

A few minutes with Admiral Michael Mullen



Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff takes questions during a town hall meeting at West Virginia University.

By Ray Luppe



DoD photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chad J. McNeeley, U.S. Navy

Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, conducted a town hall meeting on the campus of West Virginia University in Morgantown in April. Mullen spoke at length about transitioning veterans and upholding availability of service member benefits.

On Transitioning to VA Support

“Many (service members) transition through the (Veterans Administration) and we’re not communicating from one organization to another,” Mullen said. “And the scope of the challenges we have to meet the needs, in particular the wounds of these wars ... the Pentagon can’t do it, the VA can’t do it. The only way that I think that scope and scale can be met is through communities throughout the land.”

“There are health care and in some cases severe medical needs associated with these wars,” Mullen said. “And these are individuals who have done exactly what our country asked them to and have, in many cases, paid the ultimate sacrifice. From my perspective, we owe them as a country. We need to do everything we can to pay that debt and meet those needs. And we must meet those needs for the rest of their lives.”

Mullen continued, “These are the same people about whom I care dearly when they are serving on active duty. I just want to reassure you of that that care doesn’t change be-

cause they move out of the service and back to their communities. So, more than anything else, it is my goal to try to advocate for and ignite and energize a dedicated effort for communities throughout the land to meet the needs, educational, training and employment needs of these young people who have sacrificed so much.”

On Employing Veterans

On the benefits of hiring veterans, Mullen said, “Veterans bring a maturity. They bring leadership. They bring a life experience. They bring a dedication they may not have had when they were 17, 18, or 19 years old, when they were coming out of high school or in their first couple years of college. But they clearly have it now. And they can make a big difference for an awful lot of institutions.”

On Don’t Ask – Don’t Tell policy

The subject of gays and lesbians serving in the military was brought up by two members of the Morgantown audience.

Admiral Mullen responded this way, “The Department of Defense has initiated a review of the Don’t Ask – Don’t Tell policy enacted during the Clinton Administration. We are in the beginning months in the review process. We don’t have a

Admiral Michael Mullen ★★★★★



DoD photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Molly A. Burgess

lot of data. We've got a lot of strongly held feelings. We've got strongly held views. We've got anecdotal information. So, out of the period of the next several months we want to meet with the force and understand from the individuals it will impact most."

Mullen continued, "The review group has a specific tasking to include making sure we hear input from the gay and lesbian soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen as we proceed through it. And what the group has done is set up a mechanism to do that indirectly by the use of a third party." He explained the third party is being used "so as not to jeopardize (service members' careers) nor to put a leader in a position to say that, now that you have come forward you have to move on the law, which we do, quite frankly. But I am comfortable with the mechanisms we have in place to assure individual privacy."

On Disability Benefits

A West Virginia staff sergeant wounded in combat in Iraq had a question about the disparity in disability ratings from the Army and the Veterans Administration.

On this point, Mullen said, "We had a system when these wars started which required an advocacy approach where, literally from the day you are injured, the fight was on for what your disability was going to be. And we'd made it extraordinarily difficult, extraordinarily bureaucratic and we continue in ways to do that."

Mullen offered this point to help this soldier and the rest of the audience understand that the message has reached the top. "We are going to one system," he said. "We're not going to get there fast enough from my perspective but we're going to get there and I believe the outcome will be the VA system. The system needs to be working for you, not against you."

On Rural Veterans

Several members of the audience voiced concerns regarding how service members from West Virginia and other rural states were getting shortchanged on VA healthcare and other

benefits. The admiral addressed them this way.

"It isn't just veterans," Mullen said. "We have active duty members, members of the Guard right now, who live in places where support is difficult to get for themselves. There has to be an active undertaking to make sure we're in touch with (the rural service member). We know they are there. We understand from a leadership standpoint what those needs are and we must start matching up needs and resources. It's doable. It's not an infinite problem. But I think we have to recognize that it's the Department of Defense. It's the VA, and it is communities all working together as the best way we can meet these needs."

On Military Training and Civilian Jobs

One participant at the meeting asked the Chairman about certification of military training being given civilian job equivalency certification.

"In the Navy back in 2001 or 2002, we started to move in that direction in terms of putting individuals in that position to have clear certifications that were easily recognizable, should an individual both attain it and transition out of the Navy," Mullen said. "I know the Navy has continued on in that vein but I don't know if we're doing that in the other services."

On our Servicemen and Women

"These are and will continue to be extraordinary times," Mullen said. "I have the privilege of serving with and leading over 2.2 million men and women; Active, Guard and Reserve. And it is the privilege of a lifetime."

Mullen continued, "These young men and women; they are the best military I have ever been associated with in the 40 plus years I've been doing this. They have sacrificed. Over 5,400 have paid the ultimate sacrifice in these two wars. Tens of thousands, literally hundreds of thousands; visibly and invisibly wounded, have made a huge difference, and they are the best of the best!"



DoD photo by Chad J. McNeeley, U.S. Navy