

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT
Hearing on Pending Health and Benefits Legislation
May 19, 2010

Today, we will look at legislation pending before the Committee. The bills on the agenda reflect the desire among Members of both parties to better serve the veterans who have served us so well. As we begin this legislative cycle, I will briefly note the progress the Committee has already made this Congress.

Last October, advance funding legislation from this Committee was enacted to finance VA health care one year ahead of the regular appropriations process. This was a major change and one long overdue. Earlier this month, the President signed the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act. This new law creates a program to support the caregivers of wounded warriors. It will also improve health care for veterans in rural areas, help VA adapt to the needs of women veterans, and strengthen VA's workforce. At this point, we must focus on proper implementation.

Turning to the agenda before us, I will leave it to the witnesses and the various Members on this Committee to talk in more detail about the bills. I note briefly a series of small and technical bills that I introduced. While they will likely not garner much attention this morning, they are a direct result of Committee oversight of VA's claims benefits process.

These bills address specific problems involving VA pension, survivor benefits, claims for veterans who are unable to understand and complete an application, and judicial review. While we work with the Administration to fully attack the claims process, it is my hope that these small but important steps will improve the quality and timeliness of benefits decisions.

Finally, I note that there are bills on the agenda that carry significant mandatory costs which trigger PAYGO issues. We are working with CBO to get firm numbers on those costs, but it is important to be aware of the challenges of moving legislation that has mandatory spending.

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