

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

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Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate

OVERSIGHT HEARING ON RESEARCH ON,  
AND TREATMENT OF, GULF WAR ILLNESSES

September 25, 2007

Good morning. Senators Sanders and Murray both asked that the Committee hold this hearing to focus on recent advances in research on, and treatment of, Gulf War Illnesses.

As Chairman, I must once again question whether DoD is protecting the health of troops, and whether they are adequately monitoring American servicemembers' health before, during, and after deployments. This is a legitimate focus for our Committee; today's troops are tomorrow's veterans. As servicemembers return from deployments abroad, many will separate from the military and become the newest generation of veterans. We need to ensure that VA has the capability to give these veterans the care they require.

We have this recent study on brain damage, and evidence that suggests there may be an elevated rate of ALS among Gulf War veterans. Further, the National Academy of Sciences has found that service in the Gulf places veterans at increased risk for anxiety disorders, depression, and substance abuse problems.

Unfortunately, as we have heard time and again, the reasons for these illnesses may never be known because important records were not kept or were lost. In addition, DoD did not track the location of individual troops, making it difficult to identify patterns among those who have fallen ill.

In short, DoD was not prepared to monitor and protect the health of troops during the Gulf War. For whatever reasons, the health of our own troops was not safeguarded, and many questions may remain forever unanswered.

This raises a basic question for me: are troops now receiving more than pro forma pre- and post-deployment physical examinations? The usefulness of these exams is not only critical to physical health but for mental health as well.

A grateful Nation must never forget that the decision to send our young people into harm's way must always go hand in hand with the knowledge that it will be our responsibility to care for those who have served.