

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Aloha and welcome to all of you who are here today. A warm aloha to National Commander Robert T. Reynolds, his senior officials, and all DAV members in the audience.

A special warm aloha to Harold Minami and Thomas Freitas, who traveled all the way from my home state of Hawaii to be with us today.

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, Richard Burr, the Senate's Ranking Member.

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

DAV 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. As I have said many times before, 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.

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.

I am also very aware of how important it is that funding gets to VA on time. I will be working with my colleagues on the Appropriations Committee to ensure that it happens this year.

However, I remain open to new approaches to guarantee timely funding of VA's discretionary programs, and I look forward to working with DAV and other veterans groups on such proposals.

Timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims also 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.

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.

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.

Assisting veterans' families is 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. DAV is working with some of the top experts in the health care field and you have brought solid, real-world ideas to the Congress. I look forward to working with all of you on these important issues.

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 cooperation 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 care was

also recently signed into law as part of the NDAA. VA has a responsibility to be at the forefront of TBI research and treatment.

Finally, I am hopeful that action on major veterans' 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 hope 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 Reynolds and the members of DAV. 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.