

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Hearing on VA-Indian Health Service Cooperation

November 5, 2009

Good morning. I am delighted that the Committee is focusing on the joint efforts of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Indian Health Service to improve care for Native American veterans. Native American veterans have a rich and storied history of service to our nation, and like all veterans, they deserve the care and benefits they have earned.

Many Native American veterans serve with distinction but return home to a difficult transition. Substance abuse, extreme poverty and unemployment still plague parts of Indian Country. American Indian and Alaska Native veterans are nearly 50 percent more likely than other veterans to have a service-connected disability, and twice as likely to be unemployed. As we will hear from a witness from my home state, challenges also extend to other Native veterans, including the many Native Hawaiians who have, and are, serving our nation.

Today's hearing focuses on health care. Despite dual-eligibility for VA and IHS health care, American Indian and Alaska Native veterans report unmet health care needs at four times the rate of other veterans. In 2003, VA and IHS signed a memorandum of understanding, agreeing to mutual goals and actions to improve cooperation and collaboration. I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses on the progress being made towards those goals.

Senator Tester has been a leader on this issue, and an advocate for Native veterans in Montana and across the nation. Indeed, today's hearing is in response to his request and I will be turning the gavel over to him momentarily.

As I speak, tribal leaders are gathering for a White House summit. Such summits remind us of the government-to-government relationship the U.S. has with tribal nations and their members. For VA to effectively serve the many Native Americans who have shared in our mutual defense, it must also collaborate with the federally recognized tribal governments whose citizens serve with pride and patriotism.

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