

Senator Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman

OPENING STATEMENT

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Chairman

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

United States Senate

Hearing on Pending Legislation

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Aloha and good morning. I welcome everyone to the Committee's hearing on pending legislation. Today the Committee will hear testimony on five bills from a number of witnesses.

The bills under consideration are largely in response to the needs of the newest generation of veterans but hold promise for all veterans.

Mental health issues remain an important part of our work in the Committee. Based upon the valuable testimony gathered at our mental health hearing in April, I introduced S. 2162, "The Mental Health Improvements Act of 2007." I am pleased that Senator Burr has joined as a co-sponsor. Now more than ever, VA must make mental health services a priority. New approaches and programs aimed at substance use disorder, PTSD, and readjustment services are included in this legislation.

Also on the agenda is legislation which recognizes the need for improvements in VA's pain care management program. VA's current pain care efforts are worthwhile, but are unfortunately too inconsistent and unstandardized to adequately meet the needs of all veterans. S. 2160 would enhance VA's pain management program on a national, system-wide level, through better clinical practices, research, and professional education.

Senator Murray and Senator Craig have proposed S. 2004, which would require VA to create epilepsy centers of excellence. These centers would focus their attention upon research, education, and clinical care related to epilepsy. Epilepsy is anticipated to be an increasingly prevalent condition among veterans. We have learned that veterans with TBI are at a substantially increased risk to develop post-trauma seizures months or even years after injury.

We also have before us a bill by Senator Brown to clarify how non-VA emergency care needs to work. Senator Brown chaired a field hearing earlier this year which highlighted problems with the reimbursement process for veterans and private hospitals when emergency care and treatment is needed. Senator Brown's bill would improve the emergency treatment of veterans at non-VA facilities by removing uncertainty through a mandatory reimbursement system and a clarification of transfer procedures.

We will have a Committee markup next month. My expectation is that we can move some of this legislation forward to the full Senate.

In closing, I note that the Committee has moved much legislation through its process. Several large authorization bills are on the Senate calendar. As Chairman, I am working with our new Ranking Member on time agreements so that we can expedite the path to enactment. I am hopeful that we will be able to reach agreement and get the pending bills to the floor in the next week or so.