

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka - Markup Statement

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

Markup of Pending Health Legislation
November 14, 2007

Aloha. Welcome to today's markup of legislation that is pending before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs.

This is our second markup of this session - the first with Senator Burr serving as our Ranking Member - and it is focused exclusively on health care matters. We have four items on the agenda.

Before we begin the actual markup, I have a comment on the CBS News report on what they are calling "the veteran suicide epidemic." The report that the rate of suicide among veterans is double that of the general population is not only deeply troubling to me, but simply unacceptable. I am especially concerned that so many young veterans appear to be taking their own lives.

I am pleased that earlier this month President Bush signed into law the Joshua Omvig Suicide Prevention Act, legislation that we reported this summer. In light of the grim news in the CBS story, I hope that the sense of urgency which has guided the Committee's extensive action on mental health issues this session will continue.

In particular, I am pleased that the Ranking Member and I have been able to find agreement on a comprehensive and very substantial mental health bill.

For too many veterans, returning home from battle will not bring an end to conflict. They will return home, but the war will follow them in their hearts and minds. Invisible wounds are complicated and wide-ranging, and our solutions must rise to the challenge.

There is no question that action is needed. One in five Iraq War veterans are likely to develop PTSD, as studies have estimated, and this is but one aspect of the mental health challenges faced by veterans.

In April, the Committee held a hearing on veterans' mental health concerns and on VA's response. We heard heart wrenching testimony from the witnesses. Randall Omvig spoke of his son's suicide upon returning from Iraq. Tony Bailey spoke of his son's struggle with substance abuse, and of his death. Patrick Campbell shared his own experience with PTSD and the experiences of his close friends. Witnesses urged us to learn, and they urged us to act.

The provisions of this bill are a direct outgrowth of that hearing and the testimony given by those who have suffered with mental health issues, and by their family members.

This bill addresses the immediate needs of veterans by ensuring high quality mental health services at VA facilities and in their communities. The bill also looks to the future with a renewed focus on research.

Also on the agenda is the Veterans Pain Care Initiative. This bill would enhance VA's pain care management program through better clinical practices and the coordination of research and education. The management of chronic and acute pain is especially critical today as advances in battlefield medicine have allowed many servicemembers to survive injuries that otherwise would have been fatal. Many of these veterans now face conditions such as TBI and polytrauma. Effective pain management is an important part of improving the quality of life for all wounded veterans.

Senator Murray and Craig worked together on the legislation to establish Epilepsy Centers of Excellence within the VA health care system. We know of the elevated risk for seizures among veterans who have suffered a TBI. This underscores the need for a better understanding of epilepsy and more effective treatment strategies.

Finally, we have Senator Brown's legislation directed at fixing the problems associated with the reimbursement procedures for veterans who receive emergency care at non-VA facilities. His field hearing in Ohio unearthed issues with the transfer rules implemented by VA that control reimbursement. This bill will ensure veterans need not worry about where they are treated in an emergency.

In conclusion, I thank all the Members for their participation, and hope that we can move forward in the legislative process in the spirit of bipartisan cooperation. Thank you.