Senator Begich Opening Statement
SVAC Conference Committee
2:50: pm; June 24, 2014; SVC 210

The House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Conference Committee will meet on Tuesday, June 24th at 2:50 P.M. and conduct a discussion regarding H.R. 3230 amendments in SVC 212-10. Each member will have 5 minutes to talk about their priorities/amendments. The chairs recognize members by seniority with Democrat then Republican. This hearing will work to reconcile the differences between the Senate and House passed bills. The easiest way for senator's to get to the conference committee meeting is to enter into the CVC from the senate subway, take the spiral stairs down one flight to the second floor. Go through the double doors which lead to SVC217 (Senate Security) and then through the double wooden doors at the end of that hallway. SVC210 will be immediately on the left for members and their staff to enter.

Thank you chairs Sanders and Miller.

Honor to be on this committee and hope we can come to an agreement so veterans do not have to wait for their care.

I want to be clear; we need to pass something to ensure accountability for the public trust.

I also feel strongly about supporting and strengthening the VA.

As you know, Alaska has been in the forefront in access to care closer to home for our veterans in the most rural remote places in our country.

Veterans in Alaska have unique needs. The sheer size of the state creates challenges in delivering veterans' health care, and many live in areas off the road system with air transportation as their only option, which is heavily dependent on weather conditions.

Veterans in most of Alaska do get their health care needs addressed in their home villages.

We did this with the help of many of the VSO's in this room today. They were very leery of any care outside of the VA.

But they also knew that we needed to take care of veterans in Barrow and Nome and places that did not have a VA, or private doctors!

We did that by working directly with Secretary Shinseki and the tribal health providers.

Each provider has a unique agreement with the VA, with the goal of providing care to veterans who would otherwise have to travel sometimes thousands of miles to get health care.

To date there are 25 agreements with Alaska tribal health providers and VA and agreements with the Federally Qualified Health Centers.

The Alaska VA has made great progress in the last four years by expanding outreach, telemedicine, and reducing long wait times to just less than a week.

Given Alaska's unique challenges of making health care accessible, I believe Alaska serves as a model for the VA's nationwide effort to deliver better care for our veterans.

The internationally recognized system of care Nuka has rural health care.

For the purpose of this conference committee I would like to put forward the model of the Alaska Hero Card, expanding to rural areas around the country. If it works in Alaska it can work anywhere.

As for the shortage of providers in the VA, working with the community, such as in Wasilla, where there were no primary care physicians at the CBOC

The Alaska VA worked on an agreement for the veterans who chose to, to go across the road to the brand new clinic run by the tribal provider and get their primary care with no wait.

And for mental health, my bill with Senator Pryor the *Ensuring Veteran's Resiliency Act* would authorize the VA to recruit a select number of psychiatrists, with 50% being from rural areas by offering loan repayment incentives.

According to the president's fiscal year (FY) 2015 budget request, more than 1.4 million veterans received specialized mental health treatment in FY 2013

In addition, more than 55 percent of post-9/11 veterans have a mental health diagnosis, and each year approximately 6,000 veterans commit suicide.

The single greatest workforce need for the VHA was for more psychiatrists to meet the mental health and substance use treatment needs of veterans.

As far as construction, I have a proposal to look at the way the VA builds their facilities. For the future building built by the VA the design-build guaranteed maximum price with personal guarantees with bonus. I would be happy to talk about this in length.

As long as I am a member of this committee I will continue to make sure we put our veterans first and do everything we can to push to get them the care and benefits they deserve.

These veterans, through their military service to our nation, have more than earned it.