

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT
Hearing on Pending Health Care Legislation

April 22, 2009

Good afternoon, and welcome to today's hearing. We have a lengthy agenda that reflects the work of many Members on both sides of the aisle. The health care bills before us today address crucial issues and seek to improve services to veterans. I anticipate that today's hearing will allow us to develop another strong package of veterans' health legislation. I will briefly highlight a few of the bills on our agenda.

Severely injured servicemembers and their families face many challenges as they return home. The bipartisan caregivers' bill, S. 801, will give family members the support they need to care for the nation's wounded warriors in the form of health care, counseling, respite, and financial support. It also will give them the training they need to provide the best care possible to their loved ones.

I am joined by Senator Baucus and Senator Begich in supporting a bill, S. 734, which would provide much needed services for veterans returning to rural areas. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have placed extraordinary demands on the country's National Guard and Reservists with multiple deployments. When they return home, it is often to a small town, not to or near a military base. This bill will improve VA's ability to recruit and retain health care providers and encourage VA to use volunteer counselors and telehealth services to reach more veterans. It also expands VA's ability to pay for travel when the only practical way for a veteran to reach a health care facility is by air.

Many other bills on the agenda reflect the dedication and hard work of my colleagues in support of the nation's veterans. There are bills that will eliminate certain copayments for the catastrophically disabled, authorize additional health care facilities, and ensure the availability of services for women veterans and homeless veterans.

Senator Rockefeller has introduced a bill that would remove a limitation on VA employees' collective bargaining rights when employment actions are related to quality of care concerns. Many are working on this issue, including Luanne Long, a nurse from Hawaii and representative of the United American Nurses and Hawaii Nurses Association. Although she is not testifying before the Committee today, I appreciate her work on behalf of VA employees.

I am confident that VA's new leadership will work with the Committee in our efforts to provide comprehensive health care to the country's wounded warriors. We recently held confirmation hearings for the Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, and the Assistant Secretary of Public Affairs, all of whom expressed their support for the VA health care system. We will be counting on their support as we address many of these issues.

I thank the witnesses for being here today, and look forward to hearing your testimony on the legislation before the Committee.

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