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# NOMINATION HEARING OF DENIS R. McDONOUGH TO BE SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

## HEARING

BEFORE THE

## COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
## UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEETH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

JANUARY 27, 2021

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# NOMINATION HEARING OF DENIS R. McDONOUGH TO BE SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

**WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 27, 2021**

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
*Washington, DC.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:00 p.m., in room SD–106, Dirksen Senate Office Building, and via Webex, Hon. Jon Tester, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Tester, Murray, Sanders, Brown, Blumenthal, Hirono, Manchin, Sinema, Moran, Boozman, Cassidy, Rounds, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, and Cramer.

## OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TESTER

Chairman TESTER. I call this hearing to order. I want to welcome everybody. I appreciate all of you that are here, that are online. The purpose of this hearing is to hear from the President's nominee to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Denis R. McDonough.

Before I talk about Denis I just want to say I appreciate this Committee for all the reasons that we sit on this Committee, that it has been bipartisan, it has been non-political, and we have tried to do the best by our veterans, whether you are on the Republican side of the aisle or the Democratic side of the aisle. And I particularly appreciate the relationship I had with the former Chairman, Johnny Isakson, and with my good friend, Jerry Moran.

And this is not going to change. We are going to continue to operate this Committee in a way that the veterans are No. 1, and that is just the way it is going to be, and we are going to continue to work together in every way possible and communicate together, and not surprise one another, and move forth the policies that work for this country's veterans.

Denis, I appreciate your commitment to public service and your willingness to step forward. If confirmed, you will be tasked with ensuring that our Nation's veterans have access to timely care, services, and the benefits that they have earned and deserve. Today we are here to determine whether you are right for this job. I appreciate you taking the time to meet with members of this Committee over the past few weeks and for your timely responses to the pre-hearing questions sent by many of us, and at this time I would ask unanimous consent that those question and responses be made part of the record of this hearing.

The transition period between administrations can be a time of turmoil and confusion, and can generate uncertainty inside and outside an agency. At VA there is simply too much at stake to let that happen. The coronavirus pandemic is still raging, with more than 400,000 Americans succumbing to the virus in less than a year.

Denis, you will be responsible for ensuring that the VA has everything it needs to treat our veterans and care for the VA employees. VA has tested nearly 1.3 million veterans and employees for COVID–19. The agency is tracking nearly 198,000 cases among veterans, staff, and others admitted to VA for care, including nearly 14,000 active veteran cases. And now there are more than 8,300 veteran families who are without their loved ones, including the more than 3,100 VA has cared for within its facilities.

Denis, simply put, your chief responsibility during this unprecedented time will be to save as many lives as possible. That includes advocating within the administration for VA's fair share of vaccines and ensuring timely and efficient deployment of those vaccines. And it includes efforts to ensure front-line workers have everything they need to take care of our sick veterans and protect themselves from coronavirus.

How you care for your staff will mean everything. VA recently reported nearly 3,200 VHA staff with active COVID–19, and another 2,300 clinical staff are quarantined and unable to work. Sadly, 118 VA staff have died from this coronavirus. The virus is taking a toll on those VA heroes who care for veterans and we are entrusting you with their safety.

I am pleased the administration has kept Dr. Richard Stone to ensure a smooth transition for VHA, Veterans Health Administration. But it will be a while before you have a full leadership team in place, so there is a lot riding on your shoulders. One area in need of scrutiny is claims processing. Nearly 500,000 claims are pending, with more than 200,000 considered to be backlogged. While so much focus is on health care right now we must ensure this important issue gets the attention it needs.

Additionally, this Committee reaffirms its bipartisan reputation in the last Congress. A number of historic reforms were enacted, from John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Improvement Act to the Deborah Sampson Act to the expansion of presumptive coverage for thousands of additional Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange. The implementation of these reforms must be consistent with congressional intent and it must be swift. Veterans are counting on it. And with the case of Vietnam veterans, they have already been waiting for decades.

