

THE NOMINATION OF W. SCOTT GOULD TO BE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF  
VETERANS AFFAIRS AND THE NOMINATION OF L. TAMMY DUCKWORTH  
TO BE AN ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
FOR PUBLIC AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

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WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1, 2009

United States Senate,  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs,  
Washington, D.C.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:34 a.m., in Room 418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Daniel K. Akaka, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Akaka, Rockefeller, Murray, Brown, Webb, Tester, Begich, Burr, Specter, Isakson, Wicker, Johanns and Graham.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN AKAKA

Chairman Akaka. The United States Committee on Veterans Affairs will come to order.

Welcome and aloha to all of you.

This morning's hearing is to consider the President's nomination of W. Scott Gould to be Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Following Mr. Gould's testimony and questions from the Committee, we will then turn to Tammy Duckworth's nomination for the position of Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs.

I am delighted that we are finally moving forward on additional nominees for VA. It is critical that VA's leadership team be put in place as quickly as possible. Secretary Shinseki has been the lone representative of the Administration at VA for over two months. I am hopeful that this Committee and then the full Senate will move quickly to consider Mr. Gould for Deputy Secretary.

Senator Reed will give more details on Mr. Gould's work and military experience. For my part, I note that he has expertise in information technology, acquisitions, budget, human resources and the management of large organizations. I have received every indication that his combined service in the public sector, private sector and military are well regarded and will support his work at VA.

Last week, I asked Mr. Gould why he would say yes to such a difficult job, especially during this difficult time. Without hesitation, he answered that he welcomed the opportunity to work for veterans. He also expressed a deep willingness to give VA's 280,000 plus employees the tools they need to do their jobs.

The Deputy Secretary has traditionally been VA's Chief Operating Officer, and Mr. Gould has advised the Committee that, along with Secretary Shinseki, he will strive to create an organization focused on giving veterans results.

Mr. Gould, I tell you the same thing I told Secretary

Shinseki during his confirmation hearing. Assuming your confirmation as the next Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, you will face tremendous challenges. In my view, leading VA is one of the most challenging jobs in or out of government, and that is especially true in a time of war.

I look forward to your testimony today and your responses to questions from the Committee members and to any post-hearing questions. It is vitally important that the position of Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs be filled as soon as possible.

Before I move here, I note that Mr. Gould is accompanied by his family and friends as well. We are especially glad to have your wife here since she is scheduled to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee at this very moment.

Mr. Gould, please introduce your family members to the Committee.

Mr. Gould. I would be delighted to do that, and I thank Michele for making the effort to be here this morning. We try to share events like this together, and, as you just noted, she is due to testify before the SAS this morning.

Sweetheart, I am glad you are here.

Seated to my left are my children: Alec, youngest son, Aidan, and Victoria. Between Victoria and Aidan is Mireya Vargas, our nanny, with whom our professional lives would

not be possible.

And, finally, directly behind me, my mom and cherished grandmother who, at age 80, has made the effort to be here today with us. Welcome.

Chairman Akaka. Well, Secretary Flournoy, you are, of course, excused to attend your pressing commitment, but thank you so much for coming this morning to this Committee hearing.

Ms. Flournoy. Thank you, sir.

Mr. Gould. Thank you, Senator.

I would like to recognize the Senior Senator from Rhode Island who is joining us this morning to introduce the nominee to the Committee.

Senator Reed, aloha and welcome to the Committee.

Senator Reed. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. It is always good to have you and good to have you this morning, particularly. I would like to ask you to give the introduction of Mr. Gould.

STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, A UNITED STATES  
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

Senator Reed. Chairman Akaka, Senator Tester, it is a great privilege for me to be here today to introduce Scott Gould to this Committee as President Obama's nominee for Deputy Secretary of the Veterans Administration.

I have known Scott and his wife, Michele, and his family now for many years. We have grown, I think, to appreciate the great service that both Michele and Scott are going to render to the United States. I certainly do.

I am glad his mother is here. She continues the proud tradition. His dad was a school teacher and a stock broker around the Boston area and was a naval officer.

Scott followed in that very proud naval tradition. He won an ROTC scholarship to Cornell University, served as an Active or Reserve Naval Officer for 26 years. His first assignment was aboard the Destroyer, U.S.S. Richard E. Byrd. He was a Surface Warfare Officer.

He continued to serve and was mobilized in 2001, in fact, for operations in Afghanistan. So he brings to the task of being the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, I think, a major qualification: He is a veteran and an extensive veteran.

Unusual for a Navy guy, he got his jump wings at Ft. Benning, Georgia. So it shows more enthusiasm than

intelligence, but anyway.

[Laughter.]

Senator Reed. I say that as a senior parachutist.

Scott has worked in private industry. Currently, he is working at IBM in their Global Leadership Initiative. He has extensive experience in industry, in management, but he has a particular wealth of experience when it comes to public management which is going to be the focus of his activities. He was the Director of Operations for the City of Chelsea outside of Boston, which was bankrupt, and he and his colleagues, a three-person team, really put that city back on its feet, curing a 25 percent structural deficit and getting it functioning again.

He was a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance and Management at the Department of the Treasury. He has also served as the Chief Financial Officer at the Commerce Department. In all of these activities, he has been recognized, having been awarded the Department of Commerce and Department of Treasury Gold Medals for Distinguished Public Service.

He is superbly prepared for the daunting task you outlined, Mr. Chairman. Part of his preparation is the fact that he has this strong, devoted and loving family: his mother, his wife, Secretary Flournoy--who I will join in a moment at Armed Services--and his children, Alec, Victoria

and Aidan. So I want to commend and thank them all and thank Scott particularly for a willingness to serve the Nation once again.

Thank you, Scott.

Mr. Gould. Thank you very much.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Reed.

Now let me call on Senator Tester for any opening remarks he may have.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

Senator Tester. Thank you, Chairman Akaka, and I will make mine very short.

First of all, thank you, Dr. Gould. Thank you for your service and for the service you are about to move forward into, and I want to welcome your wife and your mother and, more importantly, your children.

If I have my way about it, kids, your dad is going to be doing a very, very important job for the veterans of this Country.

You know we met with General Shinseki several times. He is putting together a top-flight team, yourself included in that. I think that your experiences in your life bring some important qualities to this job that are necessary.

Your challenge is to move this Agency forward and to ensure that our veterans receive first-rate health care, that claims are cleaned up and expedited and that we utilize

the latest technology, staffing and resources to manage our servicemembers, what we have promised.

We are partners in this--you, me, the Administration, this Committee on both sides of the aisle and the Chairman. I hope that you know that we will be supporting you in your efforts to make this Agency all it can be to support the veterans that served this Country so very, very well.

So, with that, Mr. Chairman, I just want to welcome Dr. Gould, and I look forward to your confirmation. I look forward more so even to the work you do once you are confirmed.

Mr. Gould. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Tester.

Mr. Gould, I will pronounce the oath here and ask you to now stand and raise your right hand.

[Witness sworn.]

Chairman Akaka. Let the record note that the witness answered in the affirmative.

Mr. Gould, please proceed with your statement.

STATEMENT OF W. SCOTT GOULD, DEPUTY SECRETARY-  
DESIGNATE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Gould. Thank you, Senator, Mr. Chairman.

I would also like to thank Senator Reed for his kind remarks and, obviously, for the example that he brings to us as a tireless advocate for veterans.

Chairman Akaka, in his absence, Senator Burr, distinguished members of the Committee--and Senator Tester--on Veterans Affairs, thank you for scheduling this hearing so expeditiously. I am honored to be before you here today, seeking your endorsement to become the Deputy Secretary of VA.

During the past several weeks, I have had the opportunity to benefit from the Committee's advice and guidance about how to better serve our veterans and accomplish the mission of the Department. Your support for strong leadership, open communication and positive results for veterans came across in a bipartisan manner.

