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Board of Advisors
Operation Truth
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First I'd like to thank Congressman Shays and all the members of the subcommittee for organizing this hearing.

I am here today on behalf of Operation Truth, the nation's first and largest Iraq War veterans organization. We represent member veterans in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Guam. Our mission is to amplify the voice of the Troops.

Along with my fellow veterans, I hope to provide a Soldier's perspective on the issues addressed in the GAO report.

As a chemical and biological officer stationed in Baghdad, I was the guy who had to answer questions like, "Is this anthrax vaccine going to make me sick?"

It was up to me to tell the Troops that the things we were doing to them were keeping them safe – that we were shielding them from as much risk as possible. But war is a messy, imperfect business, and nothing should be taken for granted.

Was the anthrax vaccine necessary? Absolutely. Did it make some people sick? Yes. Will we know the long-term health effects of the vaccine if we don't step up efforts *now* to monitor the situation? No.

That is the crux of this issue: an ounce of prevention now will far outweigh the pound of cure needed if, in the future, we are left to guess at the conditions our Troops faced.

The bottom line is that when Soldiers come back from war, they're often sick. Very rarely do we have the opportunity to collect good data on why that's the case. Now is the time to rigorously enforce the collection and reporting of data on occupational and environmental hazards for our Troops in Iraq.

This is an opportunity to do the right thing. It will save money in the long run, provide better information to our doctors and researchers, and most importantly, go a long way towards providing better health care for our Troops.

Today, many of our Troops are not convinced that their health and well-being is a priority for the government. And who can blame them?

There is currently no plan in place for evaluating the long-term health care needs for

Veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, even though organizations like Operation Truth have been calling on Congress and the Department of Defense to come up with a strategy for over a year now.

And what's more, the continuing controversy over funding shortfalls at the Department of Veteran's Affairs demonstrates an inexcusable level of disregard for the impending health needs of the more than one-million uniformed men and women who have served tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are plenty of great folks working hard at the V.A., including my mother, who helps run a VA CBOC back home in Indiana. These people need to be given the resources required to do their job, and our Troops need to know that when they come back from war, they will return to the best health care we can offer.

In today's edition of the Washington Post, Operation Truth has placed an ad calling on President Bush and Congress, in no uncertain terms, to clean up the V.A. funding mess immediately, and to provide the leadership needed to ensure that our Troops and Veterans don't get shortchanged.

The problems revealed in the GAO report should be addressed with the same level of urgency. We've had Troops on the ground in Iraq for well over two years now, and we cannot wait any longer to make their health needs a top priority.

The guidelines for health-hazard surveillance exist, as noted in the report – the result of previous Congressional hearings similar to this one today. Now Congress must demand that the Department of Defense correct the problems that our commanders in the field face when they try to follow those guidelines, and the hurdles our doctors, nurses and researchers run up against when they try to put that field research to good use.

Reporting must be standardized between the branches of service, and classification policies must be reevaluated to ensure that they don't needlessly jeopardize the health of our Troops. The Department of Defense must work more closely with the V.A. to better anticipate the health needs of our returning Troops.

On behalf of your constituents, you should not tolerate continued foot-dragging when it comes to the well-being of our men and women in uniform. They must know that the full resources of Congress are being brought to bear on their behalf – that they won't have to fight a second war for adequate health care when they return home.

Our Troops should know that not just their country, but also their government, is committed to their well-being.