Congressman Tom Udall (NM-3)
HVAC Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs
Hearing on the VA IG Report
October 20, 2005

Mr. Chairman,

I would like to recognize and thank New Mexico Veterans' Services Secretary John Garcia for testifying during today's hearing. We in New Mexico know Secretary Garcia well, and know of his dedication and loyalty to our veterans. It is not uncommon for a veteran to walk into his office and to speak directly with him about concerns and issues of importance. And I know that the Secretary is as concerned and angry as I am with the manner with which the VA has proceeded on the PTSD matter.

It seems that time and again we hear the larger facts about PTSD: how it affects 11.5 percent of all veterans; how nearly nine out of ten veterans with PTSD demonstrate signs of other disorders, including depression, alcohol and substance abuse, or anxiety; how the number of veterans diagnosed with PTSD has risen while the number of services being offered by the VA has dropped; how the stigma of PTSD is still prevalent throughout the military and prevents many veterans from seeking care – until it may be too late.

However, even with all the facts and figures, the individual stories of struggle are sometimes lost, and PTSD becomes simply another medical term, another column in the books. And unfortunately, this became the perspective of the VA. In August, it was immediately clear that the VA's review of 72,000 PTSD cases meant something different to them than it did to the veterans suffering from PTSD. To the VA, it was a process for seeking out incomplete cases and finding voids in paperwork that needed to be filled. The IG report that catalyzed the review included charts and graphs and made suggestions for action.

To veterans, though, the announcement that their case might be reviewed was not seen as simply another bureaucratic process. It was, for many, a jolting realization that the day-to-day struggle they endure was being questioned and that their request for help to deal with this struggle needed external validation. For those who live with PTSD, the review did not mean a paperwork review as much as it meant a personal attack on what is already a sensitive issue.

Last week, a veteran in my district took his life after dealing with PTSD for years and years. He can certainly be perceived as one statistic within the larger, tragic figure of those veterans who contemplate or act on suicidal thoughts. But he can also be seen as he should be, as a Vietnam Vet, decorated with the Purple Heart and other commendations. He was a soldier who fought bravely and honorably for his country. Involved in local veterans' organizations, he helped out at events and with other veterans – and all the while he struggled to deal with PTSD. Even though his case was well documented and he was in no danger of finding his compensation or medical assistance benefits revoked,

he was greatly shaken by the announcement of the VA review, and frequently inquired whether he would be losing the support he did receive. He believed, as so many veterans do, that he was being forced to prove himself yet again. It is that belief that makes veterans so angry and so frustrated with this process.

I believe the VA's intentions to bring clarity and accountability to PTSD cases were not in any way meant to harm our veterans. But I believe the manner in which they proceeded with the review – without any input from mental health professionals concerning the risk of harm to veterans with sever psychiatric symptoms - has done far more harm than good. It is important that we compile facts and figures and that we be concerned with the larger picture. It is more important that we not forget veterans who have borne the battle and now struggle with PTSD, and how our actions affect them. I have called, and will continue to call, for a halt to the review. The VA must reevaluate the process it is using in this review and must take into account how it is affecting veterans. It is better that we stop this review before more lives are lost, rather than continue with troublesome and tragic consequences.

Thank you again, Secretary Garcia, for your presence and testimony today, and a personal thank you for your tireless work on behalf of our New Mexico veterans.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.