

Chairman Daniel K . Akaka

The legislation before us will help VA adapt to the needs of America's veterans and their families. Veterans have earned at least this much through their honorable service to this country. We are considering a number of significant and far-reaching bills to improve VA health care and benefits. These measures were before the Committee in two hearings last month and have been the subject of ongoing discussion and development.

I am pleased that our agenda has been developed in a bipartisan manner and with so much involvement by the Members. I will now highlight just a few of the items we are considering today.

S. 252, the Veterans Health Care Authorization Act of 2009, will strengthen VA's workforce and help make VA an employer of choice. The bulk of the provisions in this bill were included in a bill that the Committee reported out last year. I am confident that by approving it today without controversial amendments we will be able to enact most or all of the provisions into law. If enacted, this bill will make VA more attractive to talented health care professionals, through recruitment and retention incentives. It will also direct VA to develop community partnerships in order to reach out to veterans who are eligible for care, but do not receive it.

The Budget Resolution included language that will allow Senate passage of advance funding for VA health care. Today, we take another step in ensuring timely and predictable funding for VA health care. S. 423 is supported by the nation's leading veterans organizations and 47 of our colleagues in the Senate, including a majority of the Members of this Committee. This bill has the potential to strengthen every aspect of VA's nationwide health care system.

S. 801 is legislation aimed at helping disabled veterans and the members of their families who provide care to them. By approving this legislation, we move closer to establishing a permanent program to train, certify, and support these family caregivers, a vital link in the chain of those who help meet the needs of veterans disabled during their service. VA and family caregivers should be working together as partners. Through this bill, VA can improve that partnership, by providing caregivers with the support they deserve. This is an issue that is ripe for focused improvement, and I am confident that this legislation will make a real difference.

The rural health provisions in S. 801 will change VA care in order to address the needs of veterans living in rural communities where they face many obstacles in obtaining the quality care they have earned. This has always been a concern, and it is even more so today because many of those currently serving are from rural areas. Much of the rural veterans provisions are the product of testimony at this year's rural health hearing, as well as other stories we have heard from former servicemembers in rural and remote communities. They have made it clear that more action is needed to close the gap between what rural veterans have earned through their service, and what they are receiving. This is especially true for veterans of the Guard and Reserve. Unlike their active duty counterparts, rural Guard and Reservists are often too isolated to benefit from the support available in military communities and larger cities with a VA presence.

We are also considering a broad benefits package to help veterans young and old, as well as their survivors. The Committee's Veterans' Benefits Enhancement Act of 2009 would upgrade insurance benefits for disabled veterans, who have limited insurance options due to their service-connected disabilities. It would also increase coverage under the Veterans' Mortgage Life Insurance program, which is much-needed in today's housing market. In the event of the veteran's death, the veteran's family is protected because VA will pay the balance of the mortgage owed up to the maximum amount of insurance purchased.

The benefits package also includes a provision that would expand eligibility for retroactive benefits from traumatic injury protection coverage under the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program. All insured servicemembers under SGLI from December 1, 2006 forward are covered by traumatic injury protection regardless of where their injuries occur. However, individuals sustaining traumatic injuries between October 7, 2001, and November 30, 2005, that were not incurred as a direct result of Operations Enduring or Iraqi Freedom are left out. This legislation would expand eligibility to these individuals. Importantly, this legislation would also relieve the burden on certain combat veterans who seek to prove that their disabilities are service-connected.

This is a strong agenda that we have before us today and I again thank my colleagues and their staff for working in a cooperative, bi-partisan fashion to bring us to this point.

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