

Brigadier General Allison A. Hickey (Ret.), USAF, Nominee to be Under Secretary for Benefits, Veterans Benefits Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs

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Department of Veterans Affairs
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Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee: good morning and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am deeply honored that President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have nominated me to join their leadership team as they transform the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to meet the emerging challenges of the 21st century. I am eager for the opportunity to add my leadership, passion and commitment to their efforts to continue to repay the debt of honor owed to the men and women, and their families who have "borne the battle." I still remember the day in November 2009, when I heard Secretary Shinseki's inspiring remarks to thousands of military leaders from all 54 States and Territories and the District of Columbia, about his vision for a Department of Veterans Affairs that is people-centric, results-driven and forward-looking. I heard his call to action to find an integrated approach that includes well-trained people, efficient and effective processes and proven new technologies all to deliver benefits and care for a changing population of Veterans who bring increasingly complex needs to VA. He spoke with a compassion, conviction and confidence that ignited my desire to again serve my country and shaped my journey to this nomination hearing today. I humbly present myself to you today – bringing a deep commitment to Veterans and a strong desire to join Secretary Shinseki's efforts to make bold and comprehensive changes that transform VA for the 21st century.

Before I continue, I want to briefly introduce my wonderful family with me today. They are part of what drives my passion to care for Veterans and their families. My father, Lieutenant General (Ret.) William J. Hilsman, served as a career Army Officer and is a Vietnam Veteran. My mother, Mrs. Jean Hilsman, served as a military mother and spouse, the first Director of the Department of Defense Family Policy Office and a Past President of the National Military Family Association. My husband, Colonel (Ret.) Rob Hickey, is a 30 year Veteran, who served as an A-10 and C-130 pilot, Logistics Group Commander, and who continues to serve the Nation working in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. And finally and most importantly, I am blessed to be the mother of three remarkable children -- Tyler, Chelsea and Michael. Tyler and Chelsea both graduate in May from James Madison University and Virginia Tech respectively, both with a focus on public service careers. Soon to be awarded his Eagle Scout Rank, Michael is on the same path towards dedicated citizenry and service.

I also want to recognize the over 35 years of service to Veterans by the Acting Under Secretary for Benefits, Michael Walcoff. Starting with VA as a claims examiner in Philadelphia in 1974, he culminates his distinguished career leading over 20,000 dedicated employees of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA). Working closely with all of VA, Veterans Service Organizations, and Congress, he has been instrumental in laying critical foundations to "break

the back of the backlog” and pursue other important initiatives that will improve service to Veterans.

I am also deeply appreciative of the presence here today of our Veterans Service Organizations. If confirmed, I intend to continue VA’s close collaboration with them as partners – seeking opportunities to continue to enhance our interactions early in the improvement processes we explore for VBA. I will call upon their decades of experience and knowledge to help find and implement solutions for our Veterans, their families and survivors.

If confirmed as the Under Secretary for Benefits, I would be responsible for administering vitally significant programs that provide crucial support for Veterans, their families and survivors. Each program and benefit VBA delivers is important to those we serve. It can mean the difference between a roof over their heads, a college education, or a home that is retrofitted to accommodate a disability - or a world without that support. If confirmed, I will never lose sight of the importance of VBA’s work on the individual lives of Veterans and their families.

As a Veteran myself, and a military family spouse, I have firsthand and recent experience in transitioning to Veteran status. Because of this background and my military family upbringing, the concerns of Veterans, their families, and survivors are never far from my mind and are close to my heart. This includes our National Guard and Reserve and their families who have honorably responded to their country’s call in incredibly high numbers over the last decade and more, serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, and operations around the globe and here at home. I have the unique experience of serving in all three of the military components – Active, National Guard, and Reserve – and, if confirmed, I would work to ensure that VBA continues to support each of these groups of Veterans. As a woman Veteran, I also recognize the growing population of women who have served their Nation admirably and are now seeking VA health care and benefits in record numbers. I bring shared and unique experiences with this group of dedicated Veterans and an understanding that we need a VA system that meets their needs – something I know is a priority for Secretary Shinseki and this Committee.

For over 30 years in government, military, and industry - including 17 years of leadership positions in the Department of Defense - I have focused on strategic and transformation planning, program implementation and organizational management. I have helped develop plans for major reorganization, restructuring, and refocusing of large-scale and complex organizations and programs to enable them to better meet their mission.

I believe that my past experience makes me highly qualified to manage the complexities and challenges of the claims transformation efforts currently underway, as well as other areas vital to our Veterans’ benefits. Eliminating the disability claims backlog and accomplishing the Secretary’s goal of having no Veteran wait more than 125 days for a quality decision with a 98% accuracy rate would be my central focus. I have firsthand experience building and implementing transformational efforts that focus on the integrated solution of people, process, and technology necessary to accomplish large complex goals. I spent over five years in the Air National Guard’s Productivity and Quality office establishing a culture of process improvement, and over seven years in the Air Force Strategic Planning office leading major transformation efforts. In my experience with industry, process improvement and transformation were key to business

performance results and client satisfaction levels. The “right” mix of focus on an integrated approach to people, process, and technology has been at the center of much of the work in my career. That is why, if confirmed, I am confident that I can lead VBA in delivering better service to Veterans.

In the Air Force, I led one of the largest mission and culture change efforts since the inception of that Department. This work included leadership and oversight of four divisions covering strategic planning, mission development, public and congressional affairs, and program and resource implementation. The effort affected more than 140 new Air Force units and their associated missions, and shifted billions of dollars towards new capabilities across the Air Force portfolio. The initiative also involved new organizational models for a world-wide 500,000 person organization including Active Duty, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve units and personnel to create a common Air Force policy, mission, and culture. This significant transformation directly impacted more than 50,000 members of the Air Force, provided new capabilities for the joint war fighter and redesigned the Air Force future force structure plan. I also bring experience in the private sector in two areas that directly relate to VBA’s core mission. The first area is human resources operations from recruitment to retirement – building and retaining a quality workforce. The second area is customer relationship management to include call center practices, customer relationship management system implementation and other 21st century information technology systems that provide transparency, increase accountability and speed the delivery of these services to customers.

It is my firm belief that it is an organization’s employees who drive the real success that occurs in vital programs. I am committed, if confirmed, to making the VBA workforce successful, creating an environment that engages them and develops them to their full potential.

If confirmed as Under Secretary for Benefits, I am committed to working with this Committee, the Congress more broadly, the Veterans Service Organizations, other stakeholders and all of the wonderful employees at VBA to ensure VBA provides timely and quality benefits and services to America’s heroes. Should I be confirmed, I will serve with passion and conviction as an advocate on behalf of all of America’s Veterans.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.