

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS FIELD HEARING**

**ENTITLED: "THE STATE OF VA HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS IN HAWAII"**

OCTOBER 5, 2022

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FOR PRESENTATION BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

"THE STATE OF VA HEALTH CARE AND BENEFITS IN HAWAII"

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Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, Senator Hirono, Secretary McDonough, Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, members of our panels, fellow Veterans, Veteran Organizations, and members of the community. Before starting, I would like to especially thank Senator Mazie Hirono and her staff for her efforts to bring this Senate Field Hearing to Hawaii once again. This is my second opportunity to participate and present as the first time was back in a similar Senate Field Hearing at this location in 2014. I know it is especially noteworthy having Secretary McDonough participate at these proceedings. It truly shows of his commitment and dedication to supporting Veterans not just in Hawaii, but across our entire Nation.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my perspective of the State of VA Health Care and Benefits in Hawaii. In full disclosure, I have two family members who work in the local VA offices here in Hawaii. One with the VA Healthcare Administration and one with the Memorial Services Team at Punchbowl.

First off, a quick preface about the Hawaii State Office of Veterans Services (HOVS). Currently, we serve approximately 112,000-117,000 Veterans in the State of Hawaii with an estimated break out of Veterans on Oahu (85K), Hawaii (16K), Maui/Molokai/Lanai (11K), and Kauai (4K). Inclusive of this overall number are 12K Women Veterans in Hawaii. HOVS provides advocacy for Veterans, short-term counseling, informational and referral services, claims, forms, and appeal assistance. We also assist on legal name changes, discharge upgrading advice, outreach, VA benefits assistance, burial assistance, and receive, investigate, and resolve disputes or complaints involving our Veterans and government agencies and the community. There are 25 people assigned to HOVS residing on four major islands. Half of the personnel are Veterans Benefits Counselors and trained to the same standard and accreditation as their federal Veterans Benefits Counselor counterparts. The other remaining staff members support administrative and cemetery affairs. HOVS is directly responsible for maintaining the Hawaii State Veterans

Cemetery in Kaneohe and has administrative oversight at the other seven State Veterans Cemeteries on the islands of Kauai, Maui, Molokai, Lanai, and Hawaii (3 State Cemeteries on this island). For the latter seven, these cemeteries are maintained and operated by the respective County Public Works or Parks and Recreation Divisions. HOVS is privileged to work alongside their federal Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), Veterans Healthcare Administration (VHA) and Memorial Services counterparts. Our main office is located on Oahu in the E-Wing at Tripler Army Medical Center, but we also maintain satellite offices on the islands of Maui, Hawaii, and Kauai. HOVS also performs outreach services to Molokai and Lanai. I might add that our offices are currently working under a hybrid operating model accomplishing tele-counseling to support the needs of our Veterans and their loved ones. This has resulted in an estimated 25%-30% more Veteran contacts and disability claims submitted in previous years. Additionally, it has kept both the HOVS staff and our Veteran clients safe from the healthcare challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants. In fact, even with several State and County shutdowns over the last two years, due to the high COVID-19 positivity infection rate across the State, HOVS never shut-down its operations and was able to function effectively and efficiently utilizing tele-counseling methodologies to meet the needs of our Veterans. If a Veteran needed assistance, we stood ready to help. Our motto is “proud to serve those who served our country!”

Back to the “State of VA Health Care and Benefits in Hawaii.” HOVS sees three main dominant issues that consistently arise from Veterans across the State. 1) **Access** to healthcare and benefits; 2) **Timeliness** of that healthcare and processing of disability benefit claims; and 3) the **Quality** of healthcare and benefits.

#### **Access to VA healthcare and benefits has significantly improved in Hawaii since 2014.**

**For Healthcare**, the VA Pacific Island Health Care System (VAPIHCS) in working with TriWest Healthcare Alliance, has provided greater access and more opportunities for healthcare services for Veterans to access either through the Spark M. Matsunaga Medical Center in Tripler, through the Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) in our respective rural island regions or through VA approved civilian health care providers across the State. We have also seen a significant amount of VAPIHCS full-time employment staff come on board in the last five years in critical healthcare billets due to increases in federal funding to keep pace with the needs of our Veterans. The employment of tele-medicine and tele-health technology and services provided greater access for our Veterans, especially during the last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many of the healthcare appointments that were registered and conducted were accomplished using this modality.

