

LUISA MIGUEL ANTONIO EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SAN FRANCISCO VETERANS  
EQUITY CENTER

STATEMENT OF  
LUISA MIGUEL ANTONIO  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
SAN FRANCISCO VETERANS EQUITY CENTER  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS  
FILIPINO VETERANS EQUITY ACT OF 2007  
S 57  
APRIL 11, 2007

Chairman Akaka, and distinguished members of the committee, good morning. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak before you on the Filipino World War II Veterans issue. My name is Luisa Antonio. I am the Executive Director of the San Francisco Veterans Equity Center - a seven-year old agency in San Francisco providing direct services to Filipino World War II veterans and their families. I am also speaking on behalf of the National Network for Veterans Equity - a coalition of different organizations advocating justice and equity for the Filipino Veterans. For the last seven years NNVE has been advocating for the passage of the Filipino Veterans Equity Act.

Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, I have both the honor and the pleasure of serving the Filipino World War II Veterans in my capacity as a staff of the San Francisco Veterans Equity Center. These war heroes' stories contributed to my knowledge beyond what history books and documentaries have offered. And I am grateful to those who can bear to remember the bitter and painful memories of the atrocities of war and the sacrifices made under the United States Flag to preserve freedom and democracy. Indeed their stories have driven me to commit myself to the serve our war heroes - the Filipino World War II veterans. But I am also saddened by the fact that these heroes, in their advanced age, are still forced to fight for their right to be recognized for the services they have rendered to this country.

The face of the struggle to pass the equity bill is each and every veteran we serve at the center. Every single time a veteran receives a denial for his claim with the Department of the Veterans Affairs, every single time a staff has to hands a loaf of bread to a hungry veteran, every time I hold a hand of a widow who does not enough money to bury her husband, I tend to wonder how the United States can forget the sacrifices made for this country and how this country can turn her back on its legal and moral obligation to those who made those sacrifices. I also ask myself how the Filipino Veterans remain loyal to this country after all these years of injustice. Yes, ladies and gentlemen of the committee, these veterans remain loyal to the United States. Their belief in the democratic process speaks of their commitment to fight and gives them hope that the same process can grant them the justice they deserve - the recognition for their services.

A number of legislations have been passed since 1999 giving Filipino Veterans certain benefits such as Special Veterans Benefits (a.k.a SSI Extension law), access to the VA healthcare system, and burial in national cemeteries. However, Filipino Veterans are still not classified as U.S. Veterans making them ineligible to receive pension from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Consequently, these veterans are dependent on Supplemental Security Income (SSI), soup kitchens and service agencies such as the Veterans Equity Center for support services.

Based on the Department of Veterans Affairs Study in January 2001, the estimated total number of Filipino World War II Veterans in the United States is 13,849 of which 50% live in California. Today the estimated number of Filipino Veterans drastically dropped to about 7,000 in the United States and about 13,000 in the Philippines - the projected number of veterans in 2010. With very few Filipino Veterans remaining, our community stand on the shoulders of our heroes and we have made a renewed to commitment to fight with them. We, the younger generation, have become soldiers with a mission. And we will not stop until full equity is achieved. Honorable committee members, now is your only opportunity to impact the lives of the remaining veterans. Now is the time to act, now is the time to put an end to this injustice, now is the time to pass the Filipino Veterans Equity Act.