

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate

Hearing on the Legislative Presentation of the Disabled American Veterans

February 27, 2007

Aloha! I welcome all of you who are here today. In particular, I give a warm aloha to Bradley Barton, DAV's National Commander, all of the DAV members, and especially to Wendall Kekuma, Katherine King, Harold Minami, and Brenda Reed, who have traveled all the way from my home state of Hawaii.

Along with my colleagues who are here today, and those who serve on the House and Senate Committees of Veterans' Affairs, I am delighted that this joint hearing forum has been reinstated. This venue allows veterans service organizations, who represent veterans working with VA on a daily basis, an opportunity to raise issues of concern with both Committees.

DAV has had a long tradition, beginning after World War I, of working tirelessly to assist disabled veterans and their families, a tradition that continues today.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to working to ensure that our Nation's veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. Meeting the needs of veterans is truly part of the ongoing cost of war and must be understood as such.

Again this year, I will continue to ensure that VA has the resources it needs to care for those veterans who seek assistance. VA must not be seen as simply another department or agency asking for more funding. When we send our servicemembers into harm's way on behalf of the Nation, we must be prepared to fund VA so that the Department can furnish the necessary health care, rehabilitation, and compensation to those who served. Anything less is a breach of our fundamental obligation to those who wear our Nation's uniforms.

Even as Congress debates the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must ensure that VA is given the resources needed to carry out its missions ? not only for our newest veterans and those Guard and Reserve members coming home from conflict ? but for veterans of all wars.

VA is today one of the premier health care providers in the Nation, but we must face the reality that too many veterans are waiting far too long for both primary and specialized care. VA lacks sufficient resources to meet the growing demand. Our challenge is to ensure that VA has the tools and resources it needs to provide veterans with the care they require in a timely fashion. We also must enable VA to recruit and retain doctors and health professionals across the country.

I look forward to working with DAV and other VSOs on developing strategies to achieve these goals.

On the benefits side of the ledger, VA must be ready to adjudicate claims in a timely and accurate manner. Now is the time for VA to hire and train staff to meet the present and future demand for timely adjudication. I will continue to monitor VA's inventory and staffing requirements. Our Nation's veterans deserve nothing less than having their claims fairly addressed without needless delay.

I am sure that all of you share my commitment to providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for our newest generation of veterans. Failure to engage VA early on in servicemembers' passage from active service to veteran status can result in VA not being fully prepared to meet their needs. We must make certain that VA is an active partner with the Departments of Defense and Labor so that the newest veterans do not fall through the cracks.

Commander Barton, before I close, I want to straighten out a misconception that appears in your written testimony. On page 13, there is a statement to the effect that, prior to the omnibus veterans legislation last December, Senator Craig and I entered into an agreement to repeal the attorney provisions in the bill. I wish to clarify. I agreed not to oppose any repeal effort - should one be made. I stand by that commitment. I hope that clarifies the background for you.

In closing, I again thank Commander Barton and the membership of DAV. Your service and dedication to this Nation and its veterans is unquestionable. I look forward to your presentation and working with you in the future.

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