

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Hearing
May 20, 2026

Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI):

Next question. Over two years ago, Congress gave the Department the authority to provide direct care to U.S. veterans in the freely associated states, specifically Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. We recruit from these freely associated states, and they sign up to serve our country in great numbers. Through the Compact of Free Association, we promised that we would take care of them and provide certain kinds of care.

It has been slow going, but my understanding is that things are getting better and that the VA is on its way to providing the care we promised these veterans in these island nations. Will you commit to working with Congress and the Departments of State and Interior? One of the reasons this has been challenging is that you have to coordinate with three different departments to get this done.

Will you commit to working with the Departments of State and Interior, and obviously Congress, to ensure that VA provisions in the compacts are fully implemented in line with congressional intent?

VA Secretary Doug Collins:

We are definitely going to do that.

Senator, let me just say that over the next few weeks, there will actually be several meetings involving not only Interior, State, and the committees of jurisdiction, but also the VA, the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the appropriations committees to determine the best way forward and how we can provide this care.

The VA is not a roadblock to this. We have 147 known service-related veterans in these freely associated states, and we have identified about 47 more. We are willing to do it. The regulations surrounding telehealth and some of the other issues just require additional coordination, but we are committed to doing that.

Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI):

We are supposed to provide mail pharmacy services, telehealth, and beneficiary travel. They are not asking for that much, so we should do better.

Also, as we look at how much all of this is going to cost, I would request that the Department pay close attention to the actual costs, as opposed to the kinds of figures we have been getting regarding what it would cost to provide veterans in the compact nations the care we promised them. I think the amounts have been vastly inflated, so we need accurate figures so that we can provide the resources it will take.

VA Secretary Doug Collins:

I agree with you. That has been one of my frustrations since I first came in and began looking at this issue. It was one of the later items on my plate, but one of my frustrations has been understanding what the actual costs are.

Let me make one clarification. It is not as simple as telehealth and telemedicine. We have to have agreements with those countries to be able to provide those services within their borders.

That has been one of our holdups, and we believe that when we get everyone at the table, particularly the State Department, it can help us move forward. We cannot simply implement some of these services overnight without agreements in the countries involved, especially for things like mail-order prescriptions.

Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI):

If there is anything we can do to assist with that situation, we will do it, because the compact nations are really awaiting the kind of support that their veterans deserve.

VA Secretary Doug Collins:

I appreciate that. I think anything we can work on together here will be beneficial.

Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS):

Thank you, Senator Hirono. You and I agree on more than one thing. I also agree on this issue of the freely associated states.

The Secretary was in my office in July 2025 and met with me, Senator Boozman, and Senator Risch, the three senators representing committees with an interest and jurisdiction in this matter. He assured us that the VA understands it should implement the law, and we all need to continue applying pressure to ensure this happens, including with the State Department and elsewhere.

We are happy to work with you to try to accomplish that.

Sen. John Boozman (R-AR):

Again, thank you, Senator Hirono, for bringing that up. You know we are trying to accomplish the same thing, and I think we are making progress. We have had the opportunity to speak with the Secretary on several occasions recently, and

I appreciate the fact that we are moving forward under your leadership.

Congratulations on your retirement.

<https://www.youtube.com/live/zo6MyRIwsNE?t=2970s> (Begins at 49:30 minute mark)

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