

OPENING STATEMENT Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

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Chairman

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

United States Senate

?Oversight Hearing on DoD/VA Collaboration and Cooperation
to Meet the Needs of Returning Servicemembers?

January 23, 2007

Good morning and welcome to the Committee's first hearing for the 110th Congress. As I said at our organizational meeting, I look forward to working with our new and returning Members, and for this to be a productive session for our Committee.

Today's hearing will focus on the current level of cooperation and collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense. There has been strong Congressional interest, dating back to the 1980s, on improving how the two Departments work together and improving the transition process. We hope to hear from our witnesses today, where the two Departments are and where they need to be.

I thank Secretary Mansfield from VA and Secretary Chu from DoD for joining us today to testify on this important subject. It is my hope that their testimony will establish a benchmark for future hearings that will focus on specific health and benefits issues that relate to the two Departments.

It only makes sense that, where opportunities exist for sharing resources that benefit servicemembers and veterans, we take advantage of these opportunities. As a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, I have looked at the issue of seamless transition from the vantage point of the military, and now, as Chairman of this Committee, I will look at it from the VA perspective. Today, with thousands of servicemembers in harm's way, it is more important than ever that the Departments work together.

The issue of the Departments working together goes beyond the sharing of resources. It must also include efforts to facilitate the seamless transition of servicemembers from active duty to veterans status. There is no reason why servicemembers, prior to separation, do not know exactly what VA can do for them and how they can obtain the benefits and services available to them. Given the current world-wide involvement of the total force, I believe strongly that the message needs to be consistent and universally understood by all, regardless of whether they are separating from active duty, the Guard or Reserves. This is especially true for those who are wounded or severely injured. I can only imagine the stress that a new veteran with a life altering

wound or injury endures when faced with the challenge of transitioning from one health care system to another while still in the process of recovery and rehabilitation. I am sure it would be a daunting task under the best of circumstances. We need to ensure that the hand-off between the Departments for those who are in the greatest need is truly seamless. This is an area where we cannot improve enough.

According to the Office of Management and Budget, there has been slippage since 2002 in the progress of implementing coordination of VA and DoD Programs and Systems. This is deeply concerning. It appears to me that much of this slippage has resulted from a failure to identify who is responsible for implementing recommended actions that could result in improved levels of cooperation and collaboration between the Departments. This perception is consistent with the 2003 report of the President's Task to Improve Health Care Delivery for our Nation's Veterans and by numerous GAO reports. In my view, the two Departments are not making enough progress on a national level. I believe that VA and DoD can take better advantage of local successes, by implementing them on a national level.

Let me be clear - - there have been successes and I congratulate the Departments on those areas where progress has been made, including the degree to which the departments share information, cooperate on transition issues, and deliver benefits and services.

I hope that our witnesses today will help us understand what areas that still require work, and provide us with their respective Departments' strategic plans on how they intend to improve the level of coordination and collaboration between the Departments and ensure that servicemembers truly have a seamless transition to VA. If there are particular areas where this Committee or the Congress can be of help, I ask that they let us know.