With your permission, I would like to submit full testimony for the record that is well aligned with that guidance and, instead, make a few brief remarks before taking your questions.

Chairman Akaka. Your full statement will be in the record.

Mr. Gould. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am deeply honored by President Obama's nomination to serve as Deputy Secretary at VA, and I deeply appreciate the confidence that President Obama and Secretary Shinseki have in me to help transform the VA into a 21st Century organization. I am acutely aware that transformation is a challenging task, particularly in an organization as large, as complex and as steeped in tradition as Veterans Affairs.

We faced similar modernization challenges when I was at Treasury and at Commerce in the 1990s. We have dealt with the challenges of transformation and innovation in the private sector at IBM--challenges still ongoing today because, in truth, transformation of large organizations is hard work rarely ever complete. It is an ongoing effort to serve, to improve and to meet the needs of clients.

My previous experiences, however, gives me great confidence that the goal of transformation can be achieved by VA employees with strong leadership, teamwork and especially the continued help of this Committee.

I feel especially privileged to be considered for this role not only as a veteran of 26 years of Active and Reserve service but for three very personal reasons:

I earned my master's and doctoral degrees with the help of VA benefits. It is my view that educational programs like the new GI Bill can change lives. It changed mine.

I was mobilized to support the war in Afghanistan on

short notice. It was my experience that rapid transition from Active to Veteran status is challenging for families. We need to take care of our military families.

And, most importantly, I have experienced what it is like to have my father, a Navy veteran of World War II and Korea, spend the last 11 years of his life as a patient in a VA hospital. This last experience is central to my motivation for serving at the VA.

I would like our veterans to know that my family understands the challenge of dealing with an imposing bureaucracy and wanting the very best for your loved one. Nothing less will do.

I want VA employees to know that I appreciate that much of patient care is given not by doctors but by nurses and nurse assistants who do the bathing and the feeding, who clean the rooms, who offer a kind word. They did a great job caring for my dad and, in so doing, they cared for his family as well.

And, finally, I want to say what we rarely say as veterans, that all through our lives there is a connection with the Country, its history and our expectations of each other that comes from military service. My father expressed it just before Alzheimer's took his ability to speak altogether. Long after he had forgotten many things, he remembered a few very important things: my mother's face,

fragments of prayers and the belief that somehow the Navy would come to save him.

I believe that the VA carries this elemental trust between veterans and the Country on behalf of all of us to their last day.

If confirmed, I will join a leader in Secretary Shinseki who feels the same way. If confirmed, I will work to refine and implement a basic strategy: to create a people-centric, results-oriented, forward-looking organization. As the Secretary has already said before this Committee, the VA will make veterans the centerpiece of the Organization, invest in our civil service to help them serve veterans, continuously improve the timeliness and quality of services and support to our veterans and embed transformational initiatives as part of the culture as the VA cares for veterans like my father, present and future.

If confirmed as Deputy Secretary, I will help lead the VA as Chief Operating Officer to accomplish this vision in three ways: first, by synchronizing implementation of the strategy; second, by transforming the management infrastructure that will enable modernization; and, third, by overseeing the main operating units of VA.

This will require leadership, good communication, investment in our civil service and teamwork among the VA's many internal and external stakeholders. It will also

require attention to a range of important near-term initiatives. These include successfully implementing the new GI Bill, streamlining the disability claims process that Senator Tester just mentioned, ensuring adequate resources and access points to meet the health care needs of all enrolled veterans and, as you mentioned, Mr. Chairman, leveraging the power of information technology to accelerate and modernize the delivery of benefits and services. And, it will require accountability for our actions to the public and to veterans.

In conclusion, if this Committee chooses to confirm me, I will join a team that shares a strong desire to serve veterans, a team committed to transform the Department into a 21st Century organization focused on the Nation's veterans as its clients.

I thank this committee for its long history of unwavering bipartisan commitment to Veterans. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with you to fulfill that commitment.

And, Mr. Chairman, I am ready to respond to any questions this Committee may have.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Gould follows:]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much for your statement, Mr. Gould.

Mr. Gould, you spent some time immersing yourself in VA's inner workings during the President's transition, but you are not a VA insider nor are you coming from a veterans advocacy group. How can you begin to establish your credibility and gain trust and acceptance, elements that we consider critical to success?

Mr. Gould. Senator, I think that is an age-old process of listening, of treating people with unfailing positivity and respect, and reaching out to the many stakeholders in the VA community, the veterans service organizations, the veterans themselves and, I think as importantly, our front-line employees who have a lot to tell us.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. If confirmed, you will be at the top of Secretary Shinseki's leadership team. How will you tap the obvious knowledge and policy strength that is already in place and will indeed exist long after you have moved on?

Let me just say that I raise this in light of the recent proposal to bill insurance companies for service-connected care. I cannot imagine any of the long-time policy experts in VA proposing such a thing.

Mr. Gould. No, sir, and they did not, and I know that Secretary Shinseki vigorously worked to avoid that

announcement. And, I am pleased to say that I think at our final point the Administration reached out the veterans service organizations, to the community, tested those ideas, found them lacking and quickly withdrew them.

But your overall point, sir, is that we need to be listening to our career civil servants, our team there: over 280,000 employees, 20,000 physicians, 60,000 nurses. This is a core team with deep knowledge. We need to be approaching them with respect and as members of the team and listening to their advice and counsel.

Chairman Akaka. In your recently released book--we chatted about this--you argue that VA employees should be seen as strategic resources with ability to seek new solutions by reaching out to fellow government employees, VSOs and vendors in the private sector. I am thinking about how practical this suggestion would be. For example, if Jim, the claims processor in your book, stops what he is doing and does what you suggest, who does his work in the meantime and what happens to the claims backlog?

Mr. Gould. I just, Mr. Chairman, believe so strongly that we need to stop thinking about civil servants and government employees as a cost and start thinking of them as an investment.

And the point that my co-author, Linda Bilmes, and I were raising in the book is a simple one--that change, that

the opportunity to transform, the opportunity to advance the cause of veterans at the VA, I believe, will come in large part from the men and women who are serving veterans every day. What that means practically is that we need to have mechanisms that will allow them to contribute their ideas and their creativity.

Now does that mean, practically speaking, everybody takes a six-month holiday and we go figure out a new strategy for the VA? No. I think what it does mean is that you look to the civil servant population.

You ask for volunteers and you hope to find those few bright sparks who say I want to lend some ideas, I want to create some new forward momentum in this organization. And you engage them and bring them in that process, and you listen and come to good decisions and then move forward.

Chairman Akaka. Well, thank you for all your responses. I have questions also based on your book, but let me call on Senator Tester for any questions he may have.

Senator Tester.

Senator Tester. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you very much.

Dr. Gould, the new GI Bill takes effect August 1st. This is April 1st. How will you ensure that those benefits are delivered on time over the next four months?

Mr. Gould. With only four months to go, it is, as they

say, a sporty course. The bill was enacted almost seven, eight months ago now, and the VA, to the best of my knowledge, has been working vigorously and with all seriousness to make sure that the organization meets the August 1, 2009 deadline.

In my work as Co-Chair of the Agency Review Team, I had an opportunity to do a lot of analysis on the program at that point. I have to say that in the last 60 days I have not had that same level of access nor opportunity to delve into the progress of the GI Bill.

I think it is fair to say that it is a high-risk project, that it has presently the full attention of the leadership team, and, if given the opportunity to be confirmed, I will delve into that program and project immediately to satisfy myself that we will meet that deadline.

Senator Tester. Do you support advance appropriations for the VA?

Mr. Gould. I support a steady, predictable source of funding for an Organization that badly needs to know when it can hire people and when it will get the money to serve our veterans.

Senator Tester. Okay. So does that mean you support advance appropriations?

