

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Legislative Presentations of American Ex-Prisoners of War; Blinded Veterans Association; Gold Star Wives; Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America; Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America; Paralyzed Veterans of America; and Wounded Warrior Project

March 5, 2009

Good morning. Aloha and welcome to all who are here. I am pleased to join the leaders of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees in welcoming each of you here this morning. These forums are very valuable, to hear your views on the important issues, and to help us to craft an appropriate budget for VA. All of the organizations testifying today have proud traditions of working on behalf of those who have served in our Armed Forces. I applaud each of your organizations for all that you do to better the lives of those who are serving or have served the nation in uniform, and their families.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am resolute that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. Caring for troops when they return home is a solemn responsibility. Part of our responsibility is providing the best health care and rehabilitation. Another part is fairly compensating veterans for their injuries, including invisible wounds of TBI and PTSD.

We must, in this time of war, equip VA with the resources necessary to carry out these missions, now and into the future. I have said this time and time again, and I will keep saying it: Veterans' benefits and services are a cost of war and must be understood and funded as such. I am pleased that President Obama - who served on this Committee just last year - understands and shares that view.

The Senate Committee is working right now on recommendations for VA. The new Administration has sent forward its own budget and recommendations, and we are reviewing it. I look forward to working with all of you as we move through this process.

Last month, I re-introduced bi-partisan legislation to secure the timely funding of veterans' health care through advance appropriations. Too often this budget is subject to delay and uncertainty. That hampers planning and threatens health care quality. This situation must end.

We have done much work on disability compensation. Timely and accurate processing of claims and appeals remains problematic - and we have more work to do. Comprehensive restructuring of the disability compensation system, including consideration for the loss in quality of life caused by injury, will also be an important issue in this Congress.

As one who knows the value of the GI Bill first hand, and who worked to secure passage of the new Post-9/11 GI Bill into law, I am now working to make certain that the new GI Bill is put into service in a timely fashion, and as smoothly as possible.

I know you share my commitment to providing a seamless transition, from military to civilian life, for the newest veterans. VA must be an active partner with the Department of Defense to ensure these veterans are taken care of when they return home. Prompted by a letter that Senator Burr and I sent earlier last month on the alarming rise in soldier suicides, the Secretaries met last week to discuss this important issue. I will continue to monitor actions taken to address this very serious issue as we move forward.

Assisting families is a critical part of reintegrating veterans into their communities. Steps have been taken to reach out to these families in recent years, but much work still remains.

In closing, I again thank each of the national organizations represented here this morning, and their members, for their service and dedication to our Nation and its veterans.

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