

Good morning. I first and foremost want to thank the brave soldiers at Walter Reed for allowing us to be here with you today. Everybody here is mindful of what you have done and how you've answered the call for this country without distinction from party or any other factor. Your service, patriotism, and sacrifice are an inspiration to all of us, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

I also want to welcome members of the National Security and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee. I felt it was vital that we convene this hearing at Walter Reed to see and hear for ourselves whether the horrific stories we've all read and heard about are true.

While I intend for this subcommittee to conduct hearings and investigations into many areas of our defense, homeland security, and foreign policy, I can think of no more important topic for our very first hearing than the proper care of our nation's wounded soldiers.

Walter Reed has long been perceived as the model in taking care of our nation's soldiers when they returned home from battle. However, recent news reports revealed the appalling conditions some of the soldiers here at Walter Reed had to live in as they recuperated from their battle injuries. Unsanitary living quarters – particularly at Building 18, with rats and cockroaches, with holes in the ceilings, and with black mold on the walls – are totally unacceptable.

I think everyone can agree that this is flat-out wrong. But this is only the tip of the iceberg. Far too often, soldiers at Walter Reed wait months, if not years, in limbo, and they must navigate through broken administrative processes and layers upon layers of bureaucracy to get basic tasks accomplished.

Today, we will hear firsthand of the conditions and lack of respect our soldiers and their families have received. I want to thank Staff Sergeant Dan Shannon, Corporal Dell McLeod and his wife Annette, and Specialist Jeremy Duncan for your bravery and service in sharing your experiences with us today on our first panel of witnesses. I understand that you are frustrated and you should be.

Let me be clear – this is absolutely the wrong way to treat our troops, and serious reforms need to happen immediately.

Over the past month, the perception of Walter Reed has gone from the flagship of our military health system to a facility with very serious problems. And this subcommittee wants some answers.

I want to thank Major General Weightman, the former Commander of Walter Reed; Lieutenant General Kiley, the Army's Surgeon General and also a former Commander of Walter Reed; General Cody, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army and the Army's point person on this issue, and General Peter Schoomaker, the Army Chief of Staff, for also being with us today.

I look forward to hearing from you about why all our wounded soldiers have not been getting the care and living conditions they deserve. I also want to hear what we're going to do about it.

I want to stress that this is an investigative hearing, and not an inquisition. Our purpose is to get to the bottom of things, and to get honest answers. And it will take our cooperative efforts – all of us working together – to make sure the broken system is fixed quickly.

That all being said, I do have very serious concerns and many, many questions.

- First, is this just another horrific consequence of the terrible planning that went into our invasion of Iraq? Did the fact that our top civilian leaders predicted a short war, where we'd be greeted as liberators, lead to a lack of planning for the worse in terms of adequate resources and facilities devoted to the care of wounded soldiers?

- Are we headed down this same path again with the President's surge or are we prepared this time for the increase of injuries, patients, and wounded veterans? What concrete steps have been taken and are being taken as a reaction to the President's surge to make sure that every soldier gets cared for properly?

- Did this Administration's ideological push for privatization put the care of our wounded heroes at risk? A September 2006 memorandum this committee has obtained describes how the Army's decision to privatize was causing an exodus of "highly skilled and experienced personnel" from Walter Reed and that there was fear that "patient care services are at risk of mission failure."

- Did the fact that Walter Reed is scheduled to close in 2011 because of BRAC, the Base Realignment and Closure process, decisions contribute to unacceptable conditions at Building 18 and elsewhere?

And with a Defense Department budget of over \$450 billion, this isn't a case of there not being there not being enough money to take care of our wounded soldiers; this is a case of lack of proper prioritization and focus.

More and more evidence is appearing to indicate that senior officials were aware for several years of the types of problems recently exposed by the excellent reporting of Dana Priest and Anne Hull with the Washington Post.

These are not new or sudden problems – rats and cockroaches don't burrow and infest overnight, mold and holes in ceilings don't occur in a week. And complaints of bureaucratic indifference have been reported on for years.

Moreover, this committee, under former Chairmen Davis and Shays, has been investigating over the last several years problems faced by our wounded soldiers, including those at Walter Reed, and I want to thank those Members for their leadership. I also want to thank Congressman Peter Welch from Vermont and others on this Subcommittee for their tireless efforts here.

Where does the buck stop? There appears to be a pattern developing here that we've seen before – first deny, then try to cover-up, then designate a fall guy. In this case, I have concerns that the Army is literally trying to whitewash over the problems.

I appreciate the first steps that have been taken to rectify the problems at Walter Reed and to hold those responsible accountable, but we need sustained focus here and much more needs to be done.

I also, unfortunately, fear these problems go well beyond Walter Reed; that there are problems systemic throughout the military healthcare system. And as we send more and more troops into Iraq and Afghanistan, the problems are only going to get worse, not better – and we should be prepared to deal with them.

Let me conclude by thanking all of the soldiers who are able to be with us today, for their sacrifice on all our behalf. We all agree our soldiers deserve the best care possible, so let's give them the respect and gratitude they rightly deserve. They have earned it with their dedication, with their patriotism, and with their sacrifice.