

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Good morning and welcome to the Committee's hearing on VA and DoD cooperation and collaboration. More specifically, today's hearing will focus on the joint VA and DoD Senior Oversight Committee.

This is the eleventh in a series of hearings dating back to January of 2007 addressing how well VA and DoD are working together to meet the needs of returning servicemembers. This level of oversight is indicative of how important this issue is to me and the Committee. Progress has been made in this area over the last year, but much work still remains.

It is clear that the two Departments need to function as one, especially when we have veterans at risk of suicide and severe PTSD. If either DoD or VA mishandles a veteran at risk, the result can be tragic.

This Committee has asked for even greater collaboration to ensure that the Wounded Warrior provisions of the 2008 Defense Authorization Act are carried out appropriately - namely, improvements to the way in which VA and DoD care for veterans with traumatic brain injuries.

VA Secretary Peake recently stated that the two Departments are currently operating under unprecedented levels of cooperation and information-sharing. Secretary Gates recently declared that VA care is inconsistent. Both statements are indeed true. And both statements assure me that more can and should be done.

This Committee will work to strengthen the relationship between the Departments.

Today we will take a closer look at the Senior Oversight Committee, the mechanism VA and DoD established last May to resolve many of the issues related to servicemembers' transition from active duty to veteran status. This special body is co-chaired by VA Deputy Secretary Gordon Mansfield and DoD Deputy Secretary Gordon England.

It is vital that, with the upcoming change in Administration, there be no wavering of the energy and focus the Departments have brought to the issues of coordination and cooperation. Given

the importance of improving the care and transition of wounded servicemembers, it is critical that the Departments sustain their joint efforts for as long as there are servicemembers in combat.

I understand that the current plan is for the Senior Oversight Committee to hand over its responsibilities to the Joint Executive Council in January of next year. I am concerned that this body has neither the resources, nor the leverage within the Departments to carry on this essential work.

Let me be clear: I am committed to sustaining the energy and focus the Senior Oversight Committee has brought to bear on these issues and will take the necessary action to ensure this continues. Without the weight of both of the Department's Secretaries behind solving the problems related to seamless transition, and full-time joint staff to track them, we run the risk of returning to the bureaucratic lethargy which contributed to the Walter Reed scandal. We have come too far to return to those days.

I hope that our witnesses today will provide us with a real sense of the next steps forward. As we learned last month from the testimony of families of wounded warriors, it is apparent that servicemembers - even those who are seriously wounded - are still, remarkably, not getting the attention and assistance they need. We owe more to those who have given so much for our country. Thank you.