

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Oversight hearing: Making VA the Workplace of Choice for Health Care Professionals

April 9, 2008

Good morning and welcome to today's hearing.

Health care matters affecting veterans are very important to this Committee, and to me in particular. In recent years, the Committee has, by necessity, spent much time and effort delving into the health issues facing veterans today, including TBI and invisible wounds.

A simple truth of VA health care is that its providers are the backbone of the system. If the providers are not present, or are there but unhappy in their jobs, it is unlikely that veterans will receive the quality care they need and deserve.

The Department of Veterans Affairs faces a dangerous shortage of health care professionals. Around the country, services for veterans at too many facilities are limited due to staffing shortages, from nurses to senior executives to psychologists. VA competes with other health care systems for employees, and too often comes up short.

In a recent publication by the Partnership for Public Service on employee satisfaction, the Veterans Health Administration ranked poorly in pay and benefits, and in family support. VHA also rated very low among younger employees. However, a silver lining from this survey is that at the same time, VHA has improved in almost all rankings. So while there has been progress, clearly there is still more to be done.

The task of this Committee and of the Congress is to provide VA with the resources and tools necessary to enable VA facilities to attract health care professionals of the highest caliber. This fiscal year, Congress provided VA with a significant infusion of funds. It is my expectation that we will do so again this year. During today's hearing, we will have the opportunity to examine the tools VA now has, and those it might need, to bring in top notch health professionals.

In my view, VA has the potential to recruit and retain the very best medical professionals. Scholarship programs, used effectively, could alleviate student debt burdens. An effective pay system would allow VA to compete in every labor market. VA operates a world-class research system that attracts clinicians who seek to push the boundaries of medical care. These are just a few examples of the effective recruitment and retention tools at VA's disposal. We must ensure that they are being fully utilized.

It is my hope that this hearing may lead to more effective use of existing methods of recruiting the best and brightest health care professionals to VA, and then making sure that they choose to stay. We also will seek to identify new approaches to attract health care professionals to VA. Over the past decade, VA has made tremendous strides in becoming the premiere health care provider for veterans. We must now ensure that VA can employ premiere employees.