

Jon Harlan, MSW, Team Leader, Hilo Vet Center

Statement of
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Hilo Vet Center
Department of Veterans Affairs
before the
United States
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
At the Hilo, Hawaii Field Hearing

January 13, 2006

Aloha, Senator Akaka. It is an honor to appear before you today to outline the role of the Hilo Vet Center in providing care and services to veterans of all eras, with special emphasis on newly returning veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). Although I will focus on the Hilo Vet Center's involvement, our efforts are typical of the services provided by the 207 Vet Centers nationwide.

Under the leadership of Dr. Alfonso Batres, Chief of the Office of Readjustment Counseling Service, and Mr. Richard Talbott, the Pacific Western Regional Manager; the Hilo Vet Center, located in old downtown Hilo, strives to provide the highest quality of services to all Veterans who walk through our doors and those we meet through our outreach efforts. It is a privilege and honor to serve them.

The Hilo Vet Center is responsible for providing services for veterans from the southern end of the Big Island, (Naalehu) to the far west side town of Waimea. Services provided by the Hilo Vet Center include individual, family and group counseling, with special expertise in counseling for combat-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; community outreach; assistance in gaining access to medical care through the Hilo VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC); and on-site assistance for veterans with VA disability claim issues by a VA Benefits Counselor once a month. We work closely with the State of Veterans Service Officer, referring veterans to the VSO for in-depth service on claims issues; we also conduct joint outreach efforts with the VSO in the Hilo Vet Center's catchment areas.

In the Hilo area we have one National Guard Unit: the 2nd BN, 299th Infantry BN, Army Aviation Units (193rd AVN RGT), and the Army Reserves 411th Combat Engineers, in addition to a section of the Reserves' storied 100th, 442nd Infantry. The Kona Vet Center covers the remainder of the Big Island, providing services to all eligible veterans, which includes a company of the Hawaii Army National Guard 2nd BN, 299th Infantry BN located in Kealekekua, Kona. As a member of the Hawaii Army National Guard as well as being the Hilo Vet Center Team Leader, I have personally made frequent contact with the members of these units and their families to provide them with information about Vet Center and VA services, and to support family members during the time of deployment.

The staff of the Hilo Vet Center is prepared to provide bereavement counseling for family members of military personnel killed on active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. Sadly we have suffered the loss of a fine young American from the Volcano area, and the Vet Center offered support to his family. We hope and pray that all our servicemen and women will return safely very soon, as their deployments are more than half-way over.

The Hilo Vet Center maintains non-traditional hours to ensure that all services are available to veterans, both those that work and those who don't. Currently we are open Monday and Tuesday from 8:00 am to 6:30 pm and Thursdays 08:00 am to 8:00 pm. We expect to provide additional evening hours as more soldiers return home and to work and need or want more services. We strive always to support military units and veterans' service organizations by providing outreach and informational presentations whenever they are requested. We believe by doing this and always being available, veterans who otherwise may never come to the VA will get all the care and help that they have earned.

The Hilo Vet Center has a core staff of three: Team Leader, one counselor and an Office Manager. Currently we are in the process of hiring a full time Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) Outreach Worker. This person will be stationed at the Hilo Vet Center, but will cover the entire Island, to include the Kona side. The Kona Vet Center and Hilo Vet Center staff work together closely on outreach each week, so this arrangement will work well. All Team Members are veterans. One member holds mental health licensure (Social Work); and the others have many years of experience working with Veterans, especially in the area of combat-related trauma. The Hilo Vet Center, due to its small permanent staff, has augmented clerical support staff for several years through the VA Work Study Program, which helps young veterans attending college earn a salary while assisting other veterans and helps provide for the smooth operation of the Hilo Vet Center. Having them has been a Godsend, not only for the additional work they do, but more importantly, because they are usually veterans of the OEF/OIF operations and give staff key insights into understanding what the unique experiences and needs of their peers in current conflicts. All of our Work Study students have been outstanding and show a great deal of compassion for their fellow Veterans who come in or are contacted during outreach. I believe this program could prove to be valuable in recruiting future professional staff for our Vet Centers.

The Hilo Vet Center continues to provide Readjustment Counseling and supportive services to a large number of Vietnam Veterans, as well as veterans of World War II, Korea, the current conflicts and others. During fiscal years 2004 and 2005, the Hilo Vet Center provided services to 731 individual veterans in 5,894 readjustment counseling visits for veterans and their family members. During the same time period we began to see increasing numbers of OEF/OIF Veterans and their families. In fiscal year 2005, we saw 51 individual OIF/OEF veterans for 118 visits, compared to just 4 OIF/OEF veterans for 17 visits in fiscal year 2004. Our expectation is that when the largest deployed unit (2nd BN, 299th Inf.) returns to Hilo, we will be seeing far more OEF/OIF veterans. Our Vet Center provides intense and complete counseling for veterans of the east side of Hawaii Island. Our goal is to assist veterans in leading productive and satisfying lives. As stated earlier, we do this by offering veterans individual, family, and group counseling. To achieve our goals and meet the full range of needs for the veteran and family members, many of our veterans are involved in all three modes of counseling. In regards to

OEF/OIF Veterans, our intent in offering extensive outreach to them is to let them know of our presence, to introduce them to the services that we provide, and to give them a sampling of the range of readjustment counseling services available to help them make a positive return to civilian life, as well as to assist their families. At the same time, we continue to provide the same high quality readjustment assistance to our core constituency of World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam veterans. It is a great honor to provide services to multiple generations of "America's Finest". I believe I have the greatest job in the world, and I thank you and your colleagues for providing the support to allow our Vet Centers to exist.

Senator Akaka, this concludes my statement. I thank you for your time and look forward to answering any questions you or other members of the Committee might have.