

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

OPENING STATEMENT

Senator Daniel K. Akaka

Chairman

Committee on Veterans' Affairs

United States Senate

Hearing on the Legislative Presentation of the
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States

Aloha, I welcome you all here today. In particular, I give a warm Aloha to Commander Gary Kurpius, his senior officials, all the VFW members and Ladies Auxiliary members, I give a special warm Aloha to Nick Young, State Commander and his colleagues, Richard Wong, George Barlett, Joe Ancheta, Ben Acohido, Norbert Enos, Gerri Enos, Paula Kalanikau, Anita Acohido, and Betty Morris who have traveled all the way from my home state of Hawaii. It's a pleasure joining Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer of the House Committee, my friend and Ranking Member Larry Craig, and all of my other colleagues for this important event. I am delighted that we have reinstated these joint hearings. This is truly democracy in action.

VFW has a long and proud tradition of public service. Your many charitable works and advocacy on behalf of veterans are truly exemplary and I applaud you for all that you do.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee, I am committed to ensuring that we fund VA so that the Department can furnish the necessary health care, rehabilitation, and compensation to those who have served. Anything less is a breach of our fundamental obligation to those who wear and have worn our Nation's uniforms.

Although VA is one of our Nation's top health care providers, many veterans are waiting far too long for both primary and specialized care. Unfortunately, VA lacks sufficient resources to meet the growing demand. In the budget process for the coming fiscal year, Democratic colleagues on the Committee and Senator Sanders, who caucuses with us, have recommended to the Senate Budget Committee that VA receive an additional \$2.9 billion for VA health care over the President's budget request.

I am also concerned about VA's ability to provide benefits in a timely and accurate manner. The wait for benefits adjudication is way too long. Now is the time for VA to hire and train staff to meet present and future demands on the system. My Democratic colleagues and I have recommended that VBA be authorized an additional \$50 million for compensation staffing and training.

Even as Congress debates the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we must ensure that VA is given the resources needed to carry out its missions ? not only for our newest veterans and those Guard and Reserve members coming home from conflict ? but for veterans of all wars.

Commander, I share in your commitment to ensure a seamless transition from military to civilian life for our newest generation of veterans. VA must be an active partner with the Departments of Defense and Labor so that our newest veterans do not fall through the cracks.

I apologize, but I must excuse myself. I know the members of the VFW will understand fully. There is a hearing right now in the Armed Services Committee, where I also am a member, focusing on Walter Reed. I visited Walter Reed last week with Armed Services Committee Chairman Levin and other Senators. There is much work to be done both with respect to Walter Reed itself and to the overall matter of VA-DoD cooperation. I am pleased that the White House is taking this situation seriously, and I look forward to working with the President's Commission.

I again thank Commander Kurpius and the membership of VFW for your service and dedication to our Nation and its veterans.