The VAPIHCS team also worked countless hours including weekends to put “shots in arms” for COVID-19 vaccines, boosters and for flu shots. They were active in each community including the neighbor islands to help keep our Veterans safe and protected. They worked tirelessly to ensure there would be no disruption of access to critical medical services and medicinal

prescriptive orders for Veterans throughout a very challenging time due to the pandemic. The VAPIHCS Infection Control Team also responded to a catastrophic COVID-19 deadly outbreak in 2020 at the Yukio Okutsu State Veterans Home that ran through the entire resident and staff population of the home. This VA mobile team of infection control experts provided hands-on training and support within the home addressing deficiencies with the civilian contractor of the home. These permanent fixes instituted have led to new Veteran in-take opportunities, enhanced access and the build-up of census with Veterans requiring skilled nursing and long-term care support.

The start of construction of the Daniel K. Akaka Department of Veterans Affairs Community-Based Outpatient Clinic slated for completion in 2024, will also increase access and capacity to services already offered at the Spark M. Matsunaga Veterans Medical Center at Tripler and will serve Veterans across the State and Veterans who live in other Pacific Islands, including Guam, Saipan, Tinian, Rota and American Samoa. This multi-role facility will house VA healthcare staff, the Vet Center and the State Office of Veterans Services. This “one-stop shop model” is also being duplicated on Kauai and on Maui. This office is appreciative that this same funded projects over the next several years will enhance Veteran access and reduce frustration and confusion for island Veterans needing a variety of services.

The Daniel K. Akaka State Veterans Home is over 60% completed in Kapolei on the island of Oahu. It is named after the late Senator Daniel K. Akaka, a WWII Veteran, a longtime public servant, a former Chair of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs and a native son of Hawaii. This 120-bed skilled nursing facility will be Hawaii’s second State Veterans Home in the State located on a different island. Recently, supply management chain issues and procurement delays that have affected both the domestic and international community will delay the completion of this home projected now in May 2024. These State Veterans Homes, like many across the Nation, will provide greater access to vital services to our elderly and severely disabled Veterans, Gold Star Parents and eligible loved ones. This second home is also slated to provide Adult Day Care services like the first home in Hilo, Hawaii.

The Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018, which took effect January 1, 2020, authorized the Department of Defense to expand access to commissary privileges to Veterans with service-connected disability, Purple Heart Medal recipients, former Prisoners of War and individuals approved and designated as primary family caregivers. Although there were some issues initially that hampered Veterans with obtaining their Veteran Health Identification Cards (VHIC) and base/post specific protocols for entry, the majority of Veterans were appreciative to have this important benefit and access to commissaries.

The VA Caregiver Support Program (Program of General Caregiver Support Services (PGCSS) and the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) also provides access and services to caregivers in two separate programs for Veterans enrolled in VA healthcare. Many immediate and extended family members are the prime caregivers for eligible

Veterans and have benefited from the use of these specific programs to help and assist their loved ones. The recent news that Veterans of all eras will now be eligible for these important programs that has started on October 1, 2022, is encouraging and expected to provide greater access to possibly thousands of families in the upcoming years. This office also understands that the VA has doubled their caregiver support line with staff members to address potential concerns and issues that may arise from family member inquiries.

Sheltering our Homeless Veterans across the State has also highlighted what our Federal, State, County and Community Partners can accomplish in working together towards a common goal of eliminating Veteran Homelessness. According to the last Point in Time Count in 2022, there are a total of 228 Veterans (127 sheltered and 101 unsheltered) remaining in Hawaii. This is a 57% decrease since 2015 and a 44% decrease since 2020 according to Housing and Urban Development data that has been released. With increased access to supportive agencies, these Community Partners of Care and the State Interagency Council on Homelessness can continue to work in collaboration until each Veteran receives the specific support and care they need.

