

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Daniel K. Akaka

Chairman

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

United States Senate

Hearing on the Nomination of Michael J. Kussman, MD, to be Under Secretary for Health  
of the Department of Veterans Affairs

March 16, 2007

This hearing is to consider the nomination of Michael J. Kussman, M.D., to be VA's Under Secretary for Health.

Dr. Kussman, your nomination comes before the Senate at a difficult and challenging time for VA. The terrible conditions at Walter Reed put a spotlight on VA health care. With each passing day, more and more servicemembers are returning with serious traumas and injuries, which for some will mean a lifetime of care from VA. As servicemembers reach out to VA, inevitably we hear tragic stories of those who did not get the care they needed.

There is no doubt that mental health issues will also be a challenge for VA. A truth of the war is that the toll will be felt by servicemembers and their families for years to come. I am talking about invisible wounds - wounds which cannot be seen but are every bit as devastating as physical wounds.

VA's Under Secretary for Health is one of the most important public servants. The next Under Secretary will guide the VA medical system at a time when so many new veterans will be turning to VA. From my vantage point, VA was not prepared to deal with the types of injuries

stemming from this war. Capacity must be rebuilt. And the next Under Secretary will have this challenge.

I urge you, Dr. Kussman: if you are confirmed, to first and foremost serve as an advocate for veterans. I am quite cognizant of the constraints placed upon you by the White House and OMB. I promise you my full cooperation and assistance, but I tell you now, that I will not be satisfied unless you work to uphold the promises made to all our troops.