

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Legislative Priorities of the Disabled American Veterans
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Aloha and welcome to all of you who are here today. I especially welcome National Commander Raymond E. Dempsey, his senior officials, and all DAV members in the audience.

I am pleased to join all the leaders of the Veterans' Affairs Committees - Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House Committee, as well as my colleague, Richard Burr, the Senate Committee's Ranking Member.

This forum is very valuable to us - both to hear your views on needed legislative changes and in helping us create an appropriate budget for VA.

DAV is one of the nation's premier veterans' organizations. I thank you for all the help and insight you give to our Committee. Your support in helping us pass comprehensive mental health care reform legislation last year was invaluable. Your tireless advocacy on behalf of our Nation's veterans is truly honorable, and I applaud you for all that you do.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am committed to ensuring that veterans receive the highest quality benefits and services. When we send troops into battle, we must be prepared to care for them when they return home. This means providing the best health care and rehabilitation. It means fairly compensating veterans for their injuries. We simply must - in this time of war - ensure that VA is equipped with the resources it needs to carry out these missions, now and into the future.

Two weeks ago, I introduced bi-partisan legislation to help secure the timely funding of veterans' health care through advance appropriations. Too often VHA's budget is subject to delay and uncertainty, hampering budget planning and threatening health care quality for wounded and indigent veterans. This situation must end. I applaud DAV's advocacy of this important legislation.

This Thursday, the President's budget will be announced, and I look forward to working with DAV as we work on that budget and make changes to it, where appropriate.

We've done much together to work on matters related to disability compensation. Timely and accurate adjudication of disability claims and appeals remains problematic.

A number of reports were published during the last Congress relating to disability evaluation and compensation. A common recommendation includes comprehensively restructuring the disability compensation system, including consideration for the loss in quality of life caused by

injury. Earlier this month, the Senate Committee continued its efforts in this area, holding a hearing on improvements to address delays in appeals.

Claims and appeals processing is an area we will continue to focus on during this Session. Veterans deserve to have their claims addressed fairly and without needless delay.

As one who knows firsthand how valuable the GI Bill is, I will work to make certain that the new GI Bill is implemented as Congress intended.

I know that all of you share my commitment to providing a seamless transition from military to civilian life for the newest generation of veterans. VA must be an active partner with the Department of Defense to ensure that the newest veterans are appropriately taken care of when they return home.

Prompted by a letter that Senator Burr and I sent earlier this month on the alarming rise in soldier suicides, the Secretaries are meeting today to discuss this important issue. I am eager to learn what action the Departments intend to take to address this issue.

In closing, I thank Commander Dempsey and the members of DAV. You have a long and proud tradition of service and dedication to this Nation and its veterans. I look forward to working with you on a variety of issues this Congress. Thank you.