

Ranking Member Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

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Ranking Member  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate

Hearing to Examine the Shortfall in VA's Medical Care Budget

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We all know why we are here ? to understand what went wrong in planning for veterans' health care needs and to focus on what we must now do to fix the problem.

This is not simply about data or assumptions for the planning models. This is about providing vital health care services for our nation's veterans. And we simply must keep focused.

We at least now have an admission that VA hospitals and clinics are in the red. And this is the first step in turning things around.

I frankly do not understand why this shortfall comes as a surprise. We have been hearing from health care providers all over the country about how dire the situation is. For months now, reports have been coming in that beds are deliberately kept empty, that failing equipment cannot be replaced, and that mental health services are being denied. Everyday, clinic directors are making arbitrary decisions about which veterans can come in for care ? this is in violation of the law.

Despite the tremendous pressure to keep quiet, VA's dedicated providers have been forthright about the fact that they were raiding capital accounts just to make ends meet. Using capital funds means that needed clinics ? like the one in American Samoa ? will never come to fruition.

We raised these issues earlier this year on the Senate floor ? Senator Murray, myself, and others ? and VA officials denied that trouble was ahead. During our debate on the shortfall back in April, we drew attention to the impact that the men and women returning from Iraq and Afghanistan could have on the VA system. This is an influx of patients that VA simply cannot easily absorb in addition to its huge current patient load.

I do think that in light of this crisis, we need to take a fresh look at the proposal to guarantee full funding for VA health care. If we cannot put faith in the current process, perhaps we need another approach.

Finally, let me just say that I am truly committed to working with my colleagues to ensure that existing veterans and returning servicemembers get the health care they deserve. I have no doubt that we will restore the funding. In fact, Senators Murray and I are moving to add these funds to the Interior Appropriations bill currently on the Senate floor.

I thank the Chairman.