

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Aloha and welcome. I remain committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. As troops return from battles in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must be prepared to care for them with the same dedication and commitment they showed in battle. This means providing only the very best health care. It means compensating veterans for their injuries. In this time of war, we must ensure that VA is equipped with all the resources it needs to serve those who have served now and in the future.

Last week, the Senate Committee held its hearing on the President's FY 2011 budget for the VA. And later this week, we will be sending our recommendations forward to the Senate Budget Committee. Although many agencies are facing budget cuts, I am pleased that the VA budget, which is critical for meeting the health care and benefit needs of so many of this Nation's veterans, is increasing. This does not mean, however, that VA, our Committees, and veterans themselves should not do their part in being a good steward of the taxpayers' money.

For the first time, we also see the fruits of our labor in passing the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act. We have before us a budget that includes a funding request for VA medical care into fiscal year 2012. We truly worked together to pass advance funding for VA health care. Your efforts on that front were invaluable.

The President's budget also includes an increase in programs for women veterans. This is a positive sign that VA is transforming into a 21st Century organization. DAV understands the need for major changes in the way VA delivers services and has been a leading advocate for women veterans.

On the benefits side of the ledger, timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims remains a significant problem. I know that the Administration is committed to addressing this issue and is moving to add significant staff and resources to that effort. However, I believe we must be realistic about the backlog in claims processing and admit that this situation will get worse before it gets better. It can take years for new staff to become skilled at processing claims, and technology and pilot programs can only do so much in the short term. I will work with VA to find ways to address the overwhelming impact on the compensation system that will occur as a result of the Secretary's recent decision on Agent Orange.

As we move forward, I must stress again that VA must become an organization that can respond to and absorb changes so that when issues occur – as we know they will – VA is not paralyzed. I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Committees and in Congress, as well as Secretary Shinseki, and of course, DAV, as we move forward on the budget and legislation. In closing, I thank Commander Barrera. DAV has a long and proud tradition of service and dedication to this Nation and its veterans.

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