

OPENING STATEMENT  
Field Hearing on the State of VA Services on Maui

January 7, 2010

Aloha. As a Committee, we have held similar hearings on Maui before. Much has improved in recent years, for which I am grateful, but it is important for us to understand the present challenges. Both the clinic and Vet Center on Maui are tremendously busy, and must be available to those Maui veterans who rely on VA for their care, and to veterans living on Lanai and Molokai as well.

I applaud the efforts of VA employees in Hawaii - these men and women work hard to help the veterans who seek their assistance. There are many things that VA does well in Hawaii. However, there is always room for improvement. Indeed, our unique geography, diversity, and way of life require that VA develop a unique strategy to care for our island's veterans.

Ensuring timely access to mental health services for veterans living on Maui has been a challenge due to reported shortages of VA and community health providers on the island. However, VA has established new mental health positions at the Maui Clinic and has expanded telehealth capabilities to other islands. There has also been some indication of a desire to create a single location on the island for veterans' services in lieu of the existing three locations. I hope to discuss these and other important issues with veterans and VA today.

Back in Washington, we have worked hard to ensure that VA has the resources to provide the best possible care. In my years as Chairman, Congress provided record-breaking funding increases to VA. Last year, I introduced the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act to secure funding for veterans' health care one-year in advance of the regular appropriations process. This bill was signed into law in October. And we have followed up that success, with passage of our caregivers bill, which would help wounded warriors and the families who care for them. This bill, which also improves care for women veterans, those who reside in rural areas, and those who are homeless, has been sent to the House of Representatives. I expect to finalize this bill in the coming months.

Finally, I note that there are many veterans here today who would like to testify. While we cannot accommodate everyone's request to speak, we do want to hear your views. The Committee is accepting written testimony which will be reviewed and made part of the record of today's hearing. If you have brought written testimony with you, please give it to Committee staff who are located in the back of the room. If you do not have written testimony but would like to submit something, Committee staff will assist you. In addition, the Committee staff is joined by VA staff who can respond to the questions, concerns, and comments that you raise.

I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses.

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