

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Daniel K. Akaka

Chairman

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

United States Senate

Joint SVAC/SASC Hearing

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I'm delighted to join Armed Services Committee Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Senator McCain, the Veterans' Affairs Committee's Ranking Member Senator Craig, and all of our other colleagues for this important and unprecedented joint hearing. It is my hope that through this hearing and our follow-up work, we will be able to identify solutions to the problems that first gained public attention in connection with the stories about Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Unfortunately, many of the problems that surfaced at Walter Reed, particularly concerns about how DoD works with those servicemembers who will be leaving the service due to injuries or illness, are not limited to Walter Reed, but exist throughout the military services. I am concerned that the government is not doing an adequate job in providing a smooth transition between DoD and VA.

As Chairman of the Veterans Affairs' Committee and a member of the Armed Services Committee, I am able to look at these issues from two different perspectives. However, in the end, it is clear that the problems facing DoD and VA are not separate. While there are two organizations, both deal with the same set of servicemembers. It is vital that we address both DoD and VA responsibilities and concerns to ensure that servicemembers receive the benefits and services available to them.

I know we all agree that we have an obligation to provide our servicemembers with optimal care from both DoD and VA. That obligation also must ensure that the transition between the two Departments is as smooth as possible. We have to realize that VA not only has a relationship with DoD, but an independent relationship with each of the military services. In this regard, we should not just be looking at DoD, but at each of the military services individually. Hopefully, our oversight will result in identifying best practices from the services that can be exported and implemented DoD-wide. I intend for this hearing to identify workable solutions to the many problems that confront DoD, the military services, and VA.

I look forward to hearing the testimony of the Departments. These are some of the most important issues of our time. We have a unique opportunity at this joint hearing to focus upon identifying solutions to problems that impact upon our servicemembers and veterans, we owe them no less.