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| **For Immediate Release:** | **Contact:** Neal A. Patel |
| May 17, 2016 | 202-224-6244 |

**Heller Files Veterans’ Priorities to Senate THUD/MilCon-VA Bill****(Washington, DC)** – Today, U.S. Senator Dean Heller issued the following statement after filing additional amendments to the combined Transportation, Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies Appropriations Act (THUD) and Military Construction and Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies (MilCon-VA) Appropriations Bill for Fiscal Year 2017. All of the additional amendments deal specifically with our nation’s veterans. “As a leading voice on the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, making sure the concerns of Nevada’s veterans are being heard and addressed has always been my main goal. These five additional priorities are focused on better serving the needs of America’s veterans. Important initiatives, such as preventing bonuses at the VA until the VA claims backlog is reduced, are encompassed in these additional amendments. In Washington, we must always remember to put the needs of those we serve first, especially those, like our veterans, who have sacrificed so much already,” said **Senator Dean Heller**.  **BACKGROUND:****Heller Amendment #3947 Ensuring Completion of the Rural Veterans Burial Initiative*** **Purpose:** This amendment requires the VA to complete its Rural Veterans Burial Initiative.
* **Background:** In 2012, the VA committed to expanding burial options in rural areas through its Rural Veterans Burial Initiative. This Initiative chose eight rural locations to build a small National Veterans Burial Ground within existing public or private cemeteries. These locations included Fargo, North Dakota; Rhinelander, Wisconsin; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Laurel, Montana; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Cedar City, Utah; Calais, Maine; and Elko, Nevada. However, this Initiative is yet to be fully completed as promised, which is why this amendment would ensure the VA keeps its commitment to carrying out this Initiative.  Senator Heller has previously [sent a letter](http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=DC38A0B3-4902-41C7-8641-F491F1E841BE) to the VA requesting completion of this important Initiative.

**Heller Amendment #3948 on VA Disability Claims Reporting*** **Purpose:** This amendment enhances the reporting requirements for statistics related to the VA disability claims backlog and statistics so that Congress has a full understanding of the claims being completed by the VA Regional office in each state versus their veteran constituents’ claims being brokered out to a VA Regional Office in another state.
* **Background:** The VA has been testing out its new National Work Queue in which claims from other states may be filtered into a different Regional Office to be worked on.  As the VA moves to this system, it is important to understand the claims being completed by the specific VARO versus the claims being completed for veterans in that specific state.  As a member of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee and as Co-Chair of the Senate VA Backlog Working Group, Senator Heller has been a strong advocate for [improving the claims process](http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=1299C421-9AAD-43C2-81E9-B621045D8093), as well as [ensuring that disability claims statistics reported](http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/pressreleases?ID=0B244501-CC45-481F-9EE7-300651ACDDD8) to Congress and the public are accurate.

**Heller Amendment #3949 on Veterans Receiving VA Care Closest to Home*** **Purpose:** This amendment ensures veterans, in Nevada and across the nation, can choose where they receive their VA care, regardless of geographical boundaries.
* **Background:** In many instances, a veteran may live closer to a VA facility across state lines than a VA facility within their own state. In the past, veterans have had difficulty with the VA allowing them to choose which VA medical center or clinic they can go to. This amendment would guarantee that veterans have this choice because care should not be based on geographical borders, but what is best and most convenient for that specific veteran. Senator Heller has previously [raised this issue](http://www.heller.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/videos?MonthDisplay=1&YearDisplay=2016) during a Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee hearing.

**Heller Amendment #3950 Prohibiting Bonuses Until the VA Claims Backlog Is Below 10% Nationwide*** **Purpose:** This amendment prohibits bonuses for VA employees involved in the disability claims process until the nationwide backlog average is 10%.
* **Background:** Currently, the VA backlog nationwide is 21.2% (74,000 claims) and more than 1,000 Nevada veterans have waited more than 125 days for a decision, even though the VA had committed to ending the VA claims backlog by 2015.  Despite making progress, the VA backlog has been stagnant around 20% for 8 months.  It is time that the VA keep its commitment to ending the VA backlog and work to cut it in half before offering any more performance awards during the next fiscal year.  Ultimately, Senator Heller expects the VA to completely eliminate the VA claims backlog as it has committed to doing since 2009.

**Heller Amendment #3951 on VA Bonus Transparency*** **Purpose:** This amendment requires the VA to report on the bonuses awarded to critical positions within the VA, including hospital directors, VARO directors, and VISN directors.
* **Background:** The individuals serving as VA Regional Office Directors, VA Medical Center Directors, and Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Directors have a significant amount of control over the quality of veterans’ care on the local level.  Bonuses should be offered as an award for exceptional performance, and Members of Congress—who work closely with these individuals to address challenges on the local level—should be informed of whether individuals in their districts or states are being awarded based on performance. This measure is critical to bringing greater transparency to the VA.

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