

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Statement of Senator Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman

Good morning, and welcome to today's hearing. We have another lengthy agenda today that reflects the work and commitment of many Members on both sides of the aisle.

The health care bills before us today address crucial issues and seek to improve services to veterans. I anticipate that from today's hearing we will be able to develop another strong package of veterans' health legislation.

I will briefly highlight a few of the bills on our agenda.

The Veterans' Medical Personnel Recruitment and Retention Act of 2008 is based on extensive Committee oversight, including our recent hearing on personnel issues. In the face of competition from other health care systems, VA frequently has difficulty recruiting and retaining personnel, particularly nurses and senior executives. To make matters worse, a significant portion of the VA nursing workforce will be eligible to retire within the next decade. This bill would provide the tools and flexibility for VA to attract the best personnel and deliver the best care to veterans.

Servicemembers and their families face many challenges as they return to civilian life. S. 2796 would establish pilot programs on the use of community-based organizations. The programs would assist transitioning veterans and their families as they access VA care and benefits and reintegrate into civilian life. VA has made significant strides in reaching out to provide services, and I believe this legislation will provide further support to veterans.

Other bills before us seek to address a wide range of pressing needs. There are bills to prevent homelessness, assist family caregivers, and improve mental health services.

It is this last topic - improving mental health care for veterans - which continues to get attention from this Committee. For the information of Members and others with an interest in the Committee's work, we have just scheduled a hearing on the current public perception of how mental health - and PTSD specifically - is dealt with by VA. While there has been much attention to an email from one VA clinician which raised questions for many about the possible suppression of PTSD as a diagnosis, I am concerned that the suppression of PTSD, both in terms of compensation and treatment, may in fact be much more widespread.

The bipartisan Veterans' Mental Health Care bill, approved by this Committee last year and now on the Senate calendar, is a comprehensive approach to improving PTSD and substance abuse care. Yet, there are objections to Senate action on this bill. Senator Burr and I are trying to address the pending objections now and hope this bill can pass the Senate before Memorial Day.

I thank the witnesses for being here today, and look forward to hearing your testimony on the legislation before the Committee.