

COLLEEN W. HANABUSA
1ST DISTRICT, HAWAII

238 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515
TELEPHONE: 202-225-2726
FAX: 202-225-0688

300 ALA MOANA BLVD.
ROOM 4-104
HONOLULU, HI 96850
TELEPHONE: 808-541-2570
FAX: 808-533-0133

hanabusa.house.gov



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1101

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES
SUBCOMMITTEES:
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INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE AFFAIRS
(RANKING MEMBER)
ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCES
PUBLIC LANDS AND
ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION

August 19, 2014

Aloha Senator Hirono,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments at the field hearing you are chairing entitled “The State of VA Health Care in Hawaii.” I apologize that I am unable to attend in person.

The recent scandal at the Phoenix Veterans Affairs Healthcare System has left policymakers and the general public alike searching for ways to fix this troubled system. Generally, the debate has focused on whether veterans should be allowed to seek private healthcare when they are waitlisted at a VA facility. I do not believe the answer is that simple, and from what I have heard from most of the veterans I have spoken with here in Hawaii, they are generally happy with the level of care they receive once they have access to the VA system.

However, Hawaii, like every other location in the nation, is experiencing a backlog in providing healthcare to our veterans. Adding to the problem is the fact that Hawaii is often tasked with providing veterans’ services to the entire Pacific Area of Responsibility (AOR). With large veteran populations in Guam, the Philippines, American Samoa, and elsewhere in the Pacific AOR, Hawaii’s already crowded system becomes even more overburdened.

The House and Senate recently passed H.R. 3230, also known as the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014, and it was signed into law by President Obama earlier this month. This legislation makes it possible for veterans experiencing extremely long wait

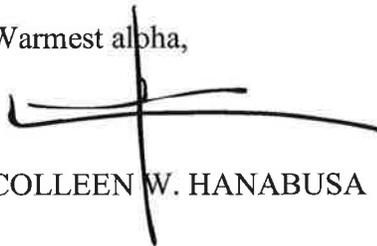
times to access outside care should they wish to do so, provides additional funding to hire nurses and doctors, and executes long-overdue leases on major medical facilities in the Department, including the new Advance Leeward Outpatient Healthcare Access Center; I have introduced legislation to name the latter after Senator Akaka. I believe this is a good first step in fixing some of the fundamental problems plaguing the VA.

On a Hawaii-centric level, I have remained in constant contact with Mr. Wayne Pfeffer, Director of the VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VA PIHCS). Mr. Pfeffer has pledged that he will have the wait time for veterans' initial primary care appointments down to 30 days within three months, and VA PIHCS has made significant progress toward this goal. We have been able to further analyze the data they have provided my office to really pinpoint where some of the problems lie, an analysis that will help us address VA issues locally.

Finally, as the ranking member on the House Subcommittee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs, I applaud the effort the veterans' compromise bill has made in enhancing collaboration with the Indian Health Service and the Native Hawaiian Health Care Systems as a community-based approach to addressing long-standing issues.

I recognize that providing care to our veterans is a moral obligation, reflecting and acknowledging the tremendous sacrifices they made for our country. I also recognize that this is not a problem we can fix overnight, and pledge to you and our veterans that I will remain dedicated to seeking all opportunities to provide them the best care possible at every point along the way.

Warmest alpha,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'COLLEEN W. HANABUSA'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a vertical line through the middle.

COLLEEN W. HANABUSA