Mr. Gould. Senator, as I mentioned earlier just a

moment ago, it means that the outcome of a process I think traditionally owned by Congress is one that needs to play out here, and what I would envision is the need for a stable and consistent funding that we can predict.

Senator Tester. Okay. So let's assume that taking all the politics out of it, that we go forth with an advanced appropriation budget for the VA, how will you project that budget to ensure it meets the needs of our veterans?

Mr. Gould. Senator, thank you for that opportunity to answer the question in that way. Very carefully, we will work to make it work. We have a very fine budget team and career civil servants who will help us work with the models, a Milner Model as an example, to develop the best predictor of utilization at the VA.

I must share with you that that is a model that has some weaknesses in it, and the further out in time that you endeavor to predict the higher likelihood there will be a gap between what you predict and what you need. So that process of projecting now not just 12 months or 18 but double that period of time is the challenge that I think everyone is most concerned about.

Senator Tester. All right. Disability benefits, you know as well as anybody in this room that Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in particular return with some pretty severe disabilities. The VA's rating process in my opinion

is outdated. It really has not evolved with the modern technologies or the new kinds of injuries that our troops are facing, particularly neurological and psychological injuries.

How do you plan to modernize the VA to meet the needs of those folks and, furthermore, as brought up earlier, really tackle not only the neurological and psychological problems but tackle the backlog in claims itself?

Mr. Gould. Senator, this is a problem that has been long admired. It is a problem that, to the best of my knowledge, has been studied in depth by a number of blue ribbon panels and by management teams for many years. The consistency of the recommendations in those documents is fairly clear, and I will talk about those in a minute.

The thing that concerns me is the lack of execution against those recommendations, and, clearly, the ability to adopt those requires the agreement of this Committee, of the veterans service organizations, of veterans themselves and the contribution of VA employees to make it all work. But, for one reason or another, that has not happened.

There are three levels of analysis that I think make sense, if I am confirmed, to conduct inside the VA:

The first is to ask ourselves the question: Is this rule set too complex to manage effectively? Can the rules be changed?

The second with respect to business process: Can we streamline the business processes that are currently being used at the VA so that, within the guidance of law, we more rapidly reach conclusion and can respond to veterans' needs?

And then lastly, I am very hopeful about the potential for the use of new technology such as the paperless environment that has been mentioned previously by the Chairman in his introductory remarks.

Senator Tester. I look forward to your meeting those goals and do that assessment.

My last question, and I have a bunch of them, and we may put some of them through, but I ultimately think that you are the right man for this job anyway.

Mr. Gould. Thank you, sir.

Senator Tester. When Chairman Akaka asked about some questions, you being the top of the team with General Shinseki and others, and you have a pretty clear direction of where you are going to go from the experiences you bring to this position.

I guess the question I have is how do you get your goals and your views and your vision for the VA to the ground where the people, for the most part, are doing some really some really good work, but every once in a while you guys and gals want to move in a different way, and it does not necessarily transfer to the ground? How do you get it

to the ground?

If you want me to clarify the question because it was a little vague.

Mr. Gould. No, no. It is the question in transformation of any large organization. I just want to share with you the experience I had as Co-Chair of the Agency Review Team.

I probably did 100 interviews, interviewed a lot of documents and so on, got a little bit of a sense, initial sense over a two-month period of the VA. On a uniform basis, I have to say how impressed I was with the commitment, the passion, the belief that Federal employees have in the VA for doing that job that they are doing.

In my view, that is the thing for which there is no substitute. Once it is there and you can enter into a conversation, a dialogue with employees in much the fashion that I have described earlier, then I think you have the opportunity for finding in the front line creative ideas and innovations that can be brought forward and brought up the chain of command and engaged in that fashion.

You asked an even harder question which is, okay, what if you get to the nine out of ten that are ideas that are readily adopted, you got a tenth that has got to go through? Very simply, I would say you look to the incentives of the individuals involved. So, explain the value of what you are

doing. Work to communicate, to develop understanding--  
frankly, to negotiate.

This is a very, very large organization, lots of people  
involved. It is very, very rare that a my way or the  
highway type of approach will succeed.

That said, when it comes to issues of accountability in  
the organization, then I believe that Secretary Shinseki  
and, if confirmed, I will join him in that process of  
demanding that we hold people accountable for the results  
that they achieve.

Senator Tester. All right. Very good. Thank you very  
much.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Tester.

Now I would like to call on our Ranking Member for his  
statement and his questions.

Senator Burr. Mr. Chairman, aloha. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. Aloha. Good to see you.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

Senator Burr. I apologize to you, and I apologize to  
Scott. My schedule had this starting at 10:00. I think you  
upped it, and when I found that out I could not readjust the  
mayor of my home town who was going to do everything he  
could to see me today. So I apologize for that.

[Laughter.]

Senator Burr. Mr. Chairman, let me say at the beginning I had the opportunity to spend some time with the nominee this week. I found it to be enlightening and fulfilling, and it is my belief that we should move this nomination as quickly as we can.

As I sat here and heard you answer Senator Tester's last question, though, Scott, it made me realize in the South we like to make sausage. It is pretty easy to make, but as long as you stuff it in the traditional thin skin it is not as easy to make it into what we are accustomed for generations and generations and generations to serve.

You know it sort of reminds me a little bit about government. We have a lot of good people and a lot of good ideas, but we consistently try to stuff it into the old framework of something that is antiquated and has proven time and time again will not allow innovation and creativity because it has no flexibility.

Let me just ask you to drill down a little bit and, specifically, what recommendations would you make to General Shinseki with your knowledge of, one, where we need to go but, two, a very good understanding of where we are here? How does it structurally have to change?

Mr. Gould. Senator, you have asked a very challenging question.

I have spent the last four years at IBM, leading an

effort on innovation within the company, and I will just describe it to you briefly and then try to relate it to the prospective opportunity here.

The company called IBM has been number one in the world in the creation of intellectual property for the last 13 or 14 years in a row, does it very, very well, and it has done it primarily in the hardware and software arena.

Some of the senior executives in the government practice recognized that they need to figure out how to do innovation in the services industry. So we created something called the Global Leadership Initiative, identified a series of toughest challenges and went about trying to solve those on a portfolio basis.

Like that, in my view, innovation that gets outside the box--your point--that is not stuffed into the old sausage skin and looks like and comes in the same serving sign as we are used to, really requires a dialogue with front-line employees and with stakeholders about what those net new solutions could be.

And then, you have to put a dedicated team on figuring out how to make that happen--developing the idea, building the business case to make sure the benefit net of cost is really going to sustain interest over time, and then engaging people in that process of maturing the idea and turning it into an investment grade solution.

Senator Burr. You have a huge challenge, and I think you will find all members of this Committee more than willing to help remove any impediments that you might find because I believe the solution is in an architecture that we have yet to create, and our success is dependent upon our ability to begin to construct that architecture of the VA of the 21st Century.

In your book, *The People Factor*, you note that it is "very difficult to fire, demote and even deny a pay raise to an individual who is not performing well in the Federal Government. This is one of the big complaints of Federal workers."

Well, I have to ask you. Is this a concern that you have at VA and, if so, how do you plan to address it?

Mr. Gould. Thank you, Senator.

As you may have noted or folks on your staff, one of the case studies that we presented in the book was an analysis of change within the strictures of Title V. That is within the rules and regulations that exist today. And it is my view that entirely within Title V it is possible to do innovative and important work in government, using those requirements.

Specifically, number one, we need an improved labor-management partnership at the VA. We need to reach out to our unions. We need to involve them in a process that will

have them contributing their creativity and input into that strategic planning process I mentioned a moment ago.

Number two, we need leadership. There is a difference between leadership and management, and I believe that Secretary Shinseki is a leader, someone who is setting high goals for the Organization, establishing a vision and working hard with Congress to make sure that there are adequate resources to make that happen.

