

Rogelio Evangelista, President, Maui Veterans Council

Statement of Rogelio G. Evangelista
President of Maui County Veterans Council

To

The Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
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Mr. Chairman Larry Craig, Senator Akaka, and distinguished members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, VAPIHCS Director Gen. Hastings and Staff, thank you for giving me this opportunity to come before you today to discuss the state of VA care in Hawaii, home to more than 110,000 veterans and especially for the more than 10,000 veterans living in the County of Maui, which comprises the three islands of Maui, Molokai, and Lanai out of the eight islands that make up the State of Hawaii which are all separated by the ocean.

The excellent medical efforts of the Maui CBOC [Community Based Outreach Clinic] with the support of the Spark Matsunaga Center on Oahu, and the Tripler Army Medical Center have been extra ordinary. I would at this time like to take a moment to stress the unique nature of health care here on Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and to also include Kauai, and Hawaii.

The first by being on the State Veterans Advisory Board for over nine years and on the VAMROC [Veterans Administration Medical & Regional Office Center] Advisory Board for over five years and as a Disabled Veteran, I have understood the stress and witnessed the bureaucracy that Veterans are faced when receiving health care from the Veterans Administration. They must be able to pass the Means Test by having limited income jointly with their spouse, so that if they need to go to Oahu, or the Mainland for specialized care that is not service connected, they will be provided airline transportation, and this are for any Veteran with less than 30% disability that uses the VA Health Care System as their Primary Health care. If the Veteran do not qualify on the Means Test and he or she has a disability of less than 30% then the Veteran must pay their own transportation to go to Oahu, or the mainland. Veterans on the Mainland can drive to the VA hospitals and not worry about passing any Means Test. VA states it is cheaper to have the exam or procedure done on Oahu with the Veteran paying about \$145.00 for a round trip ticket, instead of having the Veteran see a local provider on the island that he resides on. Veteran bills are even being sent to collection agencies because the VA takes so long on paying for the services from outside providers.

Second, as I look at our aging Veteran population, there are 100% disabled veterans in Nursing homes on Maui with the families paying over \$7,000.00 per month for their health care at those Nursing homes plus their medications and its hard for the families to send them to Oahu to the Center for Aging and there will be no family support because they can't fly to Oahu every day to see the Veteran. Is it possible for the VA to do a partnership with Hale Makua, a Nursing home on the Island of Maui for the Veterans living on Maui. Why is Hawaii and Alaska the last 2 states that do not have any VA hospital, what happened to a Federal mandate that states that there should be a VA hospital in each state.

Third, our CBOC's, on all the neighbor islands, even with the experienced and dedicated staff, they are underpaid in comparing with the mainland VA staff, and they are also overworked, we need more staffing and we need more office space, on Maui, if the VA can buy out the building that CBOC is located in and the vacant lot next to the building and look at expanding services with more staff, we now have volunteers but they are limited in the scope of work that they can perform. There is now one full time doctor 5 days a week, one part time doctor 4 days a week, we need to upgrade our staff to provide the best possible care for our Veterans, right now it takes so long to get an appointment to see the doctor, for routine or specialized care, the doctor has to come in from Oahu or the mainland. In order to provide ongoing care to Veterans, first, the government must realize that Veterans health care are part of the cost of war and that the government needs to provide enough funding for VA health care to all Veterans, second, the Veterans Administration along with the government must identify and develop programs and use today technologies to help Veterans in their daily lives, especially for our disabled veterans. Combinations of advanced health care using new technologies will greatly help all of our veterans and make their recoveries possible and the long term relationship of being accepted back into society. Why is VA funding always the lowest priority in our government, when we the Veterans made our country the greatest nation in the world.

Fourth, many of our Veterans are suffering from some sort of physical or mental disability and would rather alienate themselves from anything to do with the Veterans Administration due to many contributing factors. All the red tape that they must go through to even start to file their claim, something that happened over 30 years ago and it is just being addressed today because of the Veterans health status, be it physical or mental, Veterans are being informed to get collaborating evidence from other Veterans that served with them and might know something regarding the Veterans conditions or of an incident that occurred. Most of this Veterans don't know where these other veterans are now living and some of them just don't want to get involved, but there are records that the military have so why can't the Veterans Administration get those records to collaborate the Veterans claim.

Fifth, Veterans are now paying \$7.00 co-payment on drugs and medication and the VA is also at this time exploring the idea of raising the co-payment on drugs for Veterans that are being prescribed for non-service connected medical problems, and these Veterans are living on very limited financial support due to their physical and mental conditions being attributed to their military career in one way or another. They answered our Nations call when they were needed, why can't our Nation now help them in their time of need, I ask and plead with you the members of the Veterans Affairs Committee to lobby your constituents and help our Nation's Veterans lead fruitful and dignified lives.

Sixth, the Vocational rehabilitation program that try to help Veterans in training them for a Vocation that they can excel in is great, but now there are so much restraints being placed on being able to qualify and the approval all now comes from Washington D.C. and not done here locally like it used to be. There is so much paper work going back and forth and it takes such a long time sometimes longer than six months for approval if it does get approved and by that time the Veteran has already lost interest and have given up on the system. When you apply for Vocational rehabilitation you will need specialized and long term counseling and support from your case worker here and not from somebody from Washington that knows you only as a

number with no personal knowledge of all your special needs as you continue with your studies. There are Veterans here on Maui that don't even know of certain benefits that they may be qualified to apply for due to their physical and mental disabilities.

On behalf of the Veterans of the State of Hawaii, especially the County of Maui and all their Families, I would like to ask all the members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, along with the VAPIHCS Director and Staff for their support of these men and women who committed a part of their lives and well being to defend and protect our great Nation, the United States of America. Will the committee now along with their constituents give their full support to our Veterans and provide a health care that is second to none and a budget to surpass the costs of administering the greatest health care to our heroes.

Thank you, may God Bless America, its people, the Armed Forces, and especially its Veterans and their Families.