

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

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

Hearing on the Legislative Presentations of the
Paralyzed Veterans of America, Blinded Veterans Association, Jewish War Veterans, Vietnam
Veterans of America, Non-Commissioned Officers Association, and Air Force Sergeants
Association

March 8, 2007

Aloha, I welcome you all here today. In particular, I give a warm Aloha to Dr. Roy Kekahuna of the Blinded Veterans Association, who is originally from my home state of Hawaii.

Dr. Kekahuna testified before the Senate Committee last January at our field hearing on the island of Maui. It is very good to have you here today, Roy.

I'm delighted to join Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House Committee,

my friend and Ranking Member Larry Craig, and all of my other colleagues for this important event. I am very pleased that we have reinstated these joint hearings. The views of the veterans service organizations are invaluable to the work we do here on Capitol Hill.

All of the organizations testifying before us today have proud traditions of work 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, I am committed to ensuring that we adequately fund VA so that the Department can furnish the necessary health care, rehabilitation, and compensation to those who have served.

Anything less is a breach of our fundamental obligation to those who wear and have worn our Nation's uniforms. Although VA is one of our Nation's top health care providers, many veterans are waiting far too long for both primary and specialized care. Unfortunately, VA lacks sufficient resources to meet the growing demand. In the budget process for the coming fiscal year, the Democratic members on the Committee and Senator Sanders,

who caucuses with us, recommended to the Senate Budget Committee in our Views and Estimates letter that VA receive an additional \$2.9 billion over the President's budget request for VA health care.

I also remain concerned about VA's ability to provide benefits in a timely and accurate manner. The wait for benefits adjudication is far too long. Now is the time for VA to hire and train staff to meet present and future demands on the system.

My majority colleagues and I also recommended to the Budget Committee that VBA be authorized to spend an additional \$50 million for compensation staffing and training.

As Congress debates the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must still ensure that VA is given the resources needed to carry out its vital missions ? not only for our newest veterans and those Guard and Reserve members coming home from conflict ? but for veterans of all wars. I share in the commitment to ensure a seamless transition from military to civilian life for our newest generation of veterans. VA must work actively with both the Departments of Defense and Labor so that our newest veterans do not slip through the cracks. There is much work to be done in this area and the Senate Committee will be holding more hearings on various aspects of the transition issue.

I am pleased that the White House is taking this situation seriously, and I look forward to working with the President's newly established Commission.

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.