

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Today, the Committee will hear testimony about VA's five year plan, and the collective efforts of the federal government, to end homelessness among veterans. We will also hear from individuals who have worked to end homelessness among veterans for many years.

Earlier this month, VA announced that approximately 107,000 veterans were homeless on any given night in 2009. In 2008, that number was 131,000. While the reduction is good news, there are still too many veterans without a place to call home. Homelessness for any American is a very difficult thing but for an individual who has answered the call to duty it is unacceptable.

There are many challenges that veterans face which can lead to homelessness such as health concerns, including mental health problems, economic issues, and a lack of access to safe housing. But these challenges are not new. The central question is, what do we need to do now to try to address and resolve these issues so that we can keep from having to face this problem a decade from now?

Congress has been actively working on this issue for over 20 years. As Chairman of this Committee, I stand ready to do my part in supporting efforts to bring it to an end. I am pleased that the Committee, with Senator Murray playing a leadership role, recently approved legislation to enhance the programs and services for homeless veterans and to expand services for homeless women veterans and veterans who have care of minor dependent children. This legislation, which represents another important step in our collective efforts, will be brought before the Senate in the near future.

In order to be successful in any plan to end homelessness among veterans, we must recognize that a significant number of homeless veterans suffer from mental health issues. VA estimates that more than half of all homeless veterans have a serious psychiatric diagnosis. Many others are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Providing these veterans with an alternative to living on the street is a challenge. We must fully understand the needs of these veterans, the resources needed to assist them, and be committed to meeting their needs.

I applaud Secretary Shinseki for his dedication to the task of ending homelessness among veterans. But, as we will hear today, VA cannot do this alone. If we as a nation are to achieve this goal, we must leave no stone unturned when trying to help veterans in need.

Today's hearing gives us a chance to better understand the current situation, with an eye toward fixing what is not working and expanding what is. I thank all of our witnesses for being here today to help us in this effort.

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