

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Hearing on Easing the Burdens through Employment

November 18, 2009

These are difficult times for many Americans, with an unemployment rate higher than it has been in more than twenty years. Many Americans have given up looking for work because they believe none is available. Many others are only able to find part-time employment. The extent of our challenges is truly staggering.

For our Nation's veterans, especially those who have recently separated from active duty, the search for a job can be particularly difficult. Skills honed on the battlefield are not easily translated to a resume for the civilian job market. The problem is compounded by the need for a period of readjustment to civilian life.

Veterans who have been injured while on active duty, and especially those who are suffering the invisible wounds of war, face an even more daunting task when seeking to find a career. For those thousands of veterans who are homeless, who may be bearing the burdens of drug or alcohol abuse, or are struggling with mental health issues, finding work can seem impossible. Older veterans, and those from other conflicts, may lack the skills necessary to compete in an increasingly high tech job market. Jobs that once were plentiful may simply no longer exist.

Today, we will be focusing on the employment needs of veterans, especially those who have recently separated from active duty and those who face substantial obstacles in the civilian workforce. The goal is to gain input on ways to improve current programs. We also need ideas for new initiatives for transitional programs that emphasize easing burdens through employment and reducing homelessness, among other things.

Veterans make good employees. They have learned discipline, commitment, and the value of hard work. Many employers are eager to hire these brave men and women.

The challenge is matching the right former servicemember with the right career, and addressing any obstacles that may stand in the way of success.

On November 5th, I was privileged to attend the Department of Labor's Annual Salute to Veterans. It was an impressive event led by our lead witness today, the Honorable Ray Jefferson, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training.

I was especially moved by the remarks made by two young veterans: Ms. Dawn Halfaker and Command Sergeant Major Michelle Jones. These remarkable individuals spoke from their hearts about what it means to be a veteran and the challenges that they face. They touched many hearts with their words that day, and we have reason to be proud of them and the hundreds of thousands of others who have honorably served our country in time of need.

I look forward to this testimony and working with all Committee members and advocates to find ways to address the employment needs of veterans.