

Senator Mazie K. Hirono
Opening Remarks
House-Senate Conference Committee on
H.R. 3230, the Veteran Access to Care Act
Tuesday, June 24, 2014

Thank you to our co-Chairs, Senator Sanders and Representative Miller, for holding today's conference.

This Conference Committee has an important task in the coming days and weeks.

That is to finalize legislation that does three important things:

- 1.) Directly address the emergency circumstances that have been uncovered at the Veterans' Administration (VA).
- 2.) Ensure all of our veterans receive access to the care that they deserve.
- 3.) Begin the longer-term work of restoring veterans' trust not only in the VA, but in Congress's ability to effectively oversee the VA and provide the resources needed to care for our veterans.

Listening to my fellow conferees today, I believe we can come to an agreement on this bill.

Chairman Sanders is exactly right when he says that the situation at the VA is an emergency.

Senator McCain today described the situation as an emergency.

A recent audit of the VA in Hawaii found that veterans were waiting over 140 days to receive care.

A more recent update found that while progress is being made, that number is still over 100 days.

Nationwide, nearly 60,000 veterans are waiting simply to get an appointment.

That is unacceptable.

Nearly the entire Senate agrees that this is an emergency, and that Congress has to act to provide the resources necessary to provide care immediately.

I'm hopeful that we can all agree on that point.

However, while I hope we all agree that this is an emergency—and that we will provide the resources necessary as a result—I hope that this Committee will not ignore the task of addressing the VA's long-term needs.

Veterans approve of the quality of care that they receive from VA—when they receive it.

I hope that we will include provisions in the Senate-passed legislation that provide for 26 major medical facility leases, and provide for the resources and authority to expedite hiring of VA doctors and nurses.

In addition, while I agree that accountability of executives is needed, we should avoid politicizing the non-appointed civil service process and allow some due process for VA employees, even as appropriate disciplinary actions are taken

Our veterans rely on the services of qualified, committed professionals at VA.

We should be doing more to attract more of these people—particularly people who view service to our veterans as a noble career path and not a stopover on the way to something else.

I hope that this Committee will recognize the long-term benefits of attracting a high quality workforce to VA, and that we can improve accountability in a carefully balanced way.

A quality workforce, and quality facilities are long-term investments in our veterans—

Investments that we need to make to ensure that all veterans have access to high quality VA care.

Investing in the VA is an essential step towards building back the trust of our veterans.

I recognize that expanding access to non-VA providers is needed to immediately address this emergency.

With this expansion we must ensure every veteran in our country, whether rural or urban, can easily get the care they need if the VA is not available.

For Hawaii veterans that should include being able to get care from community health centers, Department of Defense facilities or from the Native Hawaiian Health Care System.

But that doesn't mean that getting care outside of the system is the long-term solution. I do not support an approach that will lead to atrophy of the VA.

I do not support voucherizing VA.

I do support Congressional leadership and action that addresses the current emergency, ensures our veterans' can access the care that they deserve, and lays the groundwork so that the VA can effectively address long-term needs.

I yield the remainder of my time.