

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Daniel K. Akaka

Review of Veterans' Disability Compensation: Benefits in the 21st Century

September 17, 2009

This morning the Committee continues our work on veterans' disability compensation. Specifically, we will focus on issues relating to compensation payments for service-connected disabilities.

Discussions about the veterans' disability compensation system often involve two separate but related elements of how the government pays compensation to those injured in military service. The first part is the timeliness and accuracy of compensation decisions, which we held a hearing on in July. This is an important issue which requires reforming the current process by which VA adjudicates claims for benefits. The Committee agrees that veterans deserve timely, accurate adjudication of their claims for benefits. We are now working to determine how best to meet that goal.

The second issue relates to the factors that determine how much a veteran should be compensated for his or her disability. This is a very complex question that the Committee continues to consider and is the topic for today's hearing.

There are a number of considerations that might be taken into account when we look at what influences how much a veteran is compensated for injuries related to military service. How is a veteran's quality of life affected by a disability? How do we calculate loss of earnings related to the disability? How accurate is VA's current rating schedule? What is the role of rehabilitation in making a disability determination? These are a few of the questions that we are addressing today.

Calculating the appropriate level of compensation for those disabled in service is a complex matter. For example, there is data, based on comprehensive studies, suggesting that some veterans do not receive an appropriate level of compensation – while some others may be overcompensated. As a result, efforts designed to help some veterans could inadvertently hurt others. We need to be deliberate as we work to develop solutions that will result in appropriate reform of the disability compensation system.

Again, I want to welcome everyone to today's hearing. I look forward to the testimony from our two panels and to continuing to work with the many interested parties in the months ahead – as we seek to craft a workable reform of the VA disability compensation system.