

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Joint Hearing to Receive the Legislative Presentation of the Veterans of Foreign Wars
March 9, 2010

Good morning. 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.

Just two weeks ago, the Senate Committee held its hearing on the President's budget for VA. Last Friday, we sent our recommendations to the Senate Budget Committee, recommending increases above the President's budget in some key areas, including research and construction. 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. VFW's efforts were invaluable.

Our committees are finalizing a health care bill that, among other things, will 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 families bare 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 working with my colleagues on the Committees and in Congress, as well as Secretary Shinseki, and of course, VFW, as we move forward on the budget and legislation.

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