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For Immediate Release

Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission Holds a Town Hall Meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida

More than 200 people participated in a town hall meeting hosted by the Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission on February 15, 2006, in St. Petersburg, Florida. During the first of eight fact-finding site visits throughout the United States, the Commission held the town hall meeting to explain why it was established; what the Commission hopes to accomplish; and to hear directly from veterans and their families who traveled from all over Florida.

A presentation describing the Commission and its responsibilities opened the meeting, followed by an open forum, allowing individual members of the public to ask questions, relate their experiences, and make comments on the Commissions' undertaking.

Veterans questioned the Commissioners about how their findings would impact them. Many requested that the Commission look at ways to make navigating the system easier. They commented on how the current system is enmeshed in "bureaucratic red tape" and better communications and appeals processes are needed. Many praised the quality of health care and rating decisions, while lamenting that access to care and timeliness of decisions were real problems.

"Most of us [members of the Commission] are veterans. Most of us have at least one Purple Heart. Most of us fought in at least one war and some in more than that. This Commission was not formed to cut veterans benefits," stated Chairman Terry James Scott in response to concerns voiced during the public comments that the Commission intends to reduce benefits. "This Commission was formed to follow-up on a Commission that occurred in the early 1950s led by General Omar Bradley. The legislated charter given to this Commission offers the first real opportunity in over 50 years to revisit a number of very serious veterans' issues and that's what we intend to do. And I can tell you that we are very interested in preserving veterans' benefits for the future for the young men and women who serve after we're gone."

The Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission, an independent, bipartisan body created by Public Law 108-136 and appointed by the President and leaders of Congress, is mandated to study the benefits and services intended to compensate and assist veterans and their survivors for disabilities and deaths attributable to military service. The Commission is dedicated to conducting a thorough, objective, and impartial analysis of the full range of programs that are intended to meet the needs of disabled veterans and survivors.

The St. Petersburg/Tampa area was selected based on Commission criteria that included the concentration of veterans, active-duty service members and National Guard and Reserves, and the location of Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and Department of Defense facilities, with particular interest in transition activities.

The Commission plans to hold similar town hall meetings in San Antonio, TX; Chicago, IL; St. Louis, MO; Atlanta, GA; San Diego, CA; Boston, MA; and Seattle, WA. For details regarding locations, dates and times, please visit the Commission website at <http://www.vetscommission.org> or email veterans@vetscommission.intranets.com.

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