

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT
Hearing on Pending Benefits Legislation

April 29, 2009

Good morning, and welcome to today's hearing. Like the health legislative hearing last week, we have an ambitious agenda today that reflects the work and commitment of many Members on both sides of the aisle. The bills we are reviewing today reflect a bipartisan effort on this Committee to help VA adapt to the needs of veterans and their families.

The legislation before us focuses on providing assistance to veterans disabled while serving their country and assisting servicemembers as they transition from military to civilian life. Both are areas in which this Committee has worked, and will continue to look at, as we develop another strong package of veterans' benefits legislation. Before we begin, I want to speak briefly about the items on the agenda that I have introduced:

As veterans and their families all across this nation struggle to stretch their dollars, the passage of S. 407, the Veterans' Compensation Cost-of-Living Adjustment Act of 2009, is critical. Among other benefits, it would increase the rates of compensation for veterans with service-connected disabilities, and it would increase the rates of dependency and indemnity compensation for the survivors of certain disabled veterans.

Many of the three million-plus recipients of these benefits depend upon the tax-free payments, not only to provide for their own basic needs, but for the needs of their families. Without an annual COLA increase, these veterans and their families would see the value of their hard-earned benefits slowly diminish. We would be delinquent if we did not ensure that those who sacrificed so much for this country receive the benefits and services they have earned.

S. 514, the Veterans Rehabilitation and Training Improvements Act of 2009, would ensure that veterans in VA's vocational rehabilitation program receive a subsistence allowance equal to an E-5's housing stipend. And if a veteran completes VA's vocational rehabilitation program, the bill also authorizes VA to reimburse that veteran for rehabilitation-related expenses like child care. Furthermore, the bill removes the cap on VA's independent living services.

S. 728, the Veterans' Insurance and Benefits Enhancement Act of 2009 is a comprehensive bill that would provide important benefits to veterans both young and old. This legislation would increase Veterans' Mortgage Life Insurance coverage and supplemental Service-Disabled Veterans Insurance for disabled veterans. It would also establish a new insurance program for service-connected veterans.

In addition, this legislation would expand eligibility for retroactive benefits from traumatic injury protection coverage under the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program. Importantly, this bill would also increase certain benefits that have not been updated for many years for veterans and their survivors.

Lastly, I have introduced legislation that would ease the burden placed on combat veterans to provide information on an event that caused a particular disability. This legislation would require VA to issue regulations that would specify events that are characteristics of particular combat zones, and for which a veteran's testimony concerning exposure to those events should be conceded.

I am eager for an open discussion on these meaningful pieces of legislation. I thank you all for joining us this morning and I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

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