There are other critical reforms that have been in the works for years and need serious attention. From an expansion of caregiver program that has seen its number of speed bumps to electronic health record modernization effort that has taken way too long and cost taxpayers way too much, and everything in between.

You will certainly have your hands full but know that this Committee is here to help. If you are transparent and respectful of oversight, we can be your biggest proponents and your best partners. During your predecessor's nomination hearing I told him the sacred mission of serving the veterans and their families must al-

ways transcend personal agendas or political affiliations. In the end, I believe he lost sight of that, and I called him out for it, and I will hold you to the same standard.

There is a great political divide in this Nation, but veterans across the country and the members of this Committee are united by a very basic expectation. The next VA Secretary needs to be an individual of honesty, integrity, and vision, who listens to the veterans and puts their well-being above all else. If you keep your head down and live up to that expectation, you will be successful. And in the end, we all want you to succeed because veterans across this country need you to succeed.

I look forward to our discussion today. Thank you again for your willingness to serve on behalf of our Nation's veterans. With that I will turn it over to you, Senator Moran.

**OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR MORAN**

Senator MORAN. Chairman Tester, thank you. Thank you for the comments. Thank you for the working relationship, your care and concern for veterans, the way this Committee has operated during my chairmanship, and I agree with you that that cooperation, bipartisanship, should and will continue.

You will be the eighth Chairman. I have served on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee under Chairman Bob Stump, Chairman Chris Smith, Chairman Steve Boyer, Chairman Bob Filner, and in the Senate under Chairwoman Patty Murray, Chairman Bernie Sanders, Chairman Johnny Isakson, and now you. In all circumstances I want to be a productive member of this Committee and want to work with my colleagues to see that good things happy for all veterans. And I have, in some instances, when we say things like that we have the sense that we are just talking. And I am not just talking, and you were not just talking. We have no option and no desire to do anything other than the way we have operated in the past, and will continue to work with you in that way to serve our Nation's veterans.

Mr. McDonough, welcome. No mission is more noble than the one you will lead if you are confirmed, and so I thank you and your family for your willingness to re-enter government service.

We are going into this new Congress with new leadership and a new administration. The challenges we aim to address on behalf of our veterans will be a mix of those existing and ongoing issues we will struggle to sort out, alongside new challenges and new opportunities for our country to not only honor our veterans for their service that they provided but to harness their values and their talents to help them lead again.

Mr. McDonough, in 2014, your White House deputy chief of staff, Rob Nabors, reviewed the nationwide wait time scandal and described the root causes using phrases such as "little transparency," "corrosive culture," "lack of accountability across all grade levels," and "significant and chronic system failures."

Six years later, thanks to the collective effort of three VA Secretaries and thousands of dedicated employees, it is fair to say the VA looks very different now than it did then. Employee engagement is at its highest level in over a decade. The VA ranks 6th out of 17 among large government organizations as the best place to

work. A vast improvement in just four years. And patient trust in VA health care is now over 90 percent. Your job, if confirmed, will be to solidify and build off those improvements.

At the same time, several major modernization programs are underway, with electronic health record modernization, financial business transformation, caregiver expansion, and Community Care Networks, just to name a few. These and other modernization efforts will require billions of dollars per year on top of VA's regular operations, just to catch the VA up with the latest and best practices. The VA desperately needs strong leadership to make certain these investments achieve results and they are not wastes of taxpayer dollars.

With the help of our VSO partners, Congress has enacted several recent reforms to improve mental health care, protect educational assistance, enhance disability and survivor benefits, and expand burial benefits. The next Secretary of Veterans Affairs must be ready on day one—on day one—to advance and build on the progress that has been made over the last four years, must ensure that the laws are faithfully executed, and must measure results so we know veterans are benefiting as intended.

Additionally, the next Secretary must continue to fight against COVID–19, support an already strained work force, deliver timely vaccinations to VA patients, and be ready to assist civilian health care system in places where it is overburdened. Furthermore, backlogs in health care and benefit claims appointments that have piled up due to the pandemic, they must be addressed as we return to a more stable operating environment in the coming months.

