

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT
Review of the VA and DoD Integrated Disability Evaluation System
November 18, 2010

VA and DoD used to operate two separate disability evaluation systems with many individuals being evaluated for the same condition by both agencies. The redundancy in medical examinations and the separate rating processes produced varying results and left many servicemembers confused.

Since 2007, VA and DoD have been testing a streamlined program to integrate the two processes. At the heart of this effort is a joint disability medical examination that would replace DoD's Medical Evaluation Board/Physical Evaluation Board process and VA's disability compensation claim process.

The purpose of today's hearing is to examine how well the new system is working. Our review of the program is particularly important now because VA and DoD are planning to expand the program worldwide.

While streamlining the two systems is important, the implementation of this joint program has not been without problems. At a few pilot sites, VA staffing shortages, due to a lack of personnel to conduct disability medical examinations, caused significant delay in the processing of servicemembers. There were also personnel shortages at DoD among those responsible for guiding servicemembers through the new process. Issues of servicemember satisfaction and quality of life are also of concern.

Other issues have been identified through Committee staff oversight and by the GAO in its draft report on the new process. These include problems with integrating VA staff at military installations, difficulty in having various I.T. systems work together, and ensuring that an adequate number of DoD physicians serve on Medical Evaluation Boards. The Committee needs to hear from VA and DoD on how these challenges are being addressed.

As Chairman, I also want to know how the new joint program will affect veterans who are waiting to have their claims adjudicated by VA. VA is already facing a backlog of claims and medical examinations. I am concerned that veterans already in the VA system could be adversely affected by resources being diverted to support the new program.

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