

# Veterans, their advocates tell Murray they need jobs, housing

## Debt panelists take role seriously, senator says

By KATHIE DURBIN  
*Columbian staff writer*

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, in Vancouver Tuesday for a "listening session" with veterans and their advocates, said she'll do her best to protect veterans' benefits as she steps into a high-profile role as co-chair of the new deficit-reduction supercommittee. The 12-member panel is assigned the task of finding another \$1.5 trillion in federal budget cuts by Thanksgiving.

But in response to pundits who say her spending decisions could be influenced by major defense industry campaign donors, Murray said no one should prejudge any

of the committee members — three Democrats and three Republicans each from the Senate and House. By law, the committee must begin its work by mid-September.

"I have reached out individually to each member of the committee," Washington's senior senator told *The Columbian*. "I've been impressed that they consider this a serious responsibility." Not only is the nation's fiscal health at stake, she said, but committee members understand that they must "show that a democracy can work."

"The pundits and journalists should not pigeonhole any one of us," she said. "That will allow us to move forward."

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Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., convened a panel on veterans' issues (including Clark College President Bob Knight, right) at the Fort Vancouver Artillery Barracks Tuesday. Murray will also co-chair the new congressional deficit reduction supercommittee.

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Murray received \$187,000 in defense contributions in last year's re-election campaign, including \$136,000 from Boeing, which employs nearly 78,000 workers in Washington. Defense spending could be slashed by \$500 billion over the next decade if the new committee fails to win approval for its deficit-reduction plan in both the House and Senate.

Asked whether she is committed to protecting entitlements, including Medicare and Medicaid, Murray said, "I'm not drawing any lines in the sand."

She conceded that when Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid asked her to co-chair the committee, "it was an overwhelming task." Murray, a member of the leadership team, chairs the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and serves on the Budget Committee and the Health, Education, Labor and Pension Committee.

She also heads the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, which is responsible for getting Democrats elected to the Senate next year.

At Tuesday's listening session, Murray got an earful about the problems facing military veterans who are struggling to make the transition to civilian life and find jobs. Vancouver City Councilman Larry Smith co-chaired the 90-minute session, which featured a panel of six and drew an audience of more than 80 to the Fort Vancouver Artillery Barracks. Smith spent 27 years in the Army.

The first woman ever to chair the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, Murray said, "It's up to us to be there when our veterans come home, and to hold the nation's feet to the fire" in insisting that the government honor the contract it makes with every person who enlists in the nation's armed forces.

She is the sponsor of a bill that would make skills training mandatory for every service member upon discharge.

## Huge backlog

Panelist Morris Giesler of Vancouver, a 20-year Air Force veteran who is active in the American Legion, said the Department of Veterans Affairs backlog of unprocessed claims for benefits is "unacceptable." Even a simple claim can take six months for the agency to process, he said, and appeals of DVA decisions can stretch to 24 months.

Nationally, the department has more than 500,000 claims pending and 91,000 on appeal, Giesler said.

Roxanne Boose, Vancouver-Longview coordinator of the Washington National Guard's Family Assistance Center, said some veterans enrolled in college wait up to a year and half for their education benefit claims to be processed. Many come to her saying, "I can't afford gas to get to class every week," she said.

Clark College President and 21-year Army veteran Bob Knight, also a panelist, said vets enrolled at the college face many hurdles under a post-Sept. 11 GI Bill that made significant changes to veterans' education benefits. The current



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About 80 veterans and veterans' advocates attended Tuesday's listening session with Sen. Patty Murray to discuss the challenges veterans face. The need for jobs and housing assistance were among the issues brought to Murray's attention.

## Murray helps Camas celebrate purchase of Fallen Leaf park

By RAY LEGENDRE  
Columbian staff writer

CAMAS — The bucolic Fallen Leaf Lake stood silent in the background as U.S. Sen. Patty Murray addressed a small audience gathered for a Tuesday afternoon ceremony recognizing the city's purchase of 55 acres of land, including the lake.

Murray, D-Wash., celebrated the leadership and teamwork it took to make the \$2.05 million local project come to fruition then turned her remarks to an item of national importance with trillions of dollars in the balance.

Murray was recently named the co-chair of a "supercommittee" tasked with developing a debt-reduction plan. She participated in the Fallen Leaf Lake Park dedication ceremony after holding a 90-minute meeting with veterans in Vancouver.

"As many of you know, I have taken

on a tough new challenge that will create a lot of stress in my life," Murray told the Camas crowd without the benefit of a microphone. The device lost power earlier in the program.

Murray predicted she would reflect on people enjoying the tranquil Fallen Leaf Lake when her work resumed in Washington, D.C.

"Know that in the back of my head I'm remembering you," she told the crowd before being whisked off into a Subaru en route to an unknown destination.

Murray's closing remarks caught the ear of Camas City Administrator Lloyd Halverson.

"There was an important glimpse into the senator's responsibilities when she talked about how beautiful and calming (the lake) was and talked about the stresses" she would face in Washington, D.C., Halverson observed.

law cuts off funding for veterans during the breaks between academic quarters, denies in-state tuition to Oregon veterans attending the college under bi-state reciprocity agreements, and puts bureaucratic roadblocks in the way of veterans applying for GI benefits, Knight said.

"It's become very time- and labor-intensive" to apply for those benefits, he said. "What used to take an hour now

takes two or three hours." In addition, he said, the new law makes it almost impossible for vets to get work-study grants in jobs that complement the fields they are studying.

Retired Army Major Gen. Curtis Loop, an Army Reserve Ambassador to the state of Oregon, said that over the past 10 years Army reservists and members of the National Guard have proved their worth in combat, with more than 107,000

deployed in combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The most urgent thing these veterans need is jobs," he said. "I would encourage some kind of incentive for employers who hire veterans."

Pam Brokaw, who heads a program to assist women veterans in the transition to civilian life, said her clients "often don't have the same sense of camaraderie" they experienced during deployment once they come home. One obstacle, she said, is a federal Housing and Urban Development rule that prevents single women from using veterans' benefits to live in group living arrangements, even though they would benefit from such arrangements.

Kevin Nixon of the Longview Housing Authority, a case manager for a homeless veterans' program, said the vouchers his clients use likely won't be available in the future due to budget cuts. In fact, the rules already are changing, he said.

"A veteran is now no longer considered chronically homeless if he's been in housing for 90 days," Nixon said. Yet the veterans enrolled in his program commit to a two-year program, so many likely will become homeless again.

"It becomes a numbers game," he said. "They are curtailing a program that was working."

Former Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard, a retired Army colonel, said the reality is that veterans' programs won't see new funding any time soon.

"Our country is hurting," Pollard said. "Our goal is to hold on to what we have." Addressing Murray, he added, "I am glad you are co-chair of that committee, but I wish you a lot of luck."

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