

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Hearing on VA's Response to the Needs of Returning Guard and Reserve Servicemembers

July 23, 2008

Welcome to today's hearing.

Today the Committee will look at the effectiveness of VA's outreach to the over 488,000 members of the National Guard and the Reserves who have been mobilized and deployed as part of either Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom. While the Committee has held multiple hearings on VA benefits, health care, and services, this is the first time we are specifically focusing on the unique challenges confronting members of the Guard and Reserves.

In my own state of Hawaii, over 5,000 members of the Guard and Reserve have been deployed in support of O.I.F. and O.E.F. The Hawaii National Guard is currently in the midst of its second deployment to Iraq and over 85 percent of those mobilized are already combat veterans. It is important that these soldiers, and all reservists, know that VA will be there for them when they return, and in a manner that recognizes their sacrifices and helps them overcome any obstacles specific to their circumstances.

After years of war, we appreciate that there are distinct challenges facing the reintegration of these citizen servicemembers. Unlike their active duty counterparts, Guard and Reserve veterans must transition from their civilian life and employment, to active-duty military life and service, and back again, sometimes on multiple occasions as a result of numerous deployments. Despite VA's best efforts to conduct outreach to this population, it seems clear that some are still unaware of all that VA has to offer and how to access those services and benefits.

I am concerned about the results from a recent VA IG report that shows that, in 2006, VBA failed to send benefits packages to over 36,000 reservists because VA employees mistakenly thought these reservists were ineligible. One would have thought that after years of war, this process would be perfected.

I am also concerned about how VA reaches out to members of the Individual Ready Reserve and those who are discharged after their deployment and who may not have the benefit of a unit's support during their reintegration. I am pleased that, beginning this fall, VA will resume using public service announcements and advertising, which will provide another means to reach the entire veterans population.

More work needs to be done. I hope that both of our panels will shed some light on why we continue to hear from veterans that they just did not know about what VA benefits and services they are eligible for and on how VA, and the Congress, can help bridge this information gap. This is particularly important for those who suffer from the invisible wounds of this war and may need more help readjusting to their civilian lives.

I hope today's witnesses will provide us with a real sense of next steps so that no member of the Guard and Reserves is unaware of their eligibility and the benefits available to them. Thank you.