

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Aloha and I welcome you all here today. In particular, I extend a warm aloha to PFC Skinner, who is here with the Non-Commissioned Officers Association this morning and who comes all the way from Hawaii. Also, I am always delighted to welcome Dr. Roy Kekahuna of the Blinded Veterans Association, who is originally from my home state of Hawaii. It is very good to have you here today, Roy.

I am pleased to join all the leaders of the Veterans' Affairs Committees in welcoming you all here today.

This gathering offers a very valuable opportunity to us - both in terms of hearing your views on needed policy changes - and in helping us to craft an appropriate budget for VA.

All of the organizations testifying before us today have proud traditions of working on behalf of those who have served in our armed forces. I applaud each of you for all that you do to better the lives of all veterans.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am resolute that veterans receive only the highest quality benefits and services.

Caring for our troops when they return home is a solemn responsibility. Part of our responsibility is providing the best health care and rehabilitation. Another part is fairly and expeditiously compensating veterans for their injuries, including invisible wounds.

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

VA health care - in many respects - is the best in our nation. I am proud that our collective work has contributed to the improvements in quality and access. Now, we must keep the momentum going.

My Majority colleagues on the Senate Committee and I just recommended that the VA health care account receive a \$4.6 billion increase over Fiscal Year 2008. We have wide recognition that the President's budget was only a start. We must go beyond this minimal funding to a level that is fair and to a level that will ensure quality health care.

As someone who knows firsthand how valuable the GI Bill is, we must make sure that the value of educational assistance benefits for veterans keeps pace with the rising costs of higher education. At the same time, we must examine the very important role that these benefits play in recruiting and retaining high caliber young men and women in our All Volunteer Force.

Timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims remains an issue. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly and without needless delay. I will continue to monitor the implementation of the substantial increase in staff that we achieved last year. It is especially important that quality does not suffer as anticipated improvements in timeliness are accomplished.

Assisting veterans' families is an essential part of the successful reintegration of new veterans into their communities. Family members are often the primary caregivers for injured veterans. VA has taken steps to reach out to these families in recent years, but much work still remains. Families of injured veterans face a multitude of wide-ranging needs - from caregiver training to education services to employment issues. I look forward to working with all of you on these important issues.

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 appropriately taken care of when they return home. Many of you have made suggestions in this area in your statements this morning and I look forward to evaluating those.

I am quite proud of the wounded warrior provisions we enacted last year as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. Those provisions are the product of unprecedented work between the Senate Committees on Armed Services and Veterans' Affairs. We will keep pushing VA and DoD to work as well as we did together.

I am especially proud of the provision I authored to expand VA health care eligibility for returning veterans from two to five years. It was critical that the term of automatic health care

eligibility for returning veterans be increased. My legislation on traumatic brain injury was also recently signed into law. VA must be at the forefront of TBI research and treatment.

Finally, there are some major bills that have yet to be considered in the Senate. We need to reach an agreement to debate these bills - all of which should receive an up or down vote. I hope that you will see movement to complete these bills in the near future. The Senate's omnibus health care and benefits bills are important to this Nation's veterans and active duty servicemembers.

In closing, I again thank all the national leaders here with us today and the membership of all of the participating organizations for your service and dedication to our Nation and its veterans.