

**Statement of Senator Bernard Sanders,
Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Hearing on Pending Nomination
July 22, 2014**

I want to welcome everyone here for a very important hearing. We're going to be considering the nomination of Robert McDonald to be secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. We are all pleased to welcome Mr. McDonald and his wife Diane. Thank you very much. Mrs. Portman is here as well. We thank her for being here.

We are going to be learning more about Mr. McDonald's many qualifications during his introduction and throughout the course of this hearing so I won't spend time repeating what we're going to be discussing very shortly. What I do want to do is thank Mr. McDonald for accepting the president's nomination. When he and I chatted he said something to me that I thought was extremely important and revelatory. I asked him why he wanted to come into this job in this very difficult moment with so much partisanship in the Congress and problems within the VA. What he was that, "The president, our commander in chief, asked me to serve and I want to do well by my country and I accepted that challenge and I thank him very much for that."

All of us know that the Department of Veterans Affairs runs the largest integrated health care system in the United States of America. Just today, over 200,000 are walking into the doors of the VA to get health care. And the truth is that the vast majority of those veterans feel good about the health care that they're getting and feel good about the staff they're interacting with. But we all understand that there are problems in health care, there are problems in the claims backlog, there are other problems and Mr. McDonald's job is to – in a very significant way, in a very bold way – start addressing those problems.

I don't want to get Mr. McDonald too nervous by mentioning some of these problems. He may want to pick up and walk out of here. But he does know that some 640,000 veterans have an appointment that is more than 30 days from the date when that appointment was initially requested or when that appointment was desired by the patient. And clearly one of the challenges, Mr. McDonald, that you face is to make sure that all of our veterans get high quality care in a timely manner – not so easy – but that is one of your challenges.

Furthermore, in terms of the challenges you face – it is not only providing quality, timely care but many of these veterans are coming into the VA with very, very difficult problems. I am reading, and I am going to get this book for my colleagues up here, but I am reading a book by a fellow named David Finkel. He writes for The Washington Post. It's called 'Thank You for Your Service.' I don't know if any of you have read it but what he talks about – he was with the troops in Iraq and then he followed them after they came home and his book is about PTSD and TBI. It is a hard read. It is a very painful read to see not only what the soldiers are going through but what their wives and their kids are going through. Now how do we deal with the reality that some 500,000 people who served in Iraq and Afghanistan come home with TBI and PTSD. The truth is that if you had unlimited amounts of money that would be a very difficult challenge. How do we deal with that? It's unprecedented.

Furthermore, it is my strong opinion that if the VA is going to do the quality health care that it needs to do we are simply going to need more doctors, more nurses more medical personnel more productivity in the VA. And at a time when we have a shortage, a national shortage of primary care doctors, psychiatrists and many other medical health professionals how do we bring those people into our system. So health care to my mind is certainly a major issue but that is not the only challenge that our new secretary will face.

We have the veterans benefits administration which is now in the midst of one of the largest transformations in modern history and that is going from paper system to a paperless system and in my view they have done a good job at that but problems remain. We want to make sure that during that transformation as we bring down the wait times for claims that we do it in an accurate way and that's not so easy and that is a challenge that you'll have to face.

One of the scandals I think, in the modern history of this country certainly since Vietnam is the number of homeless veterans that we have seen all over this country and once again in recent years and General Shinseki played a good role in this the percentage of veterans who are homeless has gone down. How do we keep that effort going? No person who has put their lives on the line for this country should be homeless. We're making progress but that is another challenge you are going to face.

So let me close by suggesting that I think Mr. McDonald brings to us two very important qualities. No. 1, he is familiar with the military because he has served in the military for many years and he brings with that service a passion to take care of our veterans. And that is obviously an essential quality that we want from our secretary. But the other quality that he brings is that he has been the CEO of one of the major American corporations which has many, many employees – maybe not quite as many as the VA – but many, many employees. There is no question that we need good quality management, we need transparency, we need accountability and I believe Mr. McDonald's corporate experience will give him the tools that the needs to create a well-run and accountable VA.

So with that I would like to turn the mic over to my colleague the ranking member Richard Burr for his opening remarks and then we'll proceed with the introduction of the nominee.