

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of Veterans Service Organizations
March 18, 2010

As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. Each time our government fails to reach one of our newest veterans, we neglect our collective obligation to those who have served. As our troops return home from service in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must be prepared to care for them with the same dedication and commitment they showed in battle.

Just last month, the Senate Committee held its hearing on the President's budget for VA. Two weeks ago, we sent our recommendations to the Senate Budget Committee, recommending increases above the President's budget in some key areas, including research and construction. Although many agencies are facing budget cuts, I am pleased that the VA budget – critical for meeting the needs of so many of this Nation's veterans – is increasing. For the first time, in this budget, we see the fruits of our labor in passing the advanced funding legislation. The President's budget includes a funding request for VA medical care into fiscal year 2012. We worked together to pass advance funding for VA health care. Many of your organizations' efforts were invaluable.

Our committees are finalizing a health care bill that, among other things, will include provisions to provide critical support for family caregivers. Assisting the families of veterans is a key part of the successful and seamless reintegration of veterans into their communities. Family members are often the primary caregivers for injured veterans. We recognize that a family's commitment to its injured veteran can cause serious financial, emotional, and practical hardships. Our family caregiver bill will help families bear this burden.

Regarding benefits, timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims remains a significant problem. I know that the Administration is committed to addressing this issue and is moving to add significant staff and resources to that effort. Claims and appeals processing is an area on which we will continue to focus. We must be realistic, however, about the claims processing backlog. It can take years for new staff to become skilled at processing claims, and technology and pilot programs can only do so much in the short term.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Committees and in Congress, as well as Secretary Shinseki, and your organizations, as we move forward on the budget and legislation.

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