

ROBERT A. PETZEL, M.D., NOMINEE TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH,  
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

STATEMENT OF  
ROBERT A. PETZEL, M.D.  
NOMINEE TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH  
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION  
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
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Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished members of the Committee: good morning.

Before I begin my statement, I would like to recognize and thank my family: my wife, Dr. Sue Petzel; my daughter Andrea, from Seattle; my son, Aaron, from Minneapolis; and my son, Erik and his wife Jennifer, from Washington, D.C. Without their help and support, I would not be here before you today.

I am thankful and deeply humbled that President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have asked me to join their leadership team as we form a 21st Century Department of Veterans Affairs—one that is people-centric, results-driven, and forward-looking.

The Veterans Health Administration has a four-part mission: patient care, education, research, and a backup for national emergencies. But our foremost responsibility is to provide safe, effective patient-centered health care for America's Veterans. I believe that education and research enhance the patient care environment. The presence of students and residents and the generation of new knowledge stimulate better care.

My first clinical rotation in medical school was at the VA Lakeside Medical Center in Chicago. The majority of my residency was at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center, and I have spent my entire professional life in the Veterans Health Administration striving to provide the "Best Care Anywhere" to America's Veterans.

The changes that have occurred in the Veterans Health Administration since my training 35 years ago have been stunning. A national reputation for quality and safety, an outstanding integrated array of mental health services, the electronic health record and a sophisticated program to treat traumatic brain injury are but a few of VA's accomplishments. We are empowering Veterans to take control of their health care decisions through applications like My HealtheVet. We are adopting new models of treatment that bring care closer to home by emphasizing non-institutional long-term care, and we have been developing proposals and working with Congress

to support the family members and friends who assume caregiving responsibilities for their loved ones. This is particularly important for those young and severely injured service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who will need lifelong care. Our dramatically improved collaboration with the Department of Defense will enhance and improve care and services to these returning service members.

These are all great accomplishments, but we need to be better, and we can be better.

I understand health care systems and I know the VA system very well. I know its strengths, its weaknesses, and its challenges. Its strengths are its mission, dedicated workforce, reputation for quality and safety, the electronic health record, our broad array of programs, and our degree of integration. Our weaknesses and challenges include developing a clear vision of what our health care system should be in the future, a lack of alignment, and many variations within our system. Access for Veterans has improved significantly, but Veterans in rural areas still have to travel too long and too far for care. We have the largest integrated mental health system in the country, but we still do not reach many Veterans who need these services. Women are joining the military in record numbers, and we must ask ourselves if we have the services they need available in a manner they want them.

When Secretary Shinseki spoke before you in January, he promised that Veterans would be at the center of our organization. I know the Secretary is committed to transforming VA, and I know how deeply he believes in this. Building the best health care system for America's Veterans has been my life's work. This opportunity would represent the culmination of a career spent caring for those who have worn the uniform and have borne the burden.

If confirmed, I will bring an innovative and creative approach to the Veterans Health Administration. Beyond our transformation initiatives, I will focus on three areas:

- Articulating a vision of what our health care system needs to become—more patient-centered, providing more team care and continuously improving;
- Aligning the organization to achieve that vision; and
- Reducing the variation in our organization, structures, business practices, and medical care.

If confirmed, I promise you that I will work diligently with Secretary Shinseki, Congress, the Veterans Service Organizations, and all of VA to ensure our system provides the best care anywhere for America's heroes. The Under Secretary for Health's first responsibility is and always must be to advocate on behalf of America's Veterans. I promise you, this mission will be the basis for every decision I make.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be pleased to answer your questions now.