

Testimony of Dr. David Shulkin
Nominee to be Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
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Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, Distinguished Members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and everyone here today who cares deeply about our Veterans: thank you for the opportunity to address you. I have gotten to know many of you over the past 18 months, and I have great respect for this committee and the work you do.. It has been a privilege to serve as Under Secretary for Health over the past 18 months. It is my highest professional honor to be nominated for consideration as the next Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

I'm grateful to have my wife, Dr. Merle Bari, with me here today. We met in medical school and have been married for **29** years. Her continuous encouragement and support since my first confirmation process almost two years ago, as well as her commitment to our Veterans, have inspired me.

Our country's sacred obligation to fully honor our commitments to our Veterans is deeply personal to me. I was born on an Army base. My father was an Army psychiatrist, both grandfathers were Army Veterans, and my paternal grandfather served as Chief Pharmacist at the VA hospital in Madison, Wisconsin. As a young doctor, I trained in VA hospitals. I view my VA service as a duty to give back to the men and women who secured the uniquely American freedoms and opportunities we all

enjoy because of the sacrifices they made. I came to VA during a time of crisis, when it was clear Veterans were not getting the timely access to high-quality health care they deserved. I soon discovered that years of ineffective systems and deficiencies in workplace culture had led to these problems. I concluded it would take years to fix the problems, but because Veterans' lives were at stake, there was no time to waste. That is why I focused on meeting the most urgent health care needs of our Veterans first, and reorganized our approach to reflect that. As a result, we've dramatically reduced the number of people waiting for urgent care. The VA now has same-day services in primary care and mental health at all our medical centers to make sure our Veterans get the urgent care they need, when they need it most

Over the past 18 months, I have had the opportunity to travel across the country hearing directly from Veterans, service organizations, and stakeholders about their concerns with VA. I appreciate both the candor of these conversations and the overwhelming support and commitment I have received from so many for improving VA. The opportunity to spend time with and learn about the needs of the Veterans we serve was the best preparation I could have had for this nomination.

VA has been working hard to act more as an integrated enterprise, and towards that end, I have worked closely with my colleagues in VBA and NCA. I understand that Veterans see us as one VA and not three separate administrations. Creating a seamless experience for Veterans accessing benefits and services is critical to fulfilling

our mission. If confirmed, I would build on my foundational understanding of these issues to accelerate change across all three administrations.

VA is a unique national resource that is worth saving, and I am committed to doing just that. One thing I want to be especially clear on is that VA has many dedicated employees across the country, and our Veterans tell us that every day. It is unfortunate that a few employees who deviated from the values we hold so dear have been able to tarnish the reputation of so many who have dedicated their lives to serving those who have served.

But, there should be no doubt that if confirmed as Secretary, I will seek major reform and a transformation of VA. There will be far greater accountability, dramatically improved access, responsiveness and expanded care options, but the Department of Veterans Affairs will not be privatized under my watch. If confirmed, I intend to build a system that puts Veterans first and allows them to get the best possible health care wherever it may be – in VA or with community care.

I've demonstrated my commitment to moving care into the community where it makes sense for the Veteran. When I began my tenure as Under Secretary for Health, 21 percent of care was delivered in the community, today that figure stands at 31 percent. But, Veterans still tell us that even with the ability to seek care in the community, they want VA services. Of the more than 1 million Veterans who have taken advantage of the Choice program, only about 5,000 have sought care *solely* in the community. The rest used both VA and community services.

Should I be confirmed, I intend to build an integrated system of care that would strengthen services within VA that are essential for Veteran well-being, and use services in the community that can serve Veterans with better outcomes and greater value to the taxpayer. We will need to work closely together to extend and reform the Choice program to ensure Veterans are able to seek the care in the community they need.

We have made significant progress in suicide prevention, including hiring more mental health professionals, implementing a predictive tool to identify those at greatest risk, and fixing the Veterans Crisis Line so it better serves our Veterans. We also must continue our progress in addressing the unique needs of our women Veterans by expanding women's health services and ensuring our facilities are welcoming to women. I also want to recognize the importance of supporting the efforts of families and caregivers who are involved in the care of our Veterans.

We have to continue our work to eliminate the disability claims backlog, and we need legislation that would allow us to reform the outdated appeals process. We must continue the progress we have made in reducing Veteran homelessness, and modernize our IT systems to improve our services and efficiencies. We also have to address infrastructure issues and take a closer look at facilities that no longer serve a useful purpose. We must explore expansion of public-private partnerships rather than continue building medical centers that have large cost overruns and take too long to build.

With the support of the members of this Committee and others in Congress, Veterans and their service organizations, the dedicated employees of VA, and the

American people, we can fulfill President Lincoln's promise and our sacred mission "to care for him who shall have borne the battle." There is no nobler mission or higher calling for me, and it would be my distinct honor and privilege to lead this effort. Our Veterans deserve the very best, and with your support, I am confident we will succeed. Thank you and I look forward to your questions.