

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Good morning. I welcome everyone to this hearing on benefits legislation pending before the Committee. We have a lengthy agenda today that reflects the work and commitment of many Members on both sides of the aisle.

Today we will examine bills touching on benefits provided by VA. In general, the legislation before us focuses on two core parts of VA's mission: providing help to veterans disabled while serving their country and assisting servicemembers as they transition from military to civilian life. Both are areas on which this Committee has worked, and will continue to look at as we develop another strong package of veterans' benefits legislation.

Before we begin, I want to speak very briefly about the items on the agenda that I have introduced:

First, S. 2617, the "Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2008" would increase the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities and the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans, among other benefits, effective December 1st of this year.

Many of the more than three million recipients of these benefits depend upon the tax-free payments not only to provide for their own basic needs, but for the needs of their families as well. Without an annual COLA increase, these veterans and their families would see the value of their hard-earned benefits slowly diminish. We, as a Congress, would also be in dereliction of our duty to ensure that those who sacrificed so much for this country receive the benefits and services to which they are entitled.

S.2309, the proposed "Compensation for Combat Veterans Act," would ease the evidentiary requirements facing veterans who file claims for disabilities incurred while serving in a combat zone. During oversight visits to regional offices, Committee staff has identified a number of cases where service medical records of veterans serving in combat areas are missing. Discussions with physicians who have served in those areas confirm that records are not always made or maintained. As a result, combat veterans have had claims denied or unduly delayed. This bill would result in faster and more accurate decisions.

The "Veterans' Rating Schedule Review Act", S. 2737, addresses the authority of Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. This legislation would give veterans a legal recourse to challenge portions of the rating schedule that fail to conform to the law.

S. 2825, the "Veterans' Compensation Equity Act" would provide a minimum disability rating for veterans receiving medical treatment for a service-connected disability. In the course of its oversight work, Committee staff has found a great deal of inconsistency in the ratings assigned to veterans with minor, but chronic conditions. This bill would ensure that any veteran requiring continuous medication or the ongoing use of an adaptive device, such as a hearing aid, would receive at least a 10 percent rating for that disability, entitling them to a minimum level of compensation.

In the area of readjustment benefits, I have introduced two bills that would help servicemembers and veterans return to their civilian lives. S. 2471, the "USERRA Enforcement Improvement Act of 2007", which I co-authored with Senator Kennedy, would strengthen the employment and reemployment rights of returning servicemembers by imposing compliance deadlines on federal agencies. It would also implement measures to reduce inefficiencies and improve the information collected by the government on USERRA compliance.

S. 2864, the "Training and Rehabilitation for Disabled Veterans Enhancement Act of 2008", would improve VA's Independent Living program, which serves veterans whose disabilities render them unable to work. The bill would eliminate the annual cap on the number of enrollees in the program and shift the program from a discretionary pilot initiative to a mandatory program. It would also make improvement in quality of life -- an explicit objective of training and rehabilitation services of the Independent Living program.

Finally, I have introduced two complimentary bills that would improve the opportunities available to veterans for home ownership. The first bill, S. 2768, would temporarily increase the maximum loan amount for certain VA-guaranteed home loans. The second bill, S. 2961, would raise the maximum guaranty limit on refinance loans and decrease the equity requirement for those who want to refinance to a VA-backed loan.

As is the case every Session, the biggest hurdle for implementation of these bills into law is cost. I am working to find appropriate offsets within the Committee's jurisdiction.

Finally, I am pleased to see S. 22 back on the agenda this morning. I have worked hard with Senator Webb to develop this proposal, and I believe that the measure as we have it before

us this morning is a good one. I am certain that it would not only be a vastly improved readjustment benefit for our newest generation of veterans but it also gives the armed forces a valuable recruitment and retention tool. As one of the 8 million veterans who attended school on the original GI Bill after World War II, I am committed to seeing that this legislation go forward.