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United States Senate

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May 22, 2008

The Honorable James B. Peake, M.D.
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

Over the course of the last year and a half, the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs has received thousands of calls from supporters of S. 961, *The Belated Thank You to Merchant Mariners of World War II*. From these calls, we have learned that many World War II Merchant Mariners are unaware of the VA benefits and services available to them. On May 7, the Committee heard testimony from two members of the World War II Merchant Marine community who confirmed this for us. As you know, awareness of VA benefits is especially important for those of limited means who might benefit from a veterans' pension or access to VA health care.

Although the proposed bill remains under consideration by the Committee, we believe it is important for VA to redouble its efforts and provide effective outreach to all who are entitled to veterans' status under the process established in Public Law 95-202, including World War II Merchant Mariners. We would appreciate it if you would let us know what VA does now to reach out to these groups, and what it can do in the future to ensure these groups of veterans know how VA programs could help them. We have learned that the World War II Merchant Mariners are extremely well-organized and we are confident that, if engaged by VA, they would cooperate in getting the word out.

We ask that you take prompt action to reach out to Merchant Mariners and other communities of World War II individuals who achieved veterans' status under the process established in Public Law 95-202. Accessing VA benefits could give many the help they need to live their remaining years in dignity.

Sincerely,



Daniel K. Akaka
Chairman



Richard Burr
Ranking Member