

Ranking Member Senator Daniel K. Akaka

Committee on Veterans' Affairs - Opening Statement by Ranking Member Senator Daniel K. Akaka

Washington, D.C.- I am very pleased to welcome Ambassador James Nicholson to our hearing today. Mr. Ambassador, I welcome your wife, Suzanne, and your family, and thank them for their contributions to this process, as well.

We have some new members on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and I am confident that they will make important contributions as we work together to fulfill our nation's commitment to America's veterans.

Mr. Ambassador, I know I do not need to impress upon you the importance of the leadership role you will soon assume at VA. As a graduate of the United States Military Academy, you've been provided with valuable lessons in leadership which can be applied to VA. We expect you to hit the ground running to tackle VA's many challenges. And, of course, we will all be there to support you.

On the health care side of VA, I think you will find that we are always open to new and cost-effective ways to care for our current veterans and those who are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. However, it is a nonstarter to cut back on services or cut who is eligible for VA care.

I am proud of the work we did in 1996 to improve eligibility for care. Health care is now very often provided in different settings, which are frequently not hospitals. Outpatient clinics dot the landscape and provide for ease of access.

We have seen huge numbers of veterans seeking VA care for the first time. I, for one, believe this is a good thing. Others rationalize that as we are at war, we must cut back on VA care. I simply do not understand this logic.

We are at war, and therefore we must do everything we can to show our military that VA health care will be there for all veterans who served.

On the benefits side, we are in crisis. VA has come under fire for the lack of timeliness of its claims' processing. As a result, the Veterans Benefits Administration has turned its attention to decreasing the amount of time it takes to process a claim, to the detriment of the quality of its decision-making.

We are looking to you for innovative approaches so that the Veterans Benefits Administration can absorb changes in law and new business processes without always going into a nose dive. Our veterans deserve no less than quality workmanship done in a timely manner.

Mr. Ambassador, George Washington said, "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." Mr. Ambassador, our Nation and our veterans are depending on you. Our servicemembers returning

from Iraq and Afghanistan have earned a seamless transition from the military to civilian life. You must assure us that the Department of Veterans Affairs will do its part in this endeavor.

Thank you.