

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Good morning. The Committee convenes today to consider the nomination of the Honorable Patrick Dunne to be Under Secretary for Benefits.

I am pleased to welcome Admiral Dunne and his family to today's hearing. Admiral Dunne is accompanied by his wife, Diane; his daughter, Erin; and his son, Patrick. Welcome to each of you. As we say in Hawaii, e komo mai.

The nominee before the Committee today had a long and distinguished career in the United States Navy before retiring as a Rear Admiral in December 2005. He was nominated to serve as VA's Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning in May 2006, and this Committee held a hearing and sent his nomination forward to the full Senate which confirmed him on August 3, 2006. He continues to hold this position while also being designated as the Acting Under Secretary for Benefits since Admiral Cooper's retirement in April of this year.

Admiral Dunne, having performed the duties of this office for the past five and a half months, I know you are aware of the many challenges facing the Veterans Benefits Administration. The backlog of disability compensation claims remains a major concern, even as VBA continues to explore fundamental reforms to the structure of disability compensation payments. Based on your testimony and thoughtful responses to questions at this Committee's recent hearing on claims processing, I know that you understand the Committee's concern that claims be processed as timely and accurately as possible.

There are also important decisions to be made regarding administration of the GI Bill for the 21st Century, which was recently signed by the President. It is also critically important that the Under Secretary for Benefits be personally committed to the joint efforts of VA and the Department of Defense to meet the needs of servicemembers transitioning from active duty to veteran status.

The Committee realizes that there are only a few months left in the current Administration and it's uncertain how much time you will have to tackle these challenges. Typically, this late in the second term of an Administration, I would not seek to act on a nomination and would leave the acting official in place for the duration of the term. However, given that the nominee before the Committee is the acting official and has been performing the duties of the office for five and a half months, I believe it prudent to give him the clear authority and responsibility that accompanies Senate confirmation. This will enable Admiral Dunne to effectively lead VBA through the end of the term and ensure a successful transition to the next Administration.

I note that the nominee answered my pre-hearing questions and also has completed the Committee Questionnaire for Presidential Nominees which will appear in the hearing record. Also included will be a letter from the Office of Government Ethics acknowledging that the nominee is in compliance with laws and regulations governing conflicts of interest. In addition, Admiral Dunne's complete statement will be printed as part of the record of these proceedings.