assaults occur each year, and that approximately 85% of these assaults go unreported. It happens to both men and women at increasingly high rates.

Data shows that survivors of MST are very likely to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health conditions, leading many of these veterans to file claims with the VBA. Although the Veterans Health Administration is doing a good job providing counseling and treatment to these victims, there is another side of the VA that in far too many cases fails MST survivors by producing roadblocks and bureaucratic red tape. Countless MST survivors are so affected by the personal assault they experienced that they file PTSD claims with VBA, only to be denied service connection because they cannot prove the assault occurred.

Since most attacks go unreported, leaving no military documentation for victims to produce during the claims process with VBA. VBA's current policy states that they will be very liberal in deciding MST cases, and should accept "secondary markers" as proof the assault occurred—things like counseling reports for PTSD from MST, letters from family members citing behavioral changes, drug and alcohol abuse, etc...

Although it appears VBA's policy gives veterans the benefit of the doubt it has not been my experience and I am of the opinion that the VA is just too big an agency for anything short of a regulation change to fix this problem. No amount of training can ensure raters take the larger picture into account when reviewing these cases. VBA remains vastly inconsistent when deciding MST cases, and what one Regional Office accepts as a secondary marker, another might deny and *still not* be violating VBA policy.

We have to be sure that VBA gives MST survivors the benefit of the doubt, especially when so many of these survivors have lost faith in the system they swore to uphold. That is why I introduced a bill that would provide service connection for MST survivors if they provide a diagnosis of PTSD and a medical nexus stating the PTSD is caused by the assault.

This language in this bill is very similar to the July 2010 change VBA implemented for veterans suffering from PTSD related to fear of hostile enemy action or terrorist activity. These veterans need only show a diagnosis of PTSD, a medical link, and the claimed stressor must be consistent with the types of events consistent with military service.

I want to thank Chairman Runyan for his support of the bill, as I know it would go along way to addressing the issues we continue to hear about from veterans and their families.

Let's be clear. The bad guys in these stories are the perpetrators. They are the villains and the ones who should be held accountable. But by creating a policy that denies justice to the victims and forces

them to spend years or even decades fighting for the benefits they deserve, we are deepening the wounds for these veterans and making it all that much harder for them to get on with their lives.

INTRO for RUTH MOORE

One of today's witnesses, Ms. Ruth Moore, is here from Maine to tell her story. Ruth is an MST survivor who fought the VBA system for many years before she was finally service connected. Ruth and her husband Butch and their daughter Samantha have made the long trip down here today to tell her story. For 25 years Ruth has had to battle with the Navy, the VA and her own memories. I don't think any of us can really appreciate all of what Ruth has been through and we can't appreciate how brave she is to come here today and tell her story. This isn't an easy thing for Ruth to do, but I know she is doing it because if she is silent—if all the survivors of MST are silent—the problem will never go away. And she knows how important it is for other survivors to know they are not alone.

Ruth talked to a newspaper reporter in Maine last week, and when he asked her what her biggest fear about testifying was, she said "That they will hear the words, but won't understand the depth of it." I hope each of us on hear today takes the time to listen to Ruth and understand what she is saying.