Daniel K. Akaka Chairman Committee on Veterans' Affairs

OPENING STATEMENT
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Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

Hearing on the
The Current State of Affairs for Information Technology within VA

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 Aloha. Welcome to today's hearing on the state of information technology within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Before we get started, I take this opportunity to welcome Senator Richard Burr, of North Carolina, to his new role as the Committee's Ranking Republican Member. I look forward to working closely with him as we continue to seek ways to meet the many challenges that continue to confront veterans and VA. We have a long history of bipartisan work on this Committee and I am sure that will continue with Senator Burr.

 Over the past several years, this Committee has held multiple oversight hearings on VA IT issues. Often, these hearings have been in reaction to public failures of IT, including last year's data theft. Lost in the outcry about these failures was the recognition that, while IT can help VA in many ways, it is only a tool, not an overall solution to a problem or a need. Without competent management, sound business practices, trained users, and a clear idea of desired outcomes, IT not only fails to be an asset, it can even become part of the problem.

 A recent VA IG audit that I requested on waiting times at VA facilities is a good example of how IT can and can not be used. The investigation looked into the disconnect between what VA managers tell us about waiting times for VA appointment - that there are virtually none - and what veterans and stakeholders tell us about the existence of long lines. What the IG found was problems with the accuracy and completeness of the waiting lists, lists that are generated from VA's electronic health record system. VA responded to the IG's findings in part by suggesting that new computer software will solve the problem. This is not an exclusive answer. Unless and until Congress and VA leadership can rely on VA's data as it is entered into data bases, we cannot work together to get an accurate picture of the state of VA care and provide appropriate resources. IT can help, but only when there is a clear agreement on how to collect and report information.

 Today's hearing will focus on a wide range of information technology issues. Last year, there was a major change in the management of IT affairs at VA and this hearing is a chance to get a reading on the impact of that change. We hope to get a sense of where the Department is and where it is going with IT. We will hear testimony on the effects of changes to VA's IT management structure on the Department's ability to deliver health care, benefits and services to veterans. Other issues before use include the impact of new VA IT security policies and procedures since the 2006 data theft, the prognosis for the development of a DoD-VA bi-directional, interoperable electronic health record, and other significant IT issues. Also, we are

today releasing a GAO Report on Information Security that I, along with other Members from the Senate and House, requested in response to last year's data theft. The report finds that although VA has made progress, there is still much work to do. We will discuss this report today.

Secretary Howard, at your confirmation hearing last year, I challenged you to restore the confidence of veterans in VA's ability to protect their personal information while leveraging IT solutions to maintain VA's preeminence as a health care and benefits provider. I look forward to your assessment of where we are today and where we need to go in these areas. Millions of veterans rely upon VA for benefits and services and, in so doing, have to rely on VA's IT systems. We must do all we can to ensure that they can do so with confidence.

I thank all of today's witnesses. My hope is that your participation in today's hearing will help the Committee gain a clearer understanding of the challenges currently confronting VA and its use of IT and how to move ahead, utilizing IT to help improve the delivery of benefits and services and the overall operation of VA. I look forward to your testimony.