Supporting the Governor's Suicide Prevention Challenge Initiative has just commenced for the State of Hawaii in 2022. A State Interagency Program on Suicide Prevention for Military Members, Veterans and their families has been established involving government and private partnerships with DOD, VA, State, County, National Guard, Reserves and community partners. The work, training and coordination thus far has been noteworthy especially assessing best practices and benchmarks from other State programs. With 2019 and 2020 Veteran suicide rates showing some decline, there is still much work ahead to improve suicide prevention and awareness outreach. This important initiative will provide enhanced access to collaborative work across many service agencies and disciplines with the objective of reducing and eliminating Veteran suicides.

Participating and connecting women, minority, LGBTQ and rural Veterans to available services and looking downrange for development of future programs and services has also brought to the forefront issues that have not had the emphasis in previous years. One example is the game changing work the Veterans Experience Officers (VEO) from the VA and VEO consultant designers have started working on with various State and US Territorial Partners in the Pacific. For example, the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Pacific Region experience project is an important program and process to talk to subject matter experts in these communities to better inform the VA of what is needed in the field for future services and support. Again, another important first step to increasing access and support by engaging Veterans on what they need.

**For Veterans Benefits**, there has also been a record high of the number and types of disability claims that have been processed. The VA Home Loan Guaranty Office, over the last several years, has given eligible Veteran's access to some of the best interest rates in decades for refinancing or for home purchases. Additionally, Veterans are experiencing increased access for

their service-connected disability claims as a result of the “Blue Water Navy” ruling, the Camp Lejeune Justice Act of 2022 and the recent Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act passage on August 10, 2022. Veterans are latching on to the new guidance and the myriad of presumptive ailments that are now accessible for those who have verified and validated their service connection. Without a doubt, there is an increasing volume of calls and queries as a result of these major program changes coming into our State Offices and into our Veterans Service Organizations especially on the PACT Act, one of the most historic laws ever passed affecting our Veterans and their loved ones.

Modernization for the Claims Appeals process has allowed Veterans and their advocates more access and choices in their review and appeal processes. There have been an increased number of virtual appeal hearings even during some periods of delay as a result of the pandemic. Our office has seen a significant increase in the number of hearings at the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA), resulting in more Veterans participating in appeal proceedings after many years of waiting for a hearing. This has also helped in reducing the appeals backlog.

**For Memorial Services**, the signing into law of the Burial Equity Act on March 15, 2022, will also provide greater access to eligible National Guardsmen and Reservists. However, States that implement this new law will be faced with resource challenges for full-time employment authorizations, funding for grave markers and the loss of VA reimbursement for plot allowances. The demand for internments is expected to steeply climb if this law is enacted in the respective State. Without sufficient infrastructure and resources in place to take on these added responsibilities and duties, this program is not sustainable. Our State of Hawaii Attorney General’s Office has reviewed the Burial Equity Act provisions that allows a State to maintain the previous criterion for Veteran eligibility for a National or State Veterans Cemetery. Our Office will be maintaining the previous criterion and will be working with other States to review their implementation plans, to assess budget projections and to review the possibility of this funding shortfall being passed on to families and next of kin. Although we are in support of the intent of this Act, without sufficient programmed resources, implementation will be delayed.

### **Timeliness of healthcare services and benefits processing can be challenging to Veterans.**

**For Healthcare**, one of the main concerns our office receives is the timely VA reimbursement of Veteran travel, per diem and out of pocket expenses. This occurs when Veterans travel to the Spark M. Matsunaga Veterans Medical Center at Tripler or to an VA authorized civilian healthcare provider here on Oahu from our neighbor islands. In some cases, especially on the island of Hawaii, distances between the Veteran’s home and the selected treatment site can be over 200 miles. When issues of reimbursement arise, many Veterans become frustrated with the requirements to file, and some have told our offices they have contemplated foregoing treatment because of the bureaucracy. Having a robust training and educational awareness program to support Veterans who will use these critical types of services will help to preclude repetitive follow-up and inquiries after-the-fact. Possibly having VA reimbursement experts and personnel

on specific islands where Veterans can address their unique issues can also be beneficial. A review of pre-flight plans, ground and billeting arrangements and a post-flight review of completed travel to ensure the necessary reimbursement documents were submitted could also be very helpful and may preclude the constant and repetitive follow-ups.

