

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Before we begin today's hearing, I extend my warmest welcome and aloha to the three new Members of this Committee: Senator Mark Begich of Alaska, Senator Roland Burris of Illinois, and Senator Mike Johanns of Nebraska.

For the information of all, the Committee will promptly hold nomination hearings on advice and consent positions so Secretary Shinseki can have his team in place as quickly as possible. It is my hope that the nomination for Deputy Secretary will be made very soon, and immediately following that, I will schedule a hearing in consultation with Senator Burr. Other nominations will be bundled to make maximum use of the Committee's time.

Now to the immediate business at hand - today's hearing offers a valuable opportunity for us to collect the priorities of the Veterans Groups and craft our legislative and oversight agenda for this Session. In the coming months, all of the Veterans Service Organizations will have more formal legislative presentations, but I believe we should hear key priorities now. I am also looking for interplay between the organizations to focus on what can and should be done in the short-term and what can wait for later in the session.

We must, in this time of war, equip VA with the resources necessary to carry out its missions, now and into the future. I have said this time and time again: Veterans' benefits and services are a cost of war and must be understood - and funded - as such.

Many of our views are in agreement, and I believe that together, we have established a good track record relating to VA. VA health care is, in many respects, the best in the Nation. I am proud that our collective work has contributed to the improvements in quality and access. Now, we must keep the momentum going. We must work to achieve President Obama's goal of integrating more Priority Group 8 veterans back into the VA health care system while ensuring that enough resources are available to maintain the quality of care.

As someone who knows firsthand the impact an education funded through the GI Bill can have, we must make certain that the recent improvements to this vitally important benefit are being effectively implemented.

Timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims remains an issue. I expect that benefits' reform, including a hard look at the current appellate process, the role of I.T., and reaching consensus on elements of compensation, will claim much of this Committee's attention this Congress.

Assisting families is essential to successfully reintegrating new veterans back into their communities. Family members are often the primary caregivers for injured veterans, facing wide-ranging needs - from caregiver training to education services to employment issues. VA has taken steps to reach out to these families in recent years, but much work remains.

I know that all of you share my commitment to providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for the newest generation of veterans. VA must be an active partner with the Department of Defense to ensure that the newest veterans are taken care of when they return

home. VA and DoD have undertaken several initiatives to streamline to process for disabled troops. I look forward to working with VA's new leadership to achieve a truly integrated transition for servicemembers.

There are some major legislative initiatives remaining from the previous session that I hope will be enacted this Session. The Committee's bipartisan health and personnel improvements bill, which I just reintroduced as S. 252, is important to this Nation's veterans and to the thousands who work in VA hospitals and clinics throughout this country. Some of you worked to include vital provisions in that bill, such as the enhancements to women's health care, and for that I am grateful. In the near future, I will also introduce a modified version of S. 1315, an omnibus benefits bill, which passed the Senate last Congress. S. 1315 included benefits for both young and old veterans, including numerous modifications to VA's insurance programs and benefits for Filipinos who served under U.S. command during World War II.

I look forward to the statements of the witnesses and to working with each of the organizations in the 111th Congress.