A top concern for me, and for, I think, many of my colleagues, is how the VA will care for veterans living in rural communities. Before coming to the Senate, I represented a congressional district roughly the size of Illinois with no VA medical center. I look at the VA through the eyes of our Kansas veterans and the feedback I receive in speaking to them is that health care access has always been a challenge. VA provides excellent health care in its own facilities but those facilities are not in every community.

The MISSION Act, the act that you worked on, the Choice Act, and now the MISSION Act, gives veterans permanent choice to utilize community health care providers when it makes sense for them, and not when it is convenient for VA bureaucrats. I asked President Biden, and will also ask for your commitment, to uphold the law by supporting this common-sense notion that it is the veteran who should be at the center of their health care decisions.

We know that public health measures that reduce the spread of COVID also increase the risk of social isolation and mental health conditions. VA has its tools that they can use to help. Community care authorities, telehealth options, and funding provided by Congress can work together to mitigate the pandemic's impact on veterans' physical, mental, social, and economic well-being.

Furthermore, programs like the GI Bill, Veterans Readiness and Employment, and transition assistance programs can help veterans transition out of the military successfully and help launch them on what the VA terms a "solid start." Entering the civilian world should not be the challenge that it is today. Research has shown higher incomes likely lead to better health and outcomes, so invest-

ing in these programs does not just aid the veteran in his or her transition but it helps the long-term well-being, and it could reduce the burden on the VA's health system.

I would ask you to consider not just how the VA is doing at delivering the benefits provided by law but also what outcomes—what outcomes—we are trying to achieve for veterans with these benefits, and if they are doing enough to measure those outcomes relative to the benefits the VA is providing.

Again, Mr. McDonough, congratulations. Thank you for our conversations, both in person and by Zoom. Your commitment to our Nation's veterans is seemingly—let me take out the word "seemingly"—is sincere and real, and I appreciate that very much. Caring for our veterans has always been a unifying force during my time in Congress. It is my great hope that continues to be the case if you are confirmed as Secretary.

Mr. McDonough, I look forward to hearing your Statement and engaging with you further on these questions, this conversation, during the remainder of our hearing, and I thank the Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Moran, and before we get to Denis McDonough's Statement we have the incredible pleasure and honor to have our chamber graced by the senior Senator from Minnesota, Senator Klobuchar, for an introduction.

**STATEMENT BY THE HONORABLE AMY KLOBUCHAR**

Senator KLOBUCHAR. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Moran, and distinguished members of this Committee. Thank you for the good work you do, the bipartisan work you do. That is the hallmark of this Committee. And I am proud today to introduce my friend and fellow Minnesotan, Denis McDonough, as President Biden's nominee for Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Today Denis is joined by his wonderful wife, Kari, as well as two of his three kids. Denis grew up in Stillwater, Minnesota, which is on the Wisconsin border, as opposed to our other greater border, Senator Rounds, with South Dakota. And he is the grandson of Irish immigrants, the son of devout Catholic parents, and brother to 10 siblings. He attended St. John's College in Collegeville, Minnesota, and in addition to graduating summa cum laude he played safety on the very proud championship St. John's football team.

I have been privileged to call Denis a friend for years, and I know he will serve our country so well as a Secretary. As he has done his whole life, he will honor the promises our country has made to our veterans and their families. Denis' commitment to our Nation's veterans was clear during his time as President Obama's chief of staff, when he made sure that every decision impacting our servicemembers, veterans, and their families was befitting of their sacrifices. Showing respect and gratitude for our Nation's veterans is not something he just prioritizes. It is a value for him.

He is an adept manager who understands how to tackle complex challenges throughout our government, which will be vital for the next Secretary. As we all know, and you have mentioned, Chair and Ranking member, the VA is facing a number of challenges from helping veterans to stay safe during the pandemic to improving the quality of care for veterans around the country. And as you

also note, great improvements have been made thanks to all of you and many others. These are not simple problems, and these are not simple challenges, and they will require true leadership and vision, which have been, again, the hallmark of Denis' time in public service.

