

Rogelio G. Evangelista, VAPIHCS Advisory Board Member

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Senator Daniel K. Akaka
Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman

Honorable Chairman, Distinguished members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and Fellow veterans, Being on the Veterans Administration Pacific Islands Health Care System Advisory Board, I, thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Veterans of Maui County. I would like to commend the committee, especially you Senator, for all the personal sacrifices and unending time spent on helping our veterans coping with their disabilities.

The uniqueness of the Hawaiian Islands, separated from the United States by 1500 miles of ocean makes it very extra ordinary to provide health care to the more than 120,000 veterans living here. When I first testified before this panel in 2007 and again in 2008 there have been great strides done with our health care here in Hawaii with the leadership of Gen. James Hastings and his team of professionals BUT A LOT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ASSURE THE BEST HEALTH CARE TO OUR VETERANS.

Unfortunately, unlike the mainland of the United States, these island are not joined by bridges or tunnels, therefore to obtain the necessary medical services needed from Tripler, the veterans need to fly, and due to the lack of disability insurance, the veterans incur most of the cost of these flights to receive their rightful medical services. Due to the illness and injuries that these veterans have received during wartime, many of these veterans are on limited incomes. To choose between taking care of their families and themselves and flying to Oahu to receive healthcare, is a choice that should not even be an issue for these veterans who have served the United States so selflessly. The promises made by the military offer education for the betterment of the soldier for life, the ability for home loans on the GI bill for the betterment of the soldier's life, and medical care for the betterment of the soldier's life. What we are asking for is that the medical services be available and not have to be a financial liability to the veteran in need of medical services. We ask that the transportation costs of those veterans who do not live on Oahu be covered fully. Until the time that there are specialized services available on each island, it is only fair and just to cover any and all the transportation costs to receive these medical services that are only offered at Tripler or the Spark Matsunaga Clinic on Oahu. If we use the VA health care system, the VA should take care of us 100 per cent, cause the problems that are happening to us now in our later years in life are all part of the cost of war and also when we served in the military we did not give only a certain percent but we gave our full 100 per cent. In Hawaii we need to think how we can geographically place the best delivery of care or we will deny our veterans quality medical care that they so rightfully deserve.

As our WWII, Korean, and Vietnam veterans age, they are now faced with more ailments that affect their health, problems that were not visible when they were younger, with the possibility of being service connected. Not only are they faced with their health problems, but also the issues of getting to prove with collaborating evidence, records which the VA cannot provide due to all the red tape between the military records and the VA when you need copies of your records.

As we deal with the incredible injuries and mental health needs of our veterans we simply have to do it right in taking care of those that borne the battle and we can start by reducing the number of backlog on claims, especially those on disability claims. If there is any probability that it could be service connected, it should be approved.

Senator Akaka, you also know that when a person finishes his military obligation and he goes home it does not end there, but their problems are just starting, in trying to get health care, getting a job, fitting in with the community, reuniting with the family and coping with visible and invisible physical and mental scars.

Senator Akaka, another issue is the families of these veterans. For a lot of families the men or women who have left to serve their country have come back broken both mentally and physically and this is often traumatic to the families to not only welcome back a changed person, but to learn how to deal with their disabilities. These families need the support of the VA also to deal with needs of the veteran in the home situation. The veteran may have been exposed to situations to which the average family cannot even fathom much less give support to. What options do these families have on their home islands? For the families on the outer islands, often the cost of transportation to receive these services are a deterrent to receiving these services.

We have done our duty, so now we ask the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee along with the Veterans Administration to do their duty in helping the Veterans and their families. There are incredible issues that we have to face not only for our newer veterans but also those that have served in previous wars, be it World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Etc. Caring for our veterans means providing the best health care 24/7 and rehabilitation and compensating veterans for their injuries.

We have to honor our returning troops, as you know what happens when we don't. like in the case of the Vietnam Veterans, due to the opposition against the war, the men and women who served were not honored on their return, they were disrespected. For these men and women to endure wartime and come home to be dishonored by society, caused tremendous psychological issues resulting in suicides, homelessness etc. These issues have not been dealt with and our veterans of this current war are committing suicide in large numbers. Dealing with these issues is very much part of the cost of war. Part of the billions spent overseas in Iraq and Afganistan need to be spent on the men and women who relive this war on a daily basis.

With hundreds of our troops returning home in dire need of health care let us show our appreciation and commitment to the men and women who have worn the military uniform in defense of this nation, let us say thank you by asking for unlimited funding to deal with the crisis that we are facing to get the veteran soldiers back into society and their families, even in this

hard economic times we need to know and show that the care for the veteran and their families are the continuing cost of war.

The VA is a premier Health Care System, but here in Hawaii, specifically the outer islands, the healthcare services are limited. In fact, the VA does not have a hospital anywhere here in the Hawaiian islands. With the increasing population of veterans here in the islands, is it possible that there would be plans for a VA hospital in the near future.

Let me also mention that the Maui County Veterans Council and the more than 20 veteran organizations it represents wholeheartedly support the aspect of the proposed facility in Kahului at Maui High School of which one of our panelist Col. Lloyd Sodetani Ret. will address.

Last but not the least is the honors that veterans earned while serving in the military which is basically the last respect regarding the veterans service to his country during his burial rites. We are being faced with different issues in providing these various services. Services that were earned and promised when we wore the uniform. Things like new memorandums for different branch of service, no available personnel, due to deployment for the war, economic hardship on travel for the full honor guard, time constraints, etc; WE, THE VETERANS, ask you and the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee TO RIGHT WHAT IS WRONG and say to the Veterans “THANK YOU” for your service to our country.

May God Bless Our Nation, those in uniform, our veterans and their families and in closing, WE, THE VETERANS, ASK, “FOR OUR COUNTRY TO LOVE US AS WE LOVED OUR COUNTRY”, IN KEEPING IT THE LAND OF THE FREE AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE.

Thank you,

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&
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