

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT - April 3, 2008

Aloha. I welcome all of you to our fourth joint hearing of the Senate and House Veterans' Affairs Committees this Session.

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

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am unwavering in my belief that veterans and survivors should receive the highest quality benefits and services. This is not negotiable.

We must - in this time of war - equip VA with the resources necessary to carry out its mission, now and into the future. Veterans' benefits and services are a cost of war and must be understood - and funded - as such.

Caring for our troops when they return home is our moral responsibility. Providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for the newest generation of veterans is vital. It is also part of our responsibility to provide veterans with the best health care and rehabilitation available. We must also ensure the timely and accurate compensation of veterans for their injuries, including the invisible wounds of war.

I am proud of the wounded warrior provisions we enacted last year as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. In particular, we know that invisible wounds may take time to manifest - a provision I authored expands VA health care eligibility for returning veterans from two to five years.

In addition, I am proud that 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.

As someone who knows firsthand the value of the GI bill benefit, we must make sure that the value of educational assistance benefits for veterans keeps pace with the rising costs of higher education.

Adjudication of disability claims remains an issue. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly and without needless delay. We will continue to review veterans' disability compensation and the claims adjudication process this Session.

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 more needs to be done.

Finally, there are some major bills that have yet to be considered by the full Senate. I am working to reach an agreement to debate these bills and I hope that there will be action to complete these bills in the near future.

In closing, I again thank each of the veterans' and survivors' organizations for being here today. I thank you for your dedication to this Nation's veterans and those who survive them.