I also know he will work with you tirelessly to find bipartisan solutions, which has never been more important as we move our country forward. So much of our work with veterans is about keeping our promises and showing respect, not just in our words but in our actions. When you get to know Denis, for those of you who are just getting to know him, you will see the qualities of honor and loyalty in his commitment to his family, which also includes his family in Minnesota. I know this first hand. You see it in how he has treated everyone that he works with, when he worked in the Senate, when he worked as President Obama's chief of staff. You see it in that loyalty, and he puts our country first.

During his distinguished career he has approached each and every job with a spirit of respect, honesty, and collaboration, and a willingness to make himself accessible to his colleagues and to his team. Members of the Committee, I know he will do the same with you in this job. He is deeply committed to supporting his work force.

One of the things I want to tell our veterans is I know he will do two things so well. He will listen and then he will get things done for you. One of my favorite stories about Denis involves this. We were having a lot of trouble in northern Minnesota with mines closing down because of steel dumping from China, and Denis was President Obama's chief of staff and he went up to northern Minnesota—I think it was very cold, I will add—and met with about 50 people, and it was this long, long table. And Denis sat and listened to every single one of them, and the very last person to speak was a guy named Dan Hill, who was a miner, an iron ore miner. And Dan told the story of how, at his son's preschool, when they graduated, the teacher had asked them, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And the kids were saying things like an astronaut, and a basketball player, and Dan Hill's son said, "I want to be a miner"—and Joe Manchin can relate to this—"I want to be a miner like my Daddy."

And then the miner takes this tee-shirt, a steelworker tee-shirt, and he throws it down this long table to Denis, saying the words, "Make it come true, Mr. McDonough. Make it come true." And I am sitting there next to Denis saying, "You were a football star. Catch the tee-shirt," and he did. And he not only caught the tee-shirt but he put Dan back to work, and he put so many miners back to work, because he came back to Washington, helped us pass legislation, and most importantly for this job, implemented things through the bureaucracy of government by getting many different Cabinet Secretaries and others to hold hearings and the like.

I tell that story because I believe, in my heart, this is the guy you are going to get as Veterans Affairs Secretary who is actually going to follow through and listen and get things done.

I am going to end with the words of a poet who President Biden happens to love, Seamus Heaney, and given Denis' Irish roots I cannot think of a better person to quote at today's hearing. Heaney

once wrote, "Anyone with gumption and a sharp mind will take the measures of two things: what is said and what is done." He will not just say the words as your Secretary. He will get things done. I urge the Committee to support his nomination. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Klobuchar. Before we get to your Statement, Mr. McDonough, I would ask you to rise as I administer the oath. Raise your right hand, please.

Do you, Denis Richard McDonough, solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony you are about to give before the

U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I do.

Chairman TESTER. Let the record reflect that the nominee Stated in the affirmative. You have the floor, Denis.

**STATEMENT OF DENIS R. McDONOUGH**

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Chairman Tester, Senator Moran, and members of the Committee. Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I do so with great respect for your constitutional obligations to advise and consent, to fund and oversee the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the bipartisan tradition of this Committee in service to our Nation's veterans.

At a moment when our country must come together, the partnership between the Chairman, Senator Moran, and members of this Committee is inspiring. If given the honor of serving as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, I will strive to emulate that partnership in my work with you, as individual members and as members of the Committee.

We can meet today in peace and freedom because generations of servicemembers have stepped forward and sacrificed in our name. And though only a small percentage of Americans have served in our armed forces, the President has called on every American to embrace our responsibility to support our veterans and their families. President and Dr. Biden take this duty seriously and personally, as I know each of you do, perhaps especially since they, like so many of you, are members of a proud military family.

If confirmed, I will dedicate myself, with every fiber of my being, to fulfilling what President Biden rightly refers to as our country's most sacred obligation: to prepare and equip our troops that we send into harm's way and to care for them, and their families, when they return.

