

Clay Park, Papa Ola Lokahi

Mr. Chairman and Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs:

My name is William Clayton Sam Park. I am of Native Hawaiian ancestry, a disabled veteran, who served as a combat medic during the Vietnam War, and a retired Master Sergeant with 3 years active duty with the U.S. Army and 21 years of service with the Hawai'i Army National Guard. I am presently the Veterans Program Director with Papa Ola Lokahi. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. My comments today are based on my experiences in that role, and in particular with regard to situations faced by our returning OEF/OIF National Guard and Reserve troops as they transition from military to veterans status, and back to their lives in the community. Though the impact of this current war will be my focus, my work on a recent day in which the veterans I served

included an 88 year old WWII veteran from Guam and a 19 year old Oahu Iraq War veteran reminds me to emphasize the message of General Shinseki during his confirmation hearing for the position as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) — we must care for all of our veterans. We cannot allow those who have served their country at any time, in any role, to be neglected.

Having worked with community agencies for the past several years in outreach efforts to our veterans, it is evident to me that the challenges faced by our newest warriors and their families remain great. As I have done in testimony before this Committee in prior years, I would like to use the "stories" of those who come to me to provide you with the human side of the statistics reported to you by officials of the military or the VA.

Let me start with the experience of a full time, National Guard soldier, activated for duty in Iraq and wounded during that

deployment. This individual was medically boarded with a disability rating and then discharged from the National Guard. Since his full time position with the Guard was his employment, and being a member of the Guard is required for that employment, this veteran is now without a job, without adequate income to maintain his former standard of living, and without health benefits for his family.

Next, consider the young man activated with his Reserve Unit for his second tour in Iraq, and sent to the Mainland for training despite the Unit knowing he had a medical condition likely to limit his performance. He was returned to Hawaii because he was

not able to complete assigned functions; his Unit was deployed to Iraq without him. He is now in limbo — he hears from the VA that they cannot help him because he is still an active duty soldier. The military tells him he is not truly on active duty since his unit

is overseas and he is here. Consequently, he has no income and no access to health care.

A young Reservist wife from a State on the Mainland contacted me after reading an airplane magazine article about the community outreach work in Hawaii. Her husband, a medic, was being deployed for the fourth time and she was fearful for his physical and emotional well-being, but did not know where to turn for help. She believed if she spoke with anyone in his Command about her fears, or if word got to Command from any other source she might share her fears with, this would reflect badly on her husband's career. I hear from other wives of physical or verbal abuse by their returning husbands. They are fearful for their children, contemplating divorce, yet knowing that the person they loved before he was deployed is still there somewhere — desperate to find him again, but not knowing how to do that or where to go for help.

In another situation, during a briefing with a Reserve Unit about our community outreach efforts, I could see two young women soldiers in the audience — one with that "thousand yard stare." After the briefing she asked to speak with me "off-line" about her experience while deployed in Iraq. This young woman reminded me of one of my own daughters, and while she cried while telling me of being raped in Iraq by a fellow soldier, I knew I was limited in what I could do. She was fearful that she would be booted out of her unit and possibly even lose her full time federal job if she told anyone what happened. She felt she certainly could not trust that the other soldiers in her unit would be supportive, and anticipated revenge instead of support. One can only wonder how many other women face this situation alone. I am so thankful that she had the courage to trust me, and that I have a network of people and organizations in this community available as resources in such situations. In other situations, when

the individual is eligible for VA care, I do everything possible to bridge the trust and get the person to see one of our caring VA providers.

Since I last testified to this Committee in 2007, I have seen changes in the VA, such as more emphasis on outreach and more visible services for our women veterans. But, as General Shinseki stated - we must care for all of our veterans. There are still those

who do not reach the safety net of the VA through the established channels, or who are frustrated in attempts to seek help by bureaucratic obstacles. Transitioning home is still not easy.

Senator Akaka's comments in 2007 still hold true: "...more can be done to assist veterans and their families in the...reintegration of the wounded or injured veterans into their community."

Mahalo nui loa for allowing me the time to share my mana'o with you today. Mr. Chairman, I would be pleased to answer any questions that you or the members of the Committee have for me at this time. Aloha.