

Aloha Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and Members of the Committee. Mahalo for the opportunity to discuss veterans issues in Hawai'i's second congressional district and the Pacific region.

Overview

Veterans make up approximately 10% of Hawai'i's population. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Hawai'i's second congressional district is home to 56,389 veterans. Our state also has a large number of women and minority veterans: 11,356 female veterans and 72,215 minority veterans. On behalf of Hawai'i's large and diverse veteran constituency, I would like to advocate for 1) VA telehealth partnership programs, 2) minority and gender-specific health care for veterans, and 3) honoring the late Senator Daniel K. Akaka by renaming the ALOHA VA Clinic as the "Daniel K. Akaka Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Center."

VA telehealth partnership programs

Hawai'i's veteran population is spread out across the Hawaiian Islands. Veterans who live on Lāna'i, for example, face tremendous difficulty accessing care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, doctor shortages also contributed to the rural health care challenges in our state and district. As our country invests more resources into broadband infrastructure, I believe that telehealth services will significantly improve access to care for many people, including our veterans. The VA Pacific Islands Health Care System (VAPIHCS) has been actively working with the Pacific Basin Telehealth Resource Center (PBTRC) at the University of Hawai'i to increase partnerships to expand telehealth across the state of Hawai'i and the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands. I urge the committee to further support VA pilot programs that identify and do outreach to non-VA clinics in areas of high veteran populations for provider support and training in adoption of telehealth, as well as other technical assistance.

Peer support specialists for women veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs

As previously mentioned, Hawai'i has a large population of women and minority veterans. Women are also the fastest growing cohort within the U.S. veteran community at-large. The increased number of women veterans necessitates the greater need to provide and expand access to gender-specific services, including peer support programs, that are led by qualified specialists. Programs like the Women Veterans Network (WoVen) have demonstrated the effectiveness of peer support programs specifically designed for women veterans, and the VA requires additional peer support specialists to heighten access to similar programs and services tailored to the unique needs of women veterans within its care. I strongly support increasing the number of peer support specialists for women veterans at the VA.

Center for Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islander Health

I am also proud of the fact that Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (including our Compact of Freely Associated States (COFA) brothers and sisters) enroll in the military at higher rates than the general population.

House Veterans Affairs Committee Written Testimony
Congressman Kaiali‘i Kahele
May 26, 2021

As we continue to celebrate “Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders” month for the remainder of May, I believe that the federal government should do more to recognize the significant contributions of Native Hawaiian (NH), Pacific Islander (PI), and U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islander (USAPI) servicemembers and veterans. For example, the VA has centers and programs dedicated to rural populations and American Indian/Alaska Natives, but there are no VA centers specifically dedicated to the population of NH, PI, and USAPI veterans. That is why I have requested funding to establish a VA Center for Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islander Health in my FY22 Milcon-VA appropriations requests.

Daniel K. Akaka VA Outpatient Center

The late Senator Daniel K. Akaka was the first Native Hawaiian to serve in Congress. In the 109th Congress, Senator Akaka introduced legislation to establish an Advanced Leeward Outpatient Healthcare Access (ALOHA) project, a VA primary care outpatient facility to service more than 87,000 veterans on the “leeward” or western side of Oahu. Sixteen years later, I am proud to have helped take this project across the finish line.

Now that the ALOHA VA Center is finally approved for construction by Congress, I believe that the right thing to do is to honor the late Senator Akaka by renaming the facility the “Daniel K. Akaka Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Center.” Alongside Senator Hirono, I have introduced legislation to do so. Senator Akaka was a World War II veteran and a tireless champion for veterans’ affairs during his 13 years in the House of Representatives and 23 years in the Senate. Senator Akaka also served as the ranking member and then the chairman of the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs of the Senate from the beginning of the 109th Congress until the end of the 111th Congress. While he was chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, he enacted laws to provide educational assistance, cost-of-living compensation adjustments, mental health care improvements and other benefits to veterans.

For these reasons, I believe that Congress should honor and preserve the legacy of the late Senator Daniel K. Akaka and his significant accomplishments and contributions to our country and our veterans by designating the ALOHA VA Center as the “Daniel K. Akaka Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Center.”

Mahalo for allowing me to testify before you today, and I look forward to working with this committee to advance these important priorities.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Kaiali'i Kahele', written in a cursive style.

Kaiali‘i Kahele
Member of Congress