It is true that I am not a veteran, but in my years of public service I have had the privilege afforded to relatively few Americans. I have seen up close, and been deeply moved by, the excellence, talents, dedication of our men and women in uniform. When visiting our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, and Coast Guardsmen on our bases in Afghanistan and Iraq, I have witnessed the heavy burdens of long deployments away from their families.

Beside their hospital beds when they come home, I have seen their resilience in the face of wounds, visible and invisible, that can last a lifetime. Standing there at Dover, when our fallen heroes come home one final time, I have seen the unimaginable grief of

military families, to whom we owe a debt that cannot be repaid, and whom we will stand with forever.

Inside and outside of government I have been inspired how our veterans continue to strengthen our communities and our country out of uniform, as teachers, coaches, first responders, public servants.

Most of all, like every American, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to those who have worn the cloth of our Nation. It would be a tremendous honor to serve our veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors by leading the VA, to ensure our Nation serves our veterans as well as they have served us.

If confirmed, I will make it my mission to fight for our veterans with a relentless focus on three core responsibilities of the Department: providing our veterans with timely, world-class health care; ensuring our veterans and their families have timely access to their benefits; and honoring our veterans with their final resting place and lasting tributes to their service.

At the same time, the President has directed me to focus on getting our veterans through this pandemic; helping our veterans build civilian lives of opportunity with the education and jobs worthy of their skills, talents, and service; ensuring that the VA welcomes all our veterans, including women, veterans of color, and LBGTQ veterans; working to eliminate veteran homelessness and reducing suicide; and keeping faith with our families and caregivers.

In short, if confirmed, I will work tirelessly to build and restore VA's trust as the premier agency for ensuring the well-being of America's veterans. After all, there is no more sacred obligation nor noble undertaking than to uphold our promises to our veterans, whether they came home decades ago, or days ago.

I am ready for this mission. As a former White House chief of staff, I bring a deep, extensive knowledge of government. I understand how to untangle and solve large, complex challenges, both across and within large agencies. I have seen first-hand that when our government is at its best it can help the American people, including our veterans, and allow them to live in security and dignity.

This will not be easy. The Department of Veterans Affairs faces great challenges, challenges made more daunting by the coronavirus pandemic. Its capabilities have not always risen to the needs of our veterans. If confirmed, I promise to fight every single day to ensure that our veterans have the access to world-class, compassionate care that they have earned.

I look forward to being a true partner with the men and women of the VA, dedicated, highly skilled professionals, many veterans themselves, veterans serving veterans, who deserve our profound respect and support. I will also build strong partnerships with the veteran service organizations who devote themselves to their fellow veterans, to their communities, and to our country.

I have been given a clear mission by President Biden, to be a fierce, staunch advocate for veterans and their families. If confirmed, I will embrace that assignment with the solemnity it demands.

This is not a mission I take on alone. Every Federal agency has a role in supporting our veterans. If confirmed, I will make that happen, because again, when it comes to supporting our veterans and their families, every American has a role to play.

Chairman Tester, Senator Moran, distinguished members of this Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and for the opportunity to join you in caring for our veterans, who have served and sacrificed so that we can live in freedom today.

May God bless our troops, our veterans and their families, and as a nation may we always give them our very best.

I look forward to your questions.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you for your Statement, Denis. I appreciate that. Amy, you are welcome to leave if you want, but you can stay to watch the best Committee in the Senate work, if you would like.

Senator KLOBUCHAR. I think he is in good hands with you.

Chairman TESTER. All right. I will just start out. Denis, out of the top jobs in this administration which you would be well-qualified for, why this one?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Mr. Chairman, I am a fighter and I am relentless, and I am particularly relentless about things I have a passion for. And having had the professional experience of the last 20 years, since September 11, 2001, and having witnessed up close the tremendous service, excellence, and sacrifice of our military and our veterans, I have great passion for making sure that we treat them as well as they have treated us.

So, when the President called me to talk about this assignment I could not have been more excited, more humbled, and more committed to seeing it through. And if confirmed, I will apply that fight and that passion to ensure that we do live up to our promises.

