

SWEEPING VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH BILL NOW LAW

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Daniel K. Akaka (D-HI), Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, issued the following statement today regarding enactment of **S. 2162**, the [Veterans Mental Health and Other Care Improvements Act of 2008](#). S. 2162, introduced by Senator Akaka and cosponsored by a bipartisan group of Senators, makes various improvements to veterans' mental health and other forms of care. The bill pays tribute to Justin Bailey, an Iraq war veteran who returned from combat only to lose his life to PTSD and an accidental overdose of prescription medications.

"Now that S. 2162 has been enacted, VA can incorporate these provisions to improve its strategy against the injury and enemy of PTSD and other invisible wounds," said Akaka.

In his floor statement urging passage of S. 2162, Akaka detailed the origins of his legislation: *"The legislation did not stem from a lobbyist or an interest group. It came about because of one letter – a letter to me from the parents of Justin Bailey – Mary Kaye and Tony Bailey.*

"Justin Bailey was a war veteran who survived Iraq only to die while receiving care from VA for PTSD and substance use disorder. A week after his death last year, Justin's parents were naturally heartbroken by the death of their only son, but even more than that, they were concerned that other veterans might share his fate if VA mental health care did not improve," said Akaka. The Bailey family has worked actively to improve veterans' mental health, [testifying](#) before the Veterans' Affairs Committee and supporting S. 2162.

S. 2162's improvements to veterans' mental health care include:

- Setting a standard minimum level of care for substance use disorder, and creating innovative enhancements to treatment
- Improving treatment to veterans with multiple disorders, such as PTSD and substance use disorder
- Mandating a review of VA's residential mental health care facilities, to ensure that they are adequately staffed
- Creating a research program on PTSD and substance use disorder, in cooperation with the National Center for PTSD
- Enabling VA to provide mental health services to veterans' families, and setting up a program to aid the families of returning servicemembers

S. 2162 also makes significant improvements in other areas of veterans' health care:

Rural Veterans: More than doubles the beneficiary travel mileage reimbursement (from 11 to 28.5 cents per mile) eligible veterans can receive for travel to receive VA care, permanently sets the deductible to \$3 each way for such travel, creates a pilot program on the use of peers to enhance outreach to rural veterans, and encourages coordination between VA and rural community-based resources.

Emergency Care for Veterans: Corrects current procedures used by VA to reimburse community hospitals for emergency care provided to eligible veterans.

VA Epilepsy Centers of Excellence: In recognition of the link between traumatic brain injury, a signature wound of the current conflicts, and epilepsy, establishes up to six VA Epilepsy Centers of Excellence focused on research, education, and clinical care for epilepsy.

Veterans' Pain Care: Requires a pain care program, including care for acute pain, for all VA inpatient facilities for long-term mental health and substance abuse care and to prevent long-term chronic pain disability, expands VA health care staff education on pain assessment and treatment, and increases VA research on pain care.

Veterans' Caregivers: Extends authority for VA to provide institutional and non-institutional long-term care and caregiver assistance services.

Medical Construction: Authorizes a series of major medical facility construction projects and outpatient clinic leases.

Homelessness: Creates targeted programs to assist low-income veterans, and increases funding capacity for the successful VA Grant and Per Diem program, which assists community-based organizations that serve homeless veterans.

Rehabilitating Veterans: Expands a program to help formerly incarcerated veterans reintegrate into society through employment counseling and other services.

S. 2162, introduced by Chairman Akaka, was reported by the Senate [Committee](#), then passed the full Senate [unanimously](#) before being amended and passed in the House, then passed [again](#) in the Senate. President Bush signed the bill into law on October 10, 2008.