The scheduling of appointments for healthcare has improved. However, for some initial appointments with a VA Primary Care Provider or Specialist, it can take weeks or months dependent on number of servicing providers available and their respective office case workload. Like many other State's, there is a national shortage of trained and certified healthcare providers to meet the increasing demands for government and civilian healthcare providers. As a positive step, our office has seen the VAPIHCS Patient's Advocate Team double their FTE and support. With the increase of more Veterans accessing critical healthcare services due to the Blue Water Navy and PACT Act changes, the number of Veteran queries and the complexity of requested care are expected to increase even more.

**For Veterans Benefits**, the claims backlog continues to be worked aggressively and much progress has been made especially with the highest recorded number of claims being input and submitted into the VA claims process. The volume of claims is expected to remain high with the recent program changes mentioned earlier and our office has seen new additional employees in VBA to address these demands and the use of overtime to meet claims delivery time objectives. The VA's commitment to providing sustained resources will be critical to reducing this backlog. VBA has also continued their service outreach in the communities and provided many webinars to help educate and to answer questions that arise from Veterans and their loved ones.

#### **Quality of care and benefits has been noteworthy.**

**For Healthcare**, our office has received praises from Veterans utilizing VHA and accompanying healthcare providers in the community. Once Veterans can obtain appointments, healthcare specialists are caring, empathetic and supportive of their Veteran patients. The length of time between appointments for some Veterans has already been previously addressed.

Significant strides have been made for our homeless Veterans. Focusing on the causes of Veterans homelessness such as physical and mental issues, legal issues, limited job skills, alcohol and drug abuse, post traumatic syndrome and involvement with the justice system have provided focused programs in government and in our community activities to help eliminate chronic homelessness, and more importantly, its root causes. No agency or provider will stop their efforts until every homeless Veteran is sheltered and the wrap-around services and benefits they need are provided.

**For Benefits**, the quality of VA benefits support has been very receptive to the many program changes that have occurred over the last several years. The use of webinars and townhall meetings have proven to be very effective with reaching Veterans who have sought VA services

before. The processing and adjudication of more disability claims year after year is further proof of a Benefits Administration supporting State and National time elements for delivery.

As a side note from our office, if the Veteran is not treated with genuine dignity and respect from the onset, either through a call-in or in person connection at any one of the healthcare clinics or benefits offices, the rest of that Veteran's experience is tainted. Veterans become agitated and untrusting of the entire process. Treating every Veteran with dignity and respect is paramount to creating the Veterans experience we are all striving for.

**For Memorial Services,** Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs Matthew Quinn supported our first ever Cemetery Administration and Cemetery Care-Taker Training in Hawaii in March 2022. Cemetery team members from the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl, from the Hawaii State Veterans Cemetery in Kaneohe, from the seven neighbor islands State Veterans Cemeteries and from Guam were in attendance. Over 30 cemetery personnel were trained and received hands-on tools and techniques for internments and the protocols required for cemetery grounds management. Our office works closely with Punchbowl Director Jim Horton, the respective Directors from the Island Counties and our HOVS staff on each island to ensure families of decedent Veterans or their eligible loved ones are treated like "a member of our own family" when working their committal services and internments. Our office is very thankful to Undersecretary Quinn for his strong advocacy for bringing the cemetery instructor team to Hawaii saving a significant amount of travel dollars. We are also thankful to Mr. Glenn Powers, Mr. George Eisenbach, Mr. Tom Paquelet and Mr. Steven Rogers of the VA National Cemetery Administration for their stellar work and efforts to support our capitol improvement projects in our eight State Veterans Cemeteries year after year.

**In closing,** HOVS appreciates this opportunity to provide feedback on these important issues affecting Veterans in the State of Hawaii. We sincerely appreciate Senator Hirono, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, Secretary McDonough, Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, members of our panels, fellow Veterans, Veteran Organizations, and members of the community for keeping Veteran issues at the forefront. HOVS is highly encouraged by the improvements made by our VA counterparts in Hawaii and the Pacific and will continue to do our best as a State entity to support the important and critical work that is ahead of us. We stand as a full-fledged partner to assist and to help in support of mission objectives and goals to serve our Veterans. As advocates for Veterans and their families, HOVS is committed to working with VHA, VBA and Memorial Services to provide the best possible services and support we can. There is not enough we can do to support our Veterans!

Once again, Mahalo Nui Loa for this opportunity to provide written testimony.