Chairman TESTER. Okay. Thank you. Do you have the autonomy to do what you believe is best for this Nation's veterans, even when you disagree with the President?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I do. I would also say I have a very good relationship with the President. He encouraged me to be very candid with him. So, in the event that there is a disagreement, I am confident that I would have an opportunity to vigorously make my case, draw on the experience and expertise in the Department to bolster that case, and to work with you all to fulfill that case.

Chairman TESTER. Many, if not all of us, on this Committee believe the importance of the inspector general, the IG. If confirmed, will you commit to not interfere or hinder with the independent work of the IG?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, I will so commit.

Chairman TESTER. All right. We have passed a number of bills, and if you are not familiar with them you can certainly ask. But two of the bills that we passed, and we passed many of them, need a timeline for implementation, the John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Bill, that Senator Moran was so gracious to co-sponsor, and the Deborah Sampson Act, which Senator Boozman was so gracious to co-sponsor.

Will you agree to provide a timeline for implementation of both those bills, and if so, would you agree to provide regular updates to the Committee on the progress of the implementation?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I will absolutely provide an implementation timeline on those bills. I will keep you updated on the progress of that, but more than that, Mr. Chairman, I have discussed these bills at length, both with you, with Senator Moran, and with Senator Boozman, and my commitment to you is to not just give you updates but to consult with you and to work with you in true bipartisan consultative fashion to ensure that we are implementing them, that the Department implements them, if confirmed, consistent with the intent of this Committee.

Chairman TESTER. Coming into the most senior role at the VA, how are you going to approach reviewing VA's COVID–19 response to date and determining if changes need to be made?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Every question that I approach, if confirmed, at the Department will be around two questions: will it give greater access to veterans and will it ensure better outcomes, as you and Senator Moran both laid out in your opening Statements.

As it relates to a review on COVID–19, I will review whether performance to date has been as good as it can be on those two questions for our veterans. The questions are going to be around communication, around access, both to vaccines but then access to care in the case of infections.

Similarly, we have to be serious about communicating clearly with the work force, ensuring that the work force has access to vaccinations and protection, and the work force has, as you said in your opening remarks, access to all the material that they will need to do their job safely.

Chairman TESTER. Numerous reports, oversight reports, have shown that sexual harassment assault remains a key issue across the Department. Creating a self-welcoming environment for all veterans, staff, and guests at the VA is critical. Defense Secretary Austin recently issued a memo to the Pentagon leadership requesting an expedited review of DoD's sexual harassment, assault prevention, and accountability measures. As head of the VA, do you plan on doing something similar?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I do, Chairman. If confirmed, on day one I will lean into this issue to try to set a culture that underscores that such activity will not be tolerated, that the Department has to ensure that not only the Department's work force but also importantly the fastest-growing cohort of veterans, namely women veterans, have confidence that they will be treated with respect and given the access that they have earned.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Denis McDonough. Senator Moran?

Senator MORAN. Chairman Tester, thank you. Mr. McDonough, I have been a critic of what I describe as executive overreach. I happen to believe that Article I has the ability to give Congress significant and important responsibilities. And administrations, over a long period of time, have chipped away at that balance that I think would be better if the Executive branch was less aggressive and the congressional Legislative branch was more aggressive.

You were involved in an administration which I criticized for being so aggressive on Executive orders, for example, but I always tried to balance that by saying, well, part of the problem is that Congress does not do its job, and so it leaves this wide space open for an executive of either party to advance their agenda. And I would love to see this Congress work better than it does, and I want to try to make certain that I do my part that that occurs.

But where I would find fault is the area in which agencies, the Executive branch, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and others, when there is clear legislation, and clear legislative intent, so both language and intention, that then that language and intention is not followed. In our conversation that you and I have had, I would love, for the record, for you to confirm your understanding. And let me give you a couple of topics in which that will become important.

The President's campaign, President Biden's campaign, and your own response to my pre-hearing questions, mentioned rebalancing Community Care. I am concerned that these plans may, depending on what those words mean, may erode the core tenets of the mission's Community Care program, and that would cross a red line for me. Access standards, in particular, are the cornerstone of the Community Care program, and veterans have come to rely on those standards over the past 2 years.

One of the difficulties we have had is as we move from Choice to MISSION things changed. Veterans got accustomed to something and then it was something new. And I take serious issue with any effort to change those access standards or restrict veterans' eligibility for the program.

If confirmed, will you uphold the current access standards that veterans—my notes here say "universally understand." I wish that was the case—but understand, and do you plan to change those standards as part of that rebalance?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator Moran. Let me be very clear that Community Care will continue to be a key part of how the Department cares for our veterans, full stop. I intend to implement the statutes that you all have enacted consistent with your intention, and to do that in consultation with you on any decisions that come before me. And as it relates to access standards, I will treat those sets of questions in exactly that same way, which is that I will work on those fully in consultation with you.

Senator MORAN. Let me highlight a reason that I have the concern that I am expressing to you. One of your responses to my pre-hearing question, you promised to work with Congress, as you just did, to ensure that veterans are the center of their own health care decisions. However, one of the proposed Community Care updates in the campaign plan would allow the VA to send veterans back to the VA when community providers failed to meet the yet determined access in quality standards. This directly contradicts the mission's intent by enabling the VA to override the veteran's choice.

So what I am hoping to hear you say is that you understand that the MISSION Act is designed, in fact written, for the veteran and his or her provider at the VA to make a choice about where to receive care, based upon what is in the best interest of the veteran. Is there anything there that, in your view or the Biden administra-

tion's plans, that I should have concern about overriding that decision between the VA provider and the veteran?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. No, Senator. There is not.

Senator MORAN. The same theme I would have with the John Hannon act that Senator Tester and I introduced and got passed through this Committee and the Senate and the House and signed by the President. Will you faithfully commit that you will implement the John Hannon Act in that same manner?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, Senator, I will.

Senator MORAN. If confirmed, will you commit your staff to work with the Committee staff and to my staff, to me, to ensure congressional intent is met during each of the phases of implementation for that bill and other legislation?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes.

Senator MORAN. So, Mr. McDonough, one of the complaints that I have had for a long time is that when Congress does act, on the occasions in which we get our act together and succeed in passing legislation, that the VA, in particular, but I assume it is true in other departments, the VA, in particular, seems to ignore the things that we have just talked about. And what I think you are telling me is that that I should be less concerned about with you in charge than what I have experienced over the eight—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—nine Secretaries that have been in office while I have been a member of the Veterans' Committee. Is that a fair assessment that I can trust you to fulfill the role that the Executive has in implementing legislation passed by Congress?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, Senator, and I would elaborate on that in the following way. One is that I believe, as you do, and as I said earlier, everybody has a role to play in supporting the veterans. The Constitution actually divvies that up quite clearly for you all and for the Executive, in Articles I and II, so it is a constitutional question. Second, I also believe it is a question of best outcome. When the Executive works closely with Congress, in a collaborative and consultative way, that is the best way to ensure more durable policy, more durable outcomes, and especially if we are both working with the fundamental premise that every decision should answer, is this getting better access and better outcomes for our veterans.

Senator MORAN. Mr. McDonough, thank you. Your comments remind me about durability. What that really means is that a veteran can come to expect a certain outcome or a response to a question and it is not different from 1 day to the next, 1 week to the next, or one location to the next.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Correct.

Senator MORAN. And the point I would make is that in so many instances, over a long period of time, no particular administration to be specific about, the conversations I have with the Secretary or his or her team resulted in assuring me that this problem is being taken care of and this is our plan, but what I discover when I am home, that has never been communicated to the people who implement the plan and care for veterans at home in Kansas. And so there is a communication issue related to this. You can assure me that you support implementing with congressional intent, but it has to be told and insisted on by those who actually provide the

services to veterans at home. And I would encourage you to make certain that when you tell me and other Members of Congress this is the policy at the Department, that that policy is then known and implemented by those across the country.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Understood.

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

Chairman TESTER. We are going by seniority order, so next we have Senator Murray, remotely.

**SENATOR PATTY MURRAY**

Senator MURRAY. McDonough. I am Delighted to see you today. Welcome, and we all really appreciate your being with us today. You know, the VA is the largest integrated health care system in the country so it really demands a strong, effective leadership, so we appreciate your willingness to take this one.

You and I have had a chance to talk about some issues in December, and I wanted to ask you about some of those again today for the record. Let me just start, as part of the MISSION Act, Congress expanded eligibility for the caregivers program to make sure veterans of all eras suffering from service-connected illnesses would have access to caregiver support. However, under the previous administration, regulations were imposed that limit that eligibility and remove many veterans needing assistance from that caregivers program. Those restricting regulations like requiring a minimum 70 percent service-connected disability rating as well as the need for assistance each time an ADL is performed unduly restricts eligibility in a way Congress never intended, and make it harder for our veterans to get care.

So if confirmed, will you take action to roll back those recently imposed restrictions and make it a top priority for VA to fully implement the caregivers' law as Congress intended?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator, and I appreciate the question and I appreciated our discussion of it. My commitment, as I indicated earlier, is to immediately begin to address this issue upon confirmation, to work closely with you and the rest of the members of this Committee as it relates to implementation of that act, and to ensure that we do it consistent with the expectation and the intention of Congress.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much. Let me turn to another part of our promise to take care of our veterans after they return from duty, which is allowing them to fulfill their dream of having a family. Congress has given the VA authority appropriations to provide IVF and other necessary fertility treatments for ill or injured veterans and their spouses, but access to that care is far too difficult, and I have been working for nearly a decade to fix this. My bill, which is the Women Veterans and Families Health Care Services Act will permanently authorize fertility treatment and counseling for veterans and their spouses and provide adoption assistance.

Mr. McDonough, it is extremely important that we empower veterans to start families when the time is right for them. Will you commit to work with me to make sure veterans have ease of access to IVF and other fertility treatments?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Senator, I will.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you. I look forward to working with you.

One of the largest challenges that is facing the VA is the implementation of the electronic health record modernization program. The VA Medical Center in Spokane, my State, is the pilot site for this project. The process has highlighted infrastructure and staffing shortfalls, and veterans in Spokane have experienced unacceptable delays in getting care. Full implementation across every VA medical center is expected to take at least seven more years. Given that timeline and the scope of this project, if confirmed, how will you protect veterans' access to high-quality care at the VA while ensuring the success of this modernization effort?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. As I indicated, every decision that I am involved in, if confirmed as Secretary, will come back to the fundamental premise of whether the decision is increasing access and improving outcomes for veterans. This has got to be the case as it relates to the electronic health record as well, and my commitment to you and to members of this Committee is to continue to work in a collaborative, consultative fashion with you in the implementation of that program, to ensure that, at the end of the day, increased access and better outcome for veterans is the result of that health record, that the work force understands and can use the health record consistent with those principles, and that I can continue to confirm to this Committee that that is the outcome of that process.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. And one final question. Improving the information VA shares with veterans on the GI Bill comparison tool is essential to make sure veterans can get informed choices about their education. I have previously called for DoD and VA to develop a joint policy to counter aggressive recruiting and misleading marketing aimed at our veterans, and I want to see improved availability of crucial information such as levels of student debt and transferability of credits. Can you commit to providing thorough oversight of the GI Bill funds, fully implementing the protections in the GI Bill Act, and making sure that when there is evidence of fraudulent conduct you will take steps to make sure the schools are not allowed to continue to recruit veterans?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. The President has indicated to me that a fundamental priority for me, if confirmed, must be ensuring that our vets have access to employment and education opportunities consistent with their experience, skills, and talent. And consistent with that, I would intend to, working collaboratively with you and this Committee, ensure that there is appropriate, aggressive oversight and measurement on quality outcomes of that programming.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. Thank you