

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Women Veterans: Bridging the Gaps in Care

July 14, 2009

Aloha and good morning. Welcome to this important hearing on VA's health care services for women veterans. We will be looking at programs already in the works to improve access to and the quality of care, and other unique issues facing women veterans.

Women veterans are the fastest growing segment of veterans. In 1988, when VA first began providing care to women, they were only four percent of the veteran population. Today, the percentage of women veterans is nearing eight percent and expected to rise substantially over the next two decades. So it is appropriate that we ask now, "Is VA meeting the needs of women veterans?"

Many women veterans in need of services fall through the cracks because VA doesn't have a thoroughly gender-focused range of care set up to catch them. There are many obstacles that veterans face – access to health care and homelessness are two – and many veterans, woman veterans in particular, are struggling to get the services they deserve.

For too long, the approach to helping veterans avoid obstacles to VA benefits and services has been predominately focused on men. Today the Committee will review these issues and how they affect women veterans. While I applaud VA for the progress it has made in recent years to ramp up services for the rapidly growing number of women veterans, there is much still to be done to bridge the gaps in access to care that women veterans face compared to their male counterparts.

I am pleased that the Committee, with the leadership of Senator Murray, recently approved legislation designed to enhance the understanding of women veterans' need for health care and to improve the delivery of that care. I hope to bring this legislation before the full Senate during this work period. Today's hearing gives us a chance to better understand the current situation, with an eye toward fixing what is not working and expanding what is.

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