So those are two specific things. A partnership with the folks on the front line who make it all go and leadership at a high level, combined with the resources to be able to make that happen, make me confident that change can occur in the VA.

Senator Burr. As I know from my conversation with you, you have been in and out of government, and you understand the difficulty, the cultural challenges within our workforce regardless of what agency you are in. I commend you for understanding that and encourage you not to back off from any attempts to begin to change it because it is those that excel that should be rewarded and it is those that are complacent that we should find a means to either punish or reward, whichever is appropriate.

Mr. Chairman, you have been awful kind. I am going to ask one last question if I could, and again I apologize to you and to Scott and, more importantly, to his family on

this day that I was not here at the beginning.

You highlighted in your testimony the importance of transforming the VA into the 21st Century. What do you see as your greatest challenge in that transformation process?

Mr. Gould. I think the greatest standard that we are seeking to achieve here is a standard that is in the hearts and minds of every veteran served by the VA. So that future vision that the Secretary has outlined, having to do with people and results and a forward-looking organization, all turn around our capacity to meet the high expectations of the veterans that we serve.

I would envision a VA that is much easier to access, that has higher quality health care and economic benefits to offer our veterans and that ultimately is more cost-effective and productive in how we do that work. The clear image of that is something that, deliberately, we want to involve employees with, the veterans service organizations, this body to come to a crystal clear understanding of what that will be, and that is out of deference to and appreciation for the consultative process that we are going to have to go to commit to that firm goal.

But the broad parameters are there. Secretary Shinseki has laid that out, and now the job of his Chief Operating Officer, if I am confirmed for that position, will be to implement, to execute and to make that happen.

Senator Burr. Well, I thank you for your willingness to serve the public, and I feel very confident, under the Chairman's leadership, the future of this nomination is not in question.

I thank the Chair.

Mr. Gould. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

I would like to go back to the book, Mr. Gould. Your book suggests that 90 percent of initial claims for compensation are granted. I believe that actually the percentage of specific claims items is much lower.

How would you suggest that VA compensate veterans if VA finds that roughly half of their claim conditions are not deemed service-connected at first look?

Mr. Gould. Mr. Chairman, I would obviously defer to the Chairman's view of what that precise number is and offer to you the spirit in which that observation was made in the book. And that is that I share a belief along with my co-author, Harvard professor, Linda Bilmes, that there are opportunities in this process to streamline it, to make it better, to serve veterans more efficiently and effectively and that one of the ways that we can make that process more streamlined is to recognize when additional tasks add no value to a process.

So, if it is the case that some significant percentage of applications that are put into a process, where an individual has requested a particular outcome, in fact, have no additional value added provided by the organization reviewing them, that is a candidate--in my experience in a business process redesign world--to shed. It is to recognize that there is an opportunity to move that process forward more quickly because we do not have to expend the resources to make that happen.

Chairman Akaka. That is great.

Despite the historic increases in VA's budget and the need to quickly bring on new staff, I understand that all new hiring decisions in VHA are being reviewed by the incumbent VHA leadership through a human resources committee. I have been told that the local managers are being asked to provide lengthy justifications for new hires with a focus of potentially contracting the position out. What is your view of this process?

Mr. Gould. Mr. Chairman, obviously, one of the most sensitive sets of decisions that can be made in an agency in government is who to hire and when, by what criteria we make that decision. And, under Title V, there are a set of strict standards about how that should be done, particularly with respect to our career civil service that in my view should be protected.

You are raising new information to me. Frankly, I was unaware that there was that kind of control being exercised. And, with your permission, I would like to, if confirmed and have the opportunity to dig into that, get an answer back to you that would reflect more of the facts on the ground.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you for that.

Now let me move to training, Mr. Gould. Training and retraining staff is an absolutely necessary and worthy endeavor, but it is expensive both in terms of direct costs and opportunities lost. How do you believe VA's workforce should be trained, with these concerns in mind?

Mr. Gould. Mr. Chairman, you have seen me levitate about six inches off the chair on that issue, and you would be right. I do not think many people in our Country understand that government spends \$700 billion a year--a year--on personnel. That is a TARP going out of government every 12 months, and yet we spend about a third of the amount of money that the private sector does on training.

To me, it stands to reason that if you are going to have all those people and you are going to ask them to do new things and respond to new technology and redesign and transform and you are really putting a lot of challenges at them, then, at a minimum, government--in our case, for our conversation here today, VA--has an obligation to invest in our career civil servants to provide them training.

The point of the question, obviously, is, well, how do you do that and where do you come up with the money to make that happen? That is where Congress comes in. And I hope and believe that Secretary Shinseki and I will have an opportunity, if confirmed, to make that business case.

I would point out that in the book we make an economic argument on just those grounds. How is it that additional money to train can result in cost savings, cost avoidance and better performance down the road and that we ought to be making those investments now?

It is the same logic that we use for our veterans for education and training and vocational rehab and so on. We are reaching out. We are investing in them, in the hope and belief that they will contribute back to society, have richer lives as a result of that. Analogously, I think a career civil service is in that same position, that our investment in them can create value for our Country down the road.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much.

Senator Tester, any further questions?

Senator Tester. No further question. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Well, I want to thank you very much. You have responded real well. We are looking forward to moving you. I hear our Ranking Member about moving this as

quickly as we can, and we certainly will.

I thank you so much, and it is great to have your family here.

And, it is good to be looking forward to the 21st Century and what we can do for our veterans, and that is what this Committee is all about too. As was mentioned by our Ranking Member, we certainly want to move the impediments or whatever obstacles there may be that would prevent improvement and progress and work together with you and Secretary Shinseki and also the VSOs and all those who are concerned about veterans.

So, thank you very much for being here. Thank you and aloha to you and your family.

Mr. Gould. Thank you so much. You made us feel very welcome.

Thank you, Senator Burr.

Thank you, Senator Tester.

[Recess.]

Chairman Akaka. The Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs will be in order.

We will move now to the nomination of Tammy Duckworth to be the Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs within the Department of Veterans Affairs.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN AKAKA

Chairman Akaka. I want to say aloha and welcome to you. Ms. Duckworth, as you know, is no stranger to this Committee. You have been here many times and having most recently in November 2007 when you offered your thoughts on the issue of seamless transition. As someone with deep roots in my home State of Hawaii, I know that you bring the spirit of aloha which will serve you well if confirmed by the Senate.

As part of the newest generation of veterans, Ms. Duckworth continues to triumph over obstacles in her way. She demonstrates on a daily basis the strength and courage that marks the best of this new class of American servicemembers.

In many respects, the Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs is the public face of VA. When there is good news to be shared, this person advises and represents the Secretary. When there is unpleasant news for which VA must take responsibility--and we all know that there will be--this is the person who must step forward and make every effort to be open and honest with the public. There must be trust and confidence in VA if it is to serve the veterans effectively.

We recently heard of instances in Florida and Tennessee where thousands of veterans were potentially exposed to infections following colonoscopy. There are serious

situations, and these are that, and I have asked the Inspector General to investigate the facts and circumstances.

As upsetting as such mistakes are, the public's trust in VA comes from its willingness to disclose those errors and to work to fix them. I have no doubt there are private sector health care institutions making the same types of mistakes, but we simply do not hear about them in the same way. When there is a problem at one or two VA facilities, it can tar the entire VA system.

VA's constituency ranges from those who, like me, started during World War II, to the newest generation of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. VA beneficiaries live in urban areas, in remote and rural areas, and everywhere in between. Some veterans return from service with no scars. Others have lost limbs or suffer from the invisible wounds of PTSD. When we talk about reaching all veterans, there must be an effort to include their families as well.

