

**Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Subcommittee on Human Rights & Wellness
Government Reform Committee
“Investigation into Health Care Disparities in United States Pacific Island
Territories”
February 25, 2004**

The Subcommittee is convening today to examine disparities in the quality and access to health care experienced by the people of United States Pacific Island territories. We will also be discussing possible solutions that the Federal government should seriously consider in order to alleviate these health burdens.

The medical system in the continental United States prides itself on the quality of medical services supplied to the millions of Americans under its care. Unfortunately, there are populations of underserved American citizens and nationals who do not have the same access to adequate and proper medical care.

These are the citizens of the United States Pacific Island Territories; namely the residents of Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

In a post-September 11th society, many foreign nationals have been hesitant to travel to the Pacific Islands, which regrettably has taken a great toll on the economies of Guam, CNMI, and American Samoa. As a result, this has drastically increased rates of

unemployment on the islands, and consequently has left tens of thousands of men, women, and children without proper health insurance or the means for medical care.

Due to these times of economic hardship, coupled with caps placed on Federal government services such as Medicaid, territorial governments are unable to afford the much needed equipment and qualified health professionals required to properly tend to the medical needs of their people.

Late last year, I had the opportunity to travel to both Guam and the CNMI and witness first-hand the deteriorating health care conditions on those islands. Needless to say, I was extremely surprised and disappointed by the lack of sufficient medical resources on these islands, and thus was moved to convene this important hearing today to better educate my colleagues and the American people to the ongoing plight of our fellow citizens and nationals.

One of the primary health care concerns encountered by these territories is the skyrocketing incidence of diabetes. In recent years, the incidences of Type-2 Diabetes, formerly known as adult-onset Diabetes, have reached epidemic proportions on the Pacific islands.

Hundreds of these patients require constant medical intervention to survive, mainly in the form of dialysis treatments. Unfortunately, the territories are ill-equipped to deal with the ever-increasing demand for dialysis machines and trained technicians to

operate them. This has resulted in long waiting lists and late night appointments for people in desperate need of life-saving medical attention.

These growing medical concerns place a tremendous budgetary strain on the already fragile economies of each territory.

To further exemplify the severity of these disparities in health care, Guam, the largest of the U.S. Pacific Island territories, has only one fully functioning civilian hospital to service its nearly 170,000 citizens. Currently, only about 150 physicians reside on the island - and must care not only for Guamanian patients, but also thousands of patients who are transported to the territory every year from many of the smaller surrounding islands.

To add insult to injury, the Guam Memorial Hospital Authority recently declared bankruptcy, and is currently \$20 Million in debt.

Although the CNMI has a Commonwealth Health Center, the lack of proper equipment and healthcare staff forces thousands of patients to brave great distances overseas for care during medical emergencies. Consequently, this is at the expense of the CNMI government.

American Samoa unfortunately also faces these same predicaments, having only one medical center, LBJ Tropical Memorial, to service the healthcare needs of its entire population (of 60,000) - much like the CNMI.

Because a main area of concern deals with the shortage of qualified medical staff, the Subcommittee will be receiving testimony from the Honorable Jefferson Benjamin, Secretary of Health for the Federated States of Micronesia, who will be speaking today on behalf of the Pacific Island Health Officers Association. Dr. Benjamin will discuss the ever-growing need for properly trained health care professionals on the Pacific Islands.

To gain further insight into these most important issues, the Subcommittee has the honor of hearing today from the Honorable Felix Camacho, Governor of Guam; the Honorable Togiola Tulafono, Governor of American Samoa; and the Honorable Juan Babauta, Governor of CNMI.

By the way, Governor Babauta, I would like to inform you that I did receive your letter regarding the “stateless children of the CNMI”. I have already instructed my staff to start researching the “stateless children” issue in order to explore how we can best address a case that at first glance looks to be a meritorious human rights concern. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.

In addition, the Honorable David Cohen, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Insular Affairs of the U.S. Department of Interior, will testify on his personal experiences observing health care disparities in the territories.

During my visit to Guam, I had the pleasure of meeting a very brave man, the Honorable Vicente Pangelinan, Speaker of the Guam Legislature. Mr. Pangelinan was invited to testify today to share his own personal story of a recent cardiac medical scare that almost claimed his life, which may have been avoided if he had the proper access to immediate medical care. Unfortunately, due to continued health concerns, Speaker Pangelinan is unable to come before the Subcommittee today. On behalf of the Members of the Subcommittee, I would like to wish Speaker Pangelinan well, and we hope that he has a speedy recovery.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services has offices and programs in place to identify and directly assist with underserved populations, such as the residents of the U.S. Pacific Island territories. The Honorable Nathan Stinson, M.D., Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Minority Affairs, is with us here today and will discuss current HHS initiatives created to help alleviate some of the added health burdens that Pacific Island territories face.

In closing, I would like to add that this Subcommittee believes it is one of our highest duties as Members of Congress to strive to find the best possible public policy

solutions for ensuring all Americans access to the highest quality healthcare services in the world.

It is my sincere hope that the information shared today will help to provide the necessary assistance for our fellow Americans across the Pacific Ocean and ultimately help alleviate this health care crisis.