

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
JOINT ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

March 18, 2008

9:06 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Bill Wielechowski, Co-Chair
Representative Nancy Dahlstrom, Co-Chair
Senator Bettye Davis
Senator Charlie Huggins
Senator Gary Wilken
Representative Bob Lynn
Representative Bob Roses
Representative Andrea Doll
Representative John Coghill

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Albert Kookesh
Representative John Harris

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

Representative Anna Fairclough
Representative Max Gruenberg
Representative Jay Ramras
Senator Gene Therriault
Representative Kyle Johansen
Representative Craig Johnson

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: ADDRESS ON VETERANS' ISSUES BY THE HONORABLE LISA MURKOWSKI, U.S. SENATOR

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to report

WITNESS REGISTER

ACTION NARRATIVE

CO-CHAIR BILL WIELECHOWSKI called the Joint Armed Services Committee meeting to order at [9:06:01 AM](#). Representatives Dahlstrom, Lynn, Roses, and Doll and Senators Wielechowski, Davis, and Huggins were present at the call to order. Senator Wilken and Representative Coghill arrived as the meeting was in progress. Also in attendance were Representatives Fairclough, Gruenberg, Johansen, Johnson, and Ramras, and Senator Therriault.

Presentation: Address on Veterans' Issues by the Honorable Lisa Murkowski, U.S. Senator

[9:06:29 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI announced that the only order of business would be a presentation from U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski on Veterans' Issues.

U.S. SENATOR LISA MURKOWSKI said that the military population is growing in Alaska, and that so much Alaska state history revolves around the military. She expressed her belief that she may be the first U.S. Senator to testify before a legislative committee in Alaska, and that it is important to share the federal perspective. She applauded the Joint Armed Services Committee for their support of SJR 11 which provides for assured health care funding to the Veterans Administration (VA). She explained that this is funded each year through the discretionary appropriations process, and there have been financial shortfalls. She said that the U.S. Congress is listening and that funding for VA health care has grown dramatically in recent years. She relayed that the President's budget for FY09 more than doubles the funding level from seven years ago. She reported that the U.S. Senate budget provides \$48.2 billion in FY09 for discretionary veterans programs, which include medical care, and that this exceeds the President's budget by \$3.2 billion. She noted that the budget committee report states that "the funding in the committee reported resolution will ensure that the VA can provide the highest quality health care for all veterans."

[9:09:46 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI reported that the VA in Alaska has been growing over the last decade. She commented that Alaska's veterans are receiving good quality care. She congratulated the VA on Elmendorf Air Force Base for being ranked the best air force hospital in the nation. She pointed out that a new VA

outpatient clinic in Anchorage is being built, and in Juneau, the VA will open a Community Based Outreach Clinic (CBOC), possibly as early as the summer of 2008. She noted that the Juneau clinic is the only VA presence in Southeast Alaska, and that the VA is pursuing plans to open another CBOC in the Matanuska-Susitna area. She gave recognition to the CBOC clinics in Fairbanks and on the Kenai Peninsula. She also mentioned that the Veterans Centers in Anchorage, Matanuska-Susitna, Kenai, and Fairbanks provide for a wide range of counseling for veterans. She observed that veterans living in so much of Alaska have no VA health care in or near their communities. She recognized that there is a limit to the breadth of facilities, and that veterans have to travel too far for health care. She suggested that these problems are not driven by shortfalls in the VA budget, but by a long standing VA culture and policy that is resistant to change. She commented that Alaska has more veterans per capita, 17.1 percent, than any other state. Alaska has 66,000 veterans registered with the VA. She pointed out that Alaska, Vermont, North Dakota, Washington, DC, and Wyoming only have 1.1 percent of the total veterans. Conversely, the five largest states represent 32.4 percent of the veteran population. She reported that it is these total numbers that drive the budget funding.

[9:13:56 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI explained that the VA has divided the nation into 23 health care regions, the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN). Alaska is in the Northwest Network, VISN 20, which covers 25 percent of the U.S. landmass. However, the funding is allocated based on the health care workload and the veteran population. The geographic challenges are not taken into consideration. She explained that this is called the Veterans Equitable Resource Allocation (VERA), but it is not an equitable allocation. Alaska needs more money to serve veterans in rural areas. She suggested that Alaska's membership in the VISN Northwest Network has some advantages, as it allows Alaska veterans' access to resources not available in Alaska. She said the disadvantage is that the VA prefers the health care be delivered by their facilities, rather than from the local community. As the VA regards themselves as an integrated health care delivery system, they have the legal authority to use community providers, but they prefer not to spend the money. This is why so many Alaska veterans go south for their VA care.

[9:16:17 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI expressed that the last thing anyone wants to do when they are sick, is to travel. The VA often does not pay for any of the costs of travel, unless the veteran qualifies under the national veterans beneficiary travel policy. This policy has four criteria: experiencing at least a 30 percent disability, travelling for treatment of a service connected disability, receiving a VA pension, and having an annual income of less than \$12K. She reported that last year, (2007) the U.S Congress passed legislation to grant five years of free VA health care to all veterans having served in combat since November, 1998, regardless of having suffered any service connected disability. However, there is not any government paid travel, so this benefit has less value for rural Alaska veterans unless the care is permitted in their own community.

[9:19:54 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI applauded the work of the volunteer flying service, Veteran's Aviation Outreach. She explained that they use their own aircraft to fly other veterans from rural Alaska to medical appointments in Anchorage. She mentioned that she had convened the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs to assess how the VA will deliver the earned health care benefits to the Alaska National Guard. She noted that many rural Alaska veterans say the VA has no relevance because they cannot afford to travel to the health care provider, so the veterans use the Native health care delivery system. She said that Native veterans in the regional hubs will seek whatever care is available in the regional Native hospitals, but that Native veterans living in villages served only by community health aid will have a more difficult time receiving care. She explained that care may be paid by the Indian Health Service (IHS), but the IHS is underfunded. The VA system has better funding, but is asking IHS to subsidize the VA responsibilities. She reported that the Indian Health Care Improvement Act will modernize the delivery system, and a provision authorizes the VA to enter into cooperative agreements with the Alaska Tribal Health System to provide veterans' care and reimburse the veterans for the care delivered.

[9:22:53 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI explained that although this appears to resolve the dilemma and allow the veteran to get the care in the region they live, the VA is strongly against this. She read the objection:

The VA pays for health care for eligible veterans from non-VA providers only in very limited circumstances and only as part of the care that the VA determines is necessary but is otherwise unable to provide. This provision would require the VA to pay for care without having any control over how that care is provided.

She said that she is working for more accessible VA care for Alaska veterans. She said that the 2008 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act requires a report to Congress regarding the access problems for veterans living in rural areas. She emphasized that the access problems are more extreme in Alaska with the lack of a road system. She spoke about the nationwide dissatisfaction of access to VA facilities from rural veterans. She expressed her hope that the report will lead to changes in VERA, so that the distance from a VA facility will be considered and that the report will encourage the VA to develop strategic partnerships with community health care providers to deliver care where the veterans live.

[9:26:12 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI commented that Alaska has had to learn to do things differently because there are not the roads, facilities, or providers, but there is still an obligation to provide the care. She expressed her belief that veterans in need of care do not necessarily seek it out. She said that there is no follow up for the veterans in the rural communities and that there needs to be community wide strategies to ensure that "no one falls through the cracks." This will require a long term commitment from the entire Alaska community. She allowed that the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) don't surface right away.

[9:28:57 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI noted that one of the Alaska National Guard spoke to her of trouble receiving his Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD) because of his deployment. She said that her Anchorage office has received notice of incidences of denial for many guardsmen and she will forward the information to the Joint Armed Services Committee Co-Chairs so they can pursue justice for the veterans.

[9:30:58 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI noted that the latest army field survey of the mental health of combat soldiers in theater will report on how to provide for follow-up health care needs for veterans.

[9:31:39 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ROSES noted that there was a presentation on traumatic brain injuries by the coordinator at Elmendorf Air Force Base, and one concern voiced is the difficulty in bringing neuropsychologists to Alaska. He asked Senator Murkowski for all possible support to recruit the best doctors to work with the VA in Alaska.

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI acknowledged that this point is true for the community at large. She stated that although Alaska has the highest incidence of brain injuries per capita, there are only six neurosurgeons in Alaska. Alaska cannot adequately meet the health care medical professional needs. She observed that Iraq has meted out a different level of injury, so there is a need to change the level of care. She declared that there will be a need for veterans to travel outside Alaska for medical help because Alaska does not have the necessary professionals.

SENATOR HUGGINS said that bringing to Alaska a mobile unit for diagnosis and treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder would be the biggest step forward in treatment of returning veterans. He recommended that Alaska give better financial support to agencies already in the state, including the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

[9:37:32 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI agreed that the service organizations do an incredible job, but she reminded that the vast majority of organizations are in the larger Alaskan cities. She posed that there is less help in the remote and rural areas. She explained that in the smaller villages, it requires building a relationship to bring effective treatment.

[9:39:28 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI reported hearing that discriminatory practice in hiring veterans is prevalent. She said that support for veterans needs to be from the beginning through the return, especially to help with the reintegration into civilian society.

[9:41:27 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ROSES noted that HB 44 is in the Alaska State Legislature to allow for a veteran's check off box on the PFD application. This information will be provided to the Department of Military Veterans Affairs to initiate an outreach for providing benefit information to veterans.

[9:42:16 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI allowed that it is difficult when funding is tied to numbers that are unknown. She asked that any ideas for federal help be sent to her.

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI offered that adequate funding for medical care is the biggest concern. He mentioned that many veterans are not aware of the benefits they have earned.

[9:43:44 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGGINS noted that Vietnam veterans are now taking over the leadership positions from World War II veterans. He emphasized that the Community Based Outreach Clinics are a tremendous benefit to both the Juneau and Matanuska-Susitna communities.

[9:44:57 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI said that this is a long time in coming, but she is pleased to finally see some progress.

[9:45:15 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR WIELECHOWSKI said that there have been some initial discussions about the melting of the Arctic ice, and asked Senator Murkowski to comment from a federal perspective.

[9:45:37 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI said that the changes in the Arctic bring challenges and opportunities. She predicted that there is the possibility that navigation and shipping will allow goods to be moved more quickly through the north, possibly saving weeks. She allowed that this brings many questions, including those from both an environmental and a military perspective. There has not yet been any discussion of ownership in the Arctic, and what that will mean militarily. Canada has already declared that the Northwest Passage is theirs. The Russian flag is now

on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean, claiming it to be theirs. The Coast Guard has determined through mapping of the continental shelf that U.S territory is 100 miles further offshore. She acknowledged that the potentials for shipping, navigation, commerce, resources, and military all bring the Arctic into full focus. She provided that the U.S. will be negotiating with all of the other nations interested in laying claims to the Arctic.

[9:49:06 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI said that Alaska makes the U.S. an Arctic nation, and there needs to be an updated Arctic policy. She referred to testimony by a group of six or seven generals at a U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations meeting who stated that militarily, the U.S. needs to sign the Law of the Sea Treaty.

[9:50:43 AM](#)

CO-CHAIR DAHLSTROM relayed that her office received a letter from a veteran concerned about cuts to military veteran benefits.

[9:51:27 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI responded that during the budget period, there is increased concern for funding. She mentioned that the proposed VA budget, which includes discretionary funding for health care, is increased by \$3.2 billion in the Senate. She noted that the budget needs to recognize the increasing number of veterans with pronounced medical needs and the skyrocketing cost of medical care, and to be adjusted sufficiently.

[9:53:15 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE DOLL asked if the budget is sufficient to cover the increases.

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI reported that she is not sure if enough can ever be done. She referred to the VERA formula and reiterated that Alaska is unsure of how many veterans are in the state. She noted that there is no recognition to the increased cost of health care delivery in Alaska, and she pointed out that the dollars to Alaska are low. She emphasized that the funding formula needs to change, but that in addition to adding more

money to the VA system, Alaska needs the professionals to deliver the services.

[9:55:36 AM](#)

U.S. SENATOR MURKOWSKI noted that too often support from the military family is overlooked, and that it is equally important to give thanks to the families.

[9:56:59 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE LYNN remarked that there are not as many veterans in elective office, and he hopes this will change in the future, as military experience is necessary for making many of these decisions.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the Joint Armed Services Committee meeting was adjourned at [9:58:14 AM](#).