In addition to being the public face, this Assistant Secretary also represents VA across the entire Federal Government as well as with State and local governments. If confirmed, Ms. Duckworth will need to interact effectively with many agencies, from DOD to SBA, to represent the issues and interests of veterans including on matters such as

homelessness, unemployment, housing, disability policy and health care.

Undoubtedly, this is an important job, and I look forward to your testimony and hearing about your plans.

At this time, I would like to yield to my Ranking Member, Senator Burr, for his opening statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Major Duckworth, welcome. We look forward to the opportunity to share some time with you, and you could not have a more standup person, I think, to introduce you than the guy to your right and to our left. We welcome our colleague, Dick Durbin.

The position you seek is one of the most important roles that ensure that veterans and their families are being well served by the VA. As the Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, one of your most important responsibilities is to provide veterans and, more importantly, their families with up-to-date information about VA activities, benefits and services. This is critical because VA programs cannot help improve the lives of veterans if veterans do not know about them.

In this role, you would be responsible for fostering partnerships with organizations around the Country that are willing to work with VA in carrying out its noble mission.

We have veterans in all corners of the Nation including very rural areas, and many could benefit tremendously from these efforts.

Mr. Chairman, I intend to have several written questions that I am going to give to Major Duckworth to just clarify for me some things on the Committee questionnaire that I am not going to do in today's hearing. I will have some general questions that I do ask.

But I look forward to hearing from you more about your thoughts about how we take the VA forward, how we make sure that we share with the veterans and, more importantly, the communities that they come from the wide array of services that the VA has provided for them and, hopefully, that they can then utilize those.

I thank you for being here, and I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you.

At this time, I would like to ask for the introduction of the Senators from Illinois, and I would like to now recognize the honorable and distinguished Assistant Majority Leader and Senior Senator from Illinois, who is joining us this morning to introduce the nominee to the Committee. I welcome Senator Durbin. We have had a long relationship beginning from the House, and it has been a good one.

Senator Durbin. It sure has.

Chairman Akaka. And I look forward to that continuing.  
So, Senator Durbin, aloha and welcome, and we look forward  
to your statement.

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STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD J. DURBIN, A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF ILLINOIS

Senator Durbin. Chairman Akaka, thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to introduce Tammy Duckworth as a nominee for the Veterans Administration Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs.

Senator Burr, thanks for those kind words.

And, to my colleague, Senator Burr, good to see you and Senator Tester, and I would say to all of the members of the Veterans Committee this is a rare opportunity to be part of the appointment of someone of real quality, who can serve this Nation as she has so many times before.

Four years ago, in 2005, we had an occasion that President Bush gave the State of the Union Address. We each get a couple tickets for people, visitors to sit in the gallery for that historic moment, and we have made a tradition in our office to call out to Walter Reed and say: Are there any Illinois vets who can come in and take these seats? We would like to have them come by.

And so, that night of the President's State of the Union Address, I was told that there were in fact two people coming from Illinois, Major Tammy Duckworth and her husband, Bryan Bowlsbey, both of whom were members of the Illinois National Guard. I had never met her before. She literally came rolling into the office in full dress uniform and then

told me her story.

Ten weeks before, Tammy Duckworth had been an activated member of the Illinois National Guard and was piloting a helicopter over Iraq when a rocket-propelled grenade was shot into the cockpit and exploded. As a result of it, Tammy lost both of her legs, and her right arm was shattered to the point there was a serious question as to whether or not she would be able to keep that arm and use it in the future.

When I heard that story, I could not believe it because she was sitting in front of me with this big smile on her face, 10 weeks after being shot down, after going through countless surgeries, and she seemed to be as happy and composed as any person I had ever seen, her husband right by her side pushing the wheelchair.

I did not realize until long afterwards that she had an IV running under her dress uniform coat which was the only way that she could come and visit that night, and it had to be changed by Bryan during the course of the evening. But, for her, it was a big smile and a welcome to everyone.

A reporter came in, Lynn Sweet of the Chicago Sun-Times and asked Major Duckworth a hard question. She said: Major Duckworth, what do you think of these people who are protesting against this war, who say it was a mistake, we should not have gone to war. After what you have been

through, what do you think of these people?

And she said, is not that why we are fighting this war, so that Americans can express their point of view and have freedom of speech?

I was taken aback by that answer. I could not believe the insight and courage that that answer entailed that she gave, and I thought to myself, this is a special person.

I did not know her full family background at the time, but she was born into a military tradition. She is the daughter of a Marine. She is a second generation Purple Heart recipient in her family.

After completing his service, Tammy's father worked for the United Nations. Tammy spent her childhood, much of it, growing up in Southeast Asia before arriving in Hawaii at the age of 16.

She started her military career in 1990, joining the ROTC in graduate school. She was commissioned in the Army Reserve in 1992. She completed helicopter flight school, joining the Illinois National Guard in 1996.

In her civilian career, she has worked on lung cancer prevention at Northern Illinois University Center for Nursing Research and was a Global Manager for Rotary International. In 2004, she was a doctoral student when she requested to be deployed to Iraq, and it was on the afternoon of November 12th, 2004 when she was on her last

mission of the day in Baghdad when her helicopter was shot down.

She made it out of that helicopter somehow. I have had a chance to meet her pilot and co-pilot that day. The whole crew was just heroic, bringing that helicopter down safely and transferring her. Her next memory, she says, was waking up at Walter Reed with her husband, Bryan, also a member of the Illinois National Guard, by her side.

I told you about the grievous injuries which she suffered as a result of it. I met her while she was recovering, and I thought to myself, I want to know this person more. This is an exceptional person.

I kept in touch with her. A few months later, in a very weak moment, I made a phone call to her and said, would you consider running for Congress?

She did not say no. She said, I want to think about it.

I said, okay.

She talked it over with Bryan and called me back and said she was going to make the race.

Well, she did not win that race, but she was heroic again in the effort that she made. Fortunately, for her, the Governor of our State turned to her and asked her if she would become the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, and then she took up that spot in

November, 2006.

She has done some amazing things there: the Illinois Warriors Assistance Program, requiring additional screening for PTSD and traumatic brain injury, the GI Loan for Heroes mortgage loan program, the Vets Cash Grant Program which provides over \$5 million in grants to veterans service organizations, Veterans Adaptive Activities Day. The list goes on.

She has been so totally committed to her fellow veterans and to public service. She has been recognized with the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Hubert Humphrey Award, a recipient in 2007 along with President William Clinton and the late historian, John Hope Franklin. She has received the Access Living Disability Leader of the Year Award in 2007, was the DAV Disabled Veteran of the Year in 2008 and received the AMVETS Silver Helmet Award in 2009.

Now she has been called into service again by President Obama who is asking her join an extraordinary team at the Veterans Administration, facing extraordinary and historic challenges. She is a person for that job. I have known that from the minute that I met her. I know that she is going to fight for veterans with every ounce of her being and every ounce of her strength.

I know that she, having seen her husband deployed after she returned, knows the sacrifices made by families. Here

was Tammy living alone in her situation where she needs a helping hand. Her husband is deployed, and he goes without complaint. They understood what service meant, both in her life and in his life.

He could not be here today because he is at Ft. Gordon, which Tammy will explain. He is on military assignment at this moment, but cannot be with her.

I am just going to close by saying a few words in closing. She had the courage to serve. She had the courage to come home and battle her wounds. And, she has had the courage to carry on in a life of public service. We are blessed in America to have people like Tammy Duckworth.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Durbin.

Now I would like to recognize our newest Committee member, Senator Burris, for any introductory remarks you would like to make on behalf of Major Duckworth.

STATEMENT OF HON. ROLAND BURRIS, A UNITED STATES  
SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF ILLINOIS

Senator Burris. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Burr, colleague Tester. I would like to thank you for the time to address this Committee about a good fellow Illinoisan who settled in our great State.

And, we are happy for it, Tammy.

Major Tammy Duckworth, as we consider her nomination for Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs for the Department of Veterans Affairs, I would also like to thank my Senior Senator, Senator Durbin, for providing such a fine introduction.

The Department of Veterans Affairs is at a crucial juncture in our history, transitioning from one generation to the next with changing demographics and shifting priorities. It is a mission of this Committee to ensure that in the nomination process, that we confirm nominees that will best serve the needs of America's veterans.

I can think of no candidate more deserving of this position or more qualified to help lead the Department of Veterans Affairs than Major Tammy Duckworth. As a member of the ROTC since 1990, the Major has been instrumental in opening doors and leading the way.

After becoming a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army Reserves, Major Duckworth decided to fly helicopters because

it was one of the few combat jobs open to women, and she served her Country with distinction. For her service in Iraq, Major Duckworth received a Purple Heart, and while recuperating at Walter Reed Center she was presented with an Air Medal and the Army Commendation Medal.

Her service and her sacrifice alone recommend Major Duckworth to lead at the Department of Veterans Affairs, but it is the strength of her ideas and commitment to her fellow veterans that most strongly qualifies her for this post, Mr. Chairman.

Her work as the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs was marked by innovation and extraordinary outreach to make programs and resources more accessible for the veterans community, a commitment we will hear reinforced in Major Duckworth's statements today. While the head of the Department, she put in place State programs that offered tax credits for employers who hired veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan and Desert Storm, s worked to provide State grants to service organizations benefitting veterans issues and secured backing for below-market mortgages for veterans.

Major Duckworth was also honored by Chicago Access for Living for her extraordinary commitment to veterans with disabilities.

This is the type of leader we need in the Department of Veterans Affairs today because there is just so much that we

need to correct in that Department. I am grateful that President Obama has put his faith in Major Duckworth's candidacy, and I know the Department of Veterans Affairs will make a great progress under her steady, capable, committed and unwavering leadership.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burris.

Now I would like to call on Senator Tester for his statement.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

Senator Tester. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I am going to start with an apology because I am going to have to book out of here before I get the opportunity to ask you questions. So I am going to ask you questions in my opening statement, and then we will catch it on the record.

A couple things, first of all, thank you for being here. Thank you for your service. Thank you for what I think will be outstanding service in the VA once you get confirmed.

And, along those lines, Mr. Chairman, I have had Tammy in my front. We have talked about her vision for the VA, and I would hope that her and Dr. Gould's confirmations would be expedited with the Ranking Member's agreement to that.

So, a couple things, the VA is pretty much a passive

system as far as reaching out and letting people know what their benefits are. We have millions of veterans out there that are qualified for benefits that do not get them. I am curious to know how you are going to reach out to those veterans in rural areas--in a State like Montana, that is critically important--female veterans, Native American vets, and there is a high number of those.

The other issue that is very, very important to me is there has been a number of embarrassing issues that have come up in the VA. Whether it is inaccurate suicide data--that comes to mind right off the top--or other things, how are you going to deal with those issues that are very, very uncomfortable and are you willing to tell the leadership in the VA? If they come down and say you know we want to soft pedal this, you say: Now, hold it. The truth will set you free. We need to tell the truth on this stuff.

So I would hope that you would do that as you move forward and how you would integrate yourself into that.

With that, Mr. Chairman, I do have to leave, but I just want to thank, once again, Ms. Duckworth for being here today, and I look forward to working with her for the benefit of veterans throughout this Country.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Tester, for your statement.

Now I would like to ask that, Ms. Duckworth, I will

administer the oath to you at this time and ask you to raise your right hand.

[Witness sworn.]

Chairman Akaka. Let the record note that the witness answered in the affirmative.

Major Duckworth, I would like to ask you at this time to introduce your family or your friends who are here.

Major Duckworth. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I have six members of I call them my family, but they are my friends who are here with me, starting with Colonel Michael Yap, a good friend from Hawaii originally, and he and his wife started visiting me at Walter Reed right when I was first injured--Colonel, retired.

I have also Mr. Tom Porter, Korean War Veteran who started visiting me before I even woke up from my medically-induced coma at Walter Reed, a double amputee, and he is there to tell the troops at Walter Reed every single Tuesday and Thursday, without fail, that life goes on and you have a wonderful, wonderful career after you lose your legs. So he was my beacon when I had no hope.

Jim Mayer, the Milkshake Man, a Vietnam veteran, a double amputee, he walks the halls of Walter Reed for many, many years, former VA employee handing out milkshakes because he knew that when an American GI cannot keep down any food because of his medication he will suck down a

milkshake--Vietnam vet.

Also, I have Mr. Brian Clauss and Mr. Joe Butler from the John Marshall Law School in Chicago where one of the last things we were able to do at the State of Illinois was establish a veterans legal assistance clinic with law students, a very successful program. They have recently written a textbook on how to establish similar programs across the Country.

Did I get everyone? I think so.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much for those introductions and welcome to all of you to the Committee.

At this time, I would like to ask you to proceed with your statement.

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STATEMENT OF MAJOR L. TAMMY DUCKWORTH, DESIGNATE  
TO BE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR  
PUBLIC AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT  
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Major Duckworth. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and aloha, mahalo nui loa.

Chairman Akaka. Aloha.

Major Duckworth. And Ranking Member Burr and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today. I am deeply honored and humbled that President Obama has given me this opportunity to serve our Nation's Veterans.

Since my time at Walter Reed, when this Committee first called on me to testify, while I was still a patient, on behalf of my fellow wounded warriors, I have been privileged to answer your questions and assist you in caring for our brave military men and women. I plan on continuing this important partnership with you in my new role at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, should I be confirmed.

A significant part of my duties will be to transform the public affairs function at the Department of Veterans Affairs to fulfill President Obama's and Secretary Shinseki's commitment to a 21st Century agency with candor, transparency and integrity. Not only will we be responsive to this Committee's concerns, we will also be proactive in

communicating with you and with our Veterans.

In order to become a 21st Century organization, we will have to change some past methods used in communicating with outside organizations whether they are other government agencies, the media, the legislature or, most importantly, our veterans.

The things that VA already does well, we will continue. However, with the changing demographics of our veteran population, the VA will need to develop the communication strategies that best reach our newest veterans where they live, work and play. It is no longer enough to hand out brochures at demobilization ceremonies. We must develop social networking strategies, non-traditional outlets such as blogs and use a wide variety of new media available to get the message of available benefits out to our veterans.

Just as our Nation learned from our Vietnam veterans that we must love the warrior regardless of our personal stand on the war, we must also learn the lesson of how Department of Veterans Affairs lost contact with so many Vietnam veterans and apply those lessons today. We are in a critical time when we still have the ability to reach out to the generation of post-9/11 veterans. If we send the message incorrectly, we risk angering or disappointing these vets to the point of their turning their backs on the VA, as was the case of so many of the Vietnam generation.

The upcoming roll-out of the post-9/11 GI Bill is a critical example. If our vets are not given the correct information on qualifications and application processes, they will become frustrated and have their worst stereotypes of the VA bureaucracy reinforced. Most tragically, if we do not reach out in the correct way to our veterans suffering from traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, they will turn away and not access the care that they need for these wounds.

The second component of my position at VA will be to develop partnerships with other Federal and State agencies as well as with non-governmental organizations. In my past work with Veterans, I recognize that the greatest frustration with the VA is not the quality of the care that is provided. In fact, VA medical care is among the best in the Country. The frustration is with gaining access to that care.

Local governmental agencies will become an ally with the Department of Veterans Affairs in helping our vets negotiate that process of accessing and qualifying for VA benefits. In my new job, I hope to use my past experience and relationships with the State Directors of Veterans Affairs, with county veteran service officers, with veteran service organizations as well as with organizations that have not traditionally had a relationship with the VA, such

as community service organizations like Rotary International and Lions Clubs or faith-based organizations.

If VA cannot be in every store front of every hometown across America, we will find partners who are and who can help us distribute the tools that our veterans need to gain access to the healthcare and benefits that they have earned through their service.

No veteran should ever have his access to VA services blocked because of geography. If it did not matter where I lived and where my hometown was when I enlisted, where I live now should not prevent me from getting the VA services that I need and earned. Intergovernmental partnerships will be key in keeping our Nation's obligations to our veterans.

In the Army, my job did not start and end with flying helicopters. My job was to carry out the mission assigned to me and to take care of my soldiers. I view this opportunity to serve in the Department of Veterans Affairs the same way. I am nominated to be Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, but ultimately my job will be to support the mission of serving our veterans.

I live every day knowing that I should have died in that dusty field north of Baghdad, and I am surviving only because my buddies would not leave me behind. I intend to honor their heroism by doing everything that I can to make sure that this Nation stands by those who serve and leaves

no veteran behind.

Thank you for this opportunity to come before you today, and God bless our troops who are in harm's way around the world today.

Thank you, sir.

[The prepared statement of Major Duckworth follows:]

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Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Major Duckworth, for your testimony.

I certainly appreciate the enthusiasm and creativity that you will be bringing to your new position if you are confirmed by the Senate.

In your appearances before this Committee and in other public forums, you have sometimes been critical of VA. In your new position, you will be called on to defend VA when others express their criticism. How will you handle this situation?

Major Duckworth. Sir, I plan on approaching my job with the utmost level of transparency and accessibility. One of the great frustrations I had as a State Director, as someone from outside the VA organization, was that complete opaqueness. Oftentimes, when I wanted information or when I asked simple questions, I could not get the answer, and I think that is one of the great criticisms, and that was certainly something that I had, which was just tell me what I am asking so that I can go about the business of helping veterans.

And I know that is a great frustration, and so I hope to approach my job with openness, transparency and just being always available to ask questions. And, if I do not know the answer, I am going to tell you I do not know the answer. I am certainly not going to hide that, but I am

going to get back to you, do the research and get that information back out.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you for that response.

I am aware of many initiatives that States have undertaken to address the needs of veteran residents, and I know that you have said that coordination and outreach to the States will be one of your top priorities. Do you have specific ideas, for example, for ways in which the States and Federal agencies can collaborate to address the needs of veterans with TBI or PTSD?

Major Duckworth. Yes, sir. In Illinois, we started the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program, and that was out of the recognition that so many Illinois veterans who deployed were National Guardsmen and Reservists who did not live near a large military installation like in many other States and that once they came home they then returned to very rural communities that were far away from the nearest installation.

So, with the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program, we accessed our local network of mental health providers, and we partnered with actually nongovernmental organizations--the Illinois Brain Injury Association and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago--and developed a teaching program on military-caused trauma, brain trauma and PTSD that we then implemented to the network of local providers across the

State.

So, under the Illinois Warrior Assistance Program, the servicemember who either does not want to go to a Federal facility or who lives more than 1 hour's drive, 75 miles or has to wait more than 3 weeks for an appointment with the VA will get full access to care from his local provider who has been trained on military trauma. And so, it is that partnership between State Government, between not for profit organizations like the Illinois Brain Injury Association and then also with nongovernmental entities like the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, coming together to reach out and have those services.

And then we advertised it through partnerships, not just with our own offices but with county organizations, with veterans service organizations. Sometimes the first word of advice a young vet gets is when, occurs when he walks into the local VFW post and talks to a Vietnam veteran. And so, part of my job will be to make sure we have those partnerships across all of the organizations that are interested in caring for vets.

Chairman Akaka. Major Duckworth, in responses to my pre-hearing questions, you indicated an interest in looking at improved ways of communicating with this newest generation of veterans. Could you please describe in more detail what you envision?

Major Duckworth. Yes, sir. The VA does some things very well. It does a great job, a wonderful job of sending out newsletters, monthly publications, taping video messages that get played on Armed Forces channels, those very traditional methods of reaching World War II, Korean War vets.

The largest population of internet users among the veterans communities, actually Vietnam veterans, and I would like to see the VA move forward in that realm of the internet, Facebook pages, blogs, social networking sites, accessing our partners in the veterans service organization community and just getting the word out--so, accessing nontraditional media, basically going to where the vets live, work and play.

You know if the military, in the military, recruiting has moved toward getting NASCAR and blogs and video games. Well, that is because that is effective. The VA needs to think along the same lines in terms of reaching our veterans where they live and where their family members live because the other group that often gets the information to the veteran is his family members.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much.

Senator Burr.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Major, I am going to go to a similar area in your

testimony because you were very clear, and I will quote you: "No veteran should have his access to DVA services blocked because of geography. Just as it did not matter where my hometown was when enlisted, where I live now should not prevent me from getting DVA services that I need and earned." I think that is an extremely important point.

And, you covered what you did as the State Director to expand services and the criteria that was used: geographical distance, length of time for an appointment. Let me ask you honestly, should we not extend this across the Veterans Administration?

I happen to represent a State that, if you look at it, 50 percent of it is very rural. There are many areas where we have yet to reach an outpatient facility within a reasonable distance of where veterans live, yet I have the highest percentage increase of retired military in my State of any State in the Country. So we know what is coming down the road.

And, I have to say that the past Secretary and the current Secretary are working aggressively to make sure that we address the facility needs that we have. But, in the interim, there are services that you cannot at every outpatient facility. Mental health is one of them.

There are certain specialties that once you get outside of the hospital you might not be able to provide but could

be done if a health care professional is contracted with. Should we expand our contract basis care in this Country to be able to take care of rural veterans?

Major Duckworth. Sir, well, my position, should I be confirmed, will be to make sure that veterans know of all the options that are available to them.

In my own case, I go to Hines VA for most of my care, but I actually got to a contractor for my prosthetics care, as an example, because I use very high-tech prostheses, very much on the cutting edge and I, personally, was not satisfied with what was provided at the prosthetic department when I first came out of Walter Reed because Walter Reed has this really high standard. So I actually go to a contractor for my prosthetics care.

Part of my job is going to be to make sure that our veterans, wherever they are, understand that there is that combination available, that there are some things the VA does very, very well that I would never go anywhere else-- spinal cord rehabilitation, blind rehabilitation. And, there is an intangible of being served by people who work with veterans and being taken care of next to another, and you can sit there and tell war stories in the waiting room. But there is that combination.

So my job, my position will be to make sure that we access community providers, that we enter into partnerships

with nongovernmental organizations, whether they are veterans service organizations that are willing to drive veterans to appointments, or working with State Government.

I hope to really look very closely, should I be confirmed, at exploring all of those possibilities because Illinois also. You know you think of Illinois, you think of Chicago, but that is only 50 percent. The rest of my veterans live in places like Anna, Illinois and Plano, Illinois and El Paso, Illinois, with very small populations and great, great challenges with accessing care.

Senator Burr. Though the policy side is not necessarily under your role in the capacity that you are going to serve in, I think it is a unique opportunity to have somebody that has been there, done this, that can be the voice of not just reason from a standpoint of our policy but can also help us to focus on that future, that 21st Century that I truly believe that General Shinseki is focused on and how we structure it architecturally so that we deliver that same quality of care in a way that veterans can geographically access it, and sometimes that will be out of the box.

Major Duckworth. Yes, sir.

Senator Burr. It will be out of the VA facility. It will be with somebody who meets the standards that we set but may not receive a government paycheck week in and week

out, and I hope you will be that voice.

You also said earlier in your testimony: In order to become a 21st Century organization, DVA will have to change some past methods used to communicate with other government agencies, the Congress, the media and, most importantly, our veterans.

And you listed a couple. You talked about social networking. You talked about blogs. Are there any others that come to your mind right now that are areas that we do not utilize but that veterans and, more importantly, their families have become reliant on and we need to consider tapping into?

Major Duckworth. Yes, sir. Well, at the State, those partnerships were really important with those nongovernmental organizations. I worked with everybody from your traditional veterans service organizations to I went to a lot of churches. Oftentimes, a family, when a veteran's family is getting into where they need counseling, they turn to their local pastor. A lot of times, it is going to schools and letting school counselors know of programs so that they can keep their eyes on the veteran's children if they see behavior problems. So you really need to reach out across the entire broad spectrum of our society.

And, a lot of times, the information, you cannot get it directly to the veteran because our veterans, God bless

them, are stubborn, and they would not be good American GIs if they were not stubborn because that is what gets the mission accomplished. But, a lot of times, they are the last person to admit that they need help and that they have a problem.

By getting information through whatever form that you can to their family members, their employers, the community, you increase the likelihood that the veteran will eventually get that information when he needs it. When he sits down and he thinks, oh, I really need to go get some counseling, his wife will have the flyer that was handed out at Sunday School or his employer will talk about did you know that there are these services from the State because the State has reached out to the employer.

Senator Burr. I would urge you to be very imaginative as you enter into this role as to how we communicate, again, not just with veterans but with veterans' families that are absolutely crucial in every case to the healing process, both physically and mentally.

Let me assure you, in the professions we are, if we are called stubborn, that would be a generous thing than some of the things we are typically called.

[Laughter.]

Senator Burr. Mr. Chairman, I will have several additional questions that I will ask in writing to help

clarify some of the Committee's questionnaires, but at this time I would yield the floor.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

And now I would like to call on Senator Burr for your questions.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Just a couple questions, Major. I think that this may not necessarily fall under your jurisdiction or your title, but I know that you have that aggressiveness and you and General Shinseki are going to run that Department. Are you familiar with the situation in Joliet, Illinois, where that hospital is being vacated by the hospital owners, and the veterans are now seeking to get that hospital turned over to the Department of Veterans Affairs so that those veterans in that area do not have to go to Hines or to Jesse Brown or God forbid if they have to go to North Chicago?

So are you familiar with that problem in Joliet at all, the situation in Joliet?

Major Duckworth. I am familiar with it from my work as a State Director but not from the Federal VA perspective.

Senator Burr. Would you be able to assist in any way with your capacity, should you be confirmed, in seeing whether or not we can get that hospital in Joliet turned into a veterans hospital?

I understand it is a very modern facility. It is an

updated facility, and a lot of the veterans organizations are seeking to have that hospital made into another veterans hospital so that they will not have to commute those hour and two hours to Hines or to Jesse Brown.

Major Duckworth. Well, the position that I am nominated for, should I confirmed, sir, will involve me aiding in the discussions with the veterans in that community and communicating the VA's criteria for new hospitals and also getting input from them and having them have a source of expressing their concerns. So I will certainly be glad to help in that process of dialogue.

Senator Burris. And, of course, coming from Illinois and with your expertise, I am pretty sure you could get to the other colleagues in the Department of Veterans Affairs and give them a little nudge in that direction.

Secondly, I ran across another issue, Major, when I was visiting Jesse Brown the other day, which this does not fall under your category either but the information that the veterans do not have, and that is the dental care issue. This seems to come up, of how do we get information to the veterans about what benefits they get in dental care, and that seems to be a major problem.

You might want to look at how you can promote, should you get confirmed, better information to the veterans on what is available, what dental care, because what your

primary physicians will tell you is that dental care leads to other types of medical problems. If you do not take care of your teeth, then it is going to lead to all types of other health ailments.

And, thirdly, we have a piece of legislation that is coming about, and, Mr. Chairman, I do not know where we are with that legislation, but it deals with the family, the care of how we can get money to the those families also giving care to those veterans, similar to the other caregivers. If a family member has to leave his or her job to take care of that veteran, then that family member should also be compensated as any other caregiver would be compensated. We are hoping that we can get that legislation passed.

So I just hope that you would be instrumental in assisting us in getting information out to veterans when we are working on that piece of legislation to help those caregivers that, as you said in your testimony, are so much needed and taking care and giving them some peace of mind too, where someone is home that is able to take care of them and keep them in their environment.

Major Duckworth. Thank you, sir.

Senator Burris. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burris.

Major Duckworth, Senator Tester asked this in his

opening, and I want to give you an opportunity to answer it. How will you handle those times when you personally disagree with a policy under consideration by the Secretary?

Major Duckworth. Sir, should I be confirmed, I will become an advisor to the Secretary, and I will be very up-front and honest and in expressing my opinion when asked on issues. When I was Director of the State of Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, I valued most my advisors who said, here is what I see as the reality, and I may not agree with you, but I am going to stand up for what I think is right. And I hope to play that role within the Secretary's cabinet.

I think one of the great things about being able to work with General Shinseki--when he was nominated, I said I would go mop floors for him if he asked me to--is that he is that kind of a leader. He is that kind of a leader who wants input. He is that kind of a leader who wants you to stand up and express your frank opinion so that we can come to the best decision for our veterans, and I hope to continue in that capacity with him.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you.

In your pre-hearing responses, Major Duckworth, you wrote not only about how updated web-based resources are essential but also how important it is to have a real live person available to help. Do you believe that VA can do

both and, if so, how?

Major Duckworth. Yes, sir. There are many approaches that the VA can take.

At the State level, we started our own hotline for post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. When you call that hotline at the State level, you actually reach a real live counselor with a master's degree. You do not get a phone tree. You do not get push nine, whatever.

That is critical when veterans are calling these hotlines asking for help because it is so easy to turn them off. And so, we need to make sure that we train anybody that has direct customer service contact working with veterans to make sure that they understand the sensitivity of some of these issues.

I hope, should I be confirmed, to be part of that program to review how the VA does things with customer service, review how we interact with our veterans and make sure that we provide the information that they need in the way that they need it because you know we learned this from the Vietnam generation.

We had a whole generation of vets who came in, were not treated with respect, perhaps did not get the message correctly, and they turned around, and they walked away from the VA for 30 years. For 30 years they suffered, and that is simply not acceptable. If I were to be confirmed, I am

going to make sure that we do not do that to the post-9/11 vets.

Chairman Akaka. Just yesterday, the President signed into law a new Serve America Act which expands the mission of the Corporation for National and Community Service in a number of ways. The new law includes the Veteran Service Corps that is designed to help Active Duty servicemembers and veterans. Would you please report back to the Committee within 30 days on your efforts to reach out to the Corporation and your involvement in this new program?

Major Duckworth. I will be happy to do so, sir.

Chairman Akaka. Well, thank you very much. This has been a great hearing for the Committee.

Let me ask Senator Burris whether you have further questions.

Senator Burris. I am fine, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Well, I want to thank you very much, Major Duckworth.

Senator Burris. Just to congratulate our new nominee, and we are going to make sure she gets confirmed, sir.

Major Duckworth. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much. This Committee will try its best to move your nomination and try to confirm it. We will let the Committee and the Senate do that.

But thank you again for your full and open

participation in today's hearing. Your service to this Country is greatly appreciated, and we truly believe you will be an outstanding voice for the Nation's veterans and their families in the role of Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs in the VA.

With this in mind, I would like to bring Major Duckworth's nomination before the Committee and full Senate as soon as possible.

As I said previously for Mr. Gould's nomination, I ask that any post-hearing questions for Major Duckworth be sent to the Committee's legislative clerk by this afternoon.

So, this has been a great hearing for us and for the Country and for the veterans, and I want to say thank you, mahalo nui loa, for what you are and the responses you made and what you will be for our veterans.

Major Duckworth. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. This hearing is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:20 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]