

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. 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. Last Friday, the Senate Committee held its hearing on the President's budget for VA. Tomorrow, we will be sending our recommendations to the Senate Budget Committee. 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. Your organizations' efforts were invaluable.

Our committees are finalizing a health care bill that, among other things, will prohibit VA from collecting any copayment for hospital care or medical services from catastrophically disabled veterans. These veterans rely on VA health care at a much higher rate than many other veterans and should not be required to pay fees and copayments for their care. Our health care bill will also include provisions to provide critical support for family caregivers. These family members elect to take on the responsibility of providing care for seriously injured veterans. This commitment often creates serious financial, emotional, and practical hardships. Our bill will help lift this burden.

On the benefits side of the ledger, 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. 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 your testimony, and thank all of you for your service.