

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Legislative Presentations of AMVETS; Air Force Sergeants Association; Fleet Reserve Association; Non Commissioned Officers Association; Military Order of the Purple Heart; the Retired Enlisted Association; the Military Officers Association of America; and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs; and Vietnam Veterans of America

March 12, 2009

I am pleased to join all the leaders of the Veterans' Affairs Committees - Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House Committee, and my Senate colleague, Ranking Member Richard Burr, and all of our other colleagues in welcoming each of you here for this important event.

All of the organizations testifying before us today have proud traditions of public service. Your tireless advocacy on behalf of our Nation's veterans, and also their families, is truly honorable. I applaud you for all that you do. Meeting with all of you regularly is so valuable to us, to hear your views on the important issues facing our Nation's veterans, and to help us craft an appropriate budget for VA. These committees rely on your concerns and agendas for the coming year.

Two weeks ago, the President announced his budget. Among other things, it proposed 55.9 billion dollars for the VA in discretionary spending, an increase of 5.6 billion dollars over fiscal year '09 spending. This amount is by all measures significant, and close to what AMVETS and its co-authors and supporters recommended in the Independent Budget FY 2010. In fact, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs held a hearing two days ago on the Department of Veterans Affairs fiscal year 2010 budget proposal. We heard testimony from Secretary Shinseki and several VSOs, including AMVETS and Vietnam Veterans of America.

I have said this many times, and I will say it again: Veterans' benefits and services are a cost of war, and must be understood and funded as such. I am pleased that President Obama - who served on this Committee last year- understands and shares that view.

Last month, I re-introduced bi-partisan legislation to secure the timely funding of veterans' health care through advance appropriations. Too often VA medical care funding is subject to delay and uncertainty, hampering budget planning, and threatening health care quality for wounded and indigent veterans. This situation must end.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am determined: veterans must receive quality benefits and services. Caring for our troops when they return home is critical. We must provide the best health care. Anything less is a breach of our fundamental obligation to those who wear and have worn our Nation's uniforms. We must fairly compensate veterans for their injuries, including invisible wounds of TBI and PTSD. We simply must, in this time of war, ensure that VA is has the resources it needs to carry out these missions.

The effects of the troop surge in Iraq and the coming increases in Afghanistan will soon be felt at VA. To date, this generation of veterans, as a group, has been slow to come to VA for benefits and services. VA must be prepared to reach out to those now coming home and bring them into the system. Each time the government fails to reach one of these newest veterans, we neglect our collective obligation to those who have served.

Assisting the families of veterans is a key part of the successful and seamless reintegration of veterans into their communities. Family members are often the primary caregivers for injured veterans. Steps have been taken to reach out to these families in recent years, but much work still remains.

We've done a great deal together to work on disability compensation. Timely and accurate processing of disability claims and appeals remains problematic. Restructuring of the disability compensation system, including consideration for the loss in quality of life, will be an important issue in this Congress. Claims and appeals processing is an area on which we will also continue to focus.

As one who knows firsthand how valuable the GI Bill is, and who worked to secure passage of the new Post-9/11 GI Bill into law, I am working to make certain that the new GI Bill is implemented in a timely manner and as smoothly as possible.

In closing, I again thank each of the national organizations represented here this morning, and their members, for their service and dedication to our Nation and its veterans. I look forward to your presentations today.

- END -