

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2010 Budget for Veterans' Programs

March 10, 2009

Today, the Committee begins its review of Fiscal Year 2010 funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs. When we talk about the VA, we are talking about people - those who have served and the nearly 280,000 VA employees who work on their behalf.

The budget outline presented by the President last month appears to be a good one which reflects many important priorities of his Administration. From my vantage point, as Chairman of this Committee, I am committed to ensuring that veterans receive quality benefits and services. When troops are sent into battle on behalf of our nation, there is a commitment to care for them when they return home. They must be given the best health care and rehabilitation. They must be fairly compensated for their injuries. And now, in this time of war, VA must have the resources it needs to carry out its mission.

The troop surge in Iraq and the increases in Afghanistan will soon be felt at VA. To date, this generation of veterans, as a group, has been slow to come to VA for benefits and services. VA must be prepared to reach out to those now coming home and bring them into the system. While many details of the Administration's final budget proposal have yet to be presented, the Committee is required to submit its Views and Estimates to the Budget Committee by the end of this week. I intend to meet that deadline, but doing so will not complete our work on next year's budget. We will evaluate the President's final budget once it is received, and make additional recommendations.

One of the most pressing issues facing VA is ensuring timely, sufficient, and predictable funding from year to year. Last month, I introduced legislation, with bi-partisan support, to help secure the timely funding of veterans' health care through advance appropriations. Too often VHA's budget is subject to delay and uncertainty, hampering planning and threatening health care quality. This situation must end.

Another serious issue is the backlog in VA construction. I am eager to learn how the Committee can help the Department complete pending construction projects, so that VA can provide veterans with more access to care in better facilities. There are many other important areas of health care that the Committee is concerned about; such as care in rural areas, the health care needs of women veterans, recruitment and retention of medical providers, research programs, and homelessness among veterans.

On the benefits side of the ledger, timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims and appeals remains a significant problem. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly and without needless delay. The President's budget proposes to invest in better technology, and I am pleased that the Department will invest in the development of rules-based electronic processes to improve accuracy, consistency, and timeliness in claims processing.

As one who knows firsthand the value of education benefits under the GI Bill, I want to hear how VA intends to implement the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

I know that VA shares my commitment to providing a seamless transition, from military to civilian life, for today's servicemembers. VA must be an active partner with the Department of Defense to ensure that troops are cared for appropriately when they transition from active service to veterans' status. I look forward to learning in more detail how the President's Budget responds to this issue.

I am committed to working with the Secretary and my colleagues in Congress, on both sides of the aisle, to ensure that the Department gets what it needs to deliver high quality benefits and services to veterans. We must acknowledge the fact that the needs of veterans are costs of war.

I look forward to our dialogue with Secretary Shinseki, as well as the representatives of veterans service organizations here with us today.

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