

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Aloha. I welcome all of you who are here today. A warm aloha to Commander George Lisicki, his senior officials, and all VFW members and Ladies Auxiliary members in the audience.

A special warm aloha to Richard Wong, State Commander, and his colleagues, Richard Haake, Norbert Enos, Nick Young, Lorn Cramer, Rick Ferris, and Paula Kalanikau who have traveled all the way from my home state of Hawaii.

I am pleased to join all the leaders of the Veterans' Affairs Committees - Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House Committee, as well as my colleague, Senator Richard Burr, the Senate's Ranking Member.

This forum is very valuable to us - both in terms of hearing your views on needed policy changes and in helping us to create an appropriate budget for VA.

VFW has a long and proud tradition of public service. Your tireless advocacy on behalf of our Nation's veterans is truly honorable, and I applaud you for all that you do.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. When we send our troops into battle, we must be prepared to care for them when they return home. Caring for them means providing the best health care and rehabilitation. It means fairly compensating veterans for their injuries. We simply must - in this time of war - ensure that VA is equipped with the resources necessary to carry out these missions, now and into the future. The cost of veterans' benefits and services is a cost of war and must be understood as such.

VA is one of the premiere health care providers in the Nation, and I am proud to have contributed to the improvements in quality and access to VA care. Now, our task is to keep the resources flowing. 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. The President's budget took a meek approach to funding VA. We must go even further, and we will.

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.

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 has a responsibility to be at the forefront of TBI research and treatment.

Finally, I am hopeful that action on major bills that have not yet been considered in the Senate will take place soon. I have been attempting to work with my colleagues to reach an agreement

to debate these bills - all of which should receive an up or down vote - and feel that you will see movement to complete these bills in the near future. The Senate's omnibus health care and benefits bills are vitally important to this Nation's veterans and active duty servicemembers.

In closing, I again thank Commander Lisicki and the members of VFW. You have a long and proud tradition of service and dedication to this Nation and its veterans. I look forward to your presentation today. Thank you.