

Roy Kekahuna, PhD, District Director, Blinded Veterans Association

STATEMENT OF DOCTOR ROY W. KEKAHUNA,  
DIRECTOR DISTRICT #4 BLINDED VETERANS ASSOCIATION

Mister Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the care of blinded veterans in general, and in specific the needs of the blinded veterans in the state of Hawaii.

I would like to take a moment to stress that blindness is a catastrophic event in a veterans' life. Immediately the veteran loses his or her independence. The uniqueness of this situation is that for the rest of those veterans' lives, they will need assistance during 25 to 85 percent of their daily activities.

Another unique feature with a good percentage of the blinded veterans, is that they have dual sensory loss (for example, hearing and vision). Many of the blinded veterans have multiple disabilities (an example, loss of limbs).

PLEASE BEAR WITH ME WHILE WE DO A BRIEF DEMONSTRATION ON WHAT A BLIND VETERAN HAS TO GO THROUGH DOING A SIMPLE TASK.

I use the Veterans Administration (VA) Health Care Facilities for my medical services. Most areas of my medical experiences with VA have been favorable; Veterans Administration's care for their blinded veterans is behind the curve.

Veterans Administration in general is behind the curve in care for their blinded veterans; their care for the blinded veterans of the state of Hawaii is in the dark ages. I cite myself as an example. I came home from Vietnam totally blind. There were no low vision services at the local Veterans Administration. Today, there is still no low vision specialist at the VA. Almost forty years later, the blinded veterans of the State of Hawaii are less than a stepchild. I believe that this is criminal treatment of our Hawaii Blinded Veterans.

Currently the VA in Hawaii provides a part-time Vision Impairment Services Team Coordinator (VIST). The coordinator is responsible for the case management for all blind and legally blinded veterans. They do not train blinded veterans. The VIST coordinator in Hawaii works only 5 percent of her work period on blinded veterans cases. This is inefficient for the caseload.

Ho'opono, the state of Hawaii's vocational rehabilitation is the only low vision/blind service currently available to veterans. It is VA's responsibility to care for its veterans as promised. The blinded veterans of the State Hawaii need your support to gain equal treatment, which their brother and sister blinded veterans of the other 49 states receive.

I applaud the VA and the Department of Defense (DOD) partnership that they have here in Hawaii. Together they have the makings for a perfect harmony to service the blinded veterans. In this opportune scenario the Army Medical Department (AMMED) at Tripler Army Medical Center (TAMC) can provide a full time low vision doctor while VA would provide a full time VIST/Blind Rehabilitation Outreach Specialist (BROS).

The state of Hawaii's geographical island makeup supports the need of a VIST-BROS full time specialist. The individual who operates from this position can provide both casework and training for the blinded veteran while on the different islands. I would highly recommend the creation of this position as soon as possible.

In the best of times and in the best situation the blinded veteran should attend a VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRC). The closest BRC for Hawaii's' blinded veterans is Palo Alto, CA. The current configuration of the blind services training at Ho'opono only works for those veterans residing on the island of Oahu. There are no resident facilities for the other island veterans.

I have experienced the excellent medical services provided at TAMC. I have been to four sessions at different BRC's and received excellent training. I believe that it is important to fund the VA, DOD Medical facilities, and staff them properly to support our current blinded veteran population and the next generation of blinded veteran that is already here from the conflicts/wars that we fight. This means keeping the promise.

On behalf of the blinded veterans and their families, I thank the members of this great institution for providing us with the funding and resources to take care of the finest men and women that I have had the honor to represent here today.