

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT
Hearing on VA Health Care in Rural Areas
June 16, 2010

Today we will discuss VA health care in rural areas. Rural settings are some of the most difficult for VA, and other government agencies, to deliver care. I believe, and I know many of my colleagues on this Committee share the view, that we must utilize all the tools at our disposal in order to provide access to care and services for veterans in rural and remote locations.

Expanding the use of telehealth technologies, rural outreach centers, mobile clinics, and other options will help us make health care accessible to more veterans and reduce the burden on those living in rural areas. VA also has the authority to partner with other government agencies or to contract with community medical professionals in order to provide care in local communities. Monitoring and evaluating the quality of this type of contracted care remains a challenge, and I look forward to hearing more from VA on how to improve this.

We have worked to make needed improvements for rural veterans. Recently, legislation from this Committee was enacted into law which now provides higher rates of mileage reimbursement, and reimbursement for airfare, for veterans who must travel to reach VA health care facilities. This law will now provide important incentives that the Department can use to recruit and retain high quality health care providers in rural areas.

I remain concerned about how effectively we are reaching veterans in rural areas. This is a significant concern in my home state, where a large rural population cannot drive to the VA facility on Oahu, as they are separated by many miles of water. This poses a special challenge in helping these veterans access VA health care. This Committee has held several hearings on health care in rural areas. For my part, I have worked to ensure that the neighbor islands in Hawaii have telemedicine capabilities, regular visits from medical personnel, and viable outpatient clinics. We have been largely successful in these efforts, and I will continue to explore new ways to make further improvements.

Today, we will be focusing on states with exceptional challenges. Our first panel of witnesses will address care and services for veterans in Montana, which has large areas in which VA has little or no presence, but has a significant veteran population to serve.

Also on the first panel, we have a witness from Senator Burr's home state of North Carolina, who can discuss how they are reaching out in rural areas. The second panel will address issues in Alaska, which is not just considered rural but actually a remote area. Because of the specific focus on these two areas, I will be turning the gavel over to Senator Tester for the first panel, and then to Senator Begich for the second panel.

I do plan to review all the testimony and will be working with Members of this Committee – and the full Senate – to ensure that VA does its very best to meet the needs of veterans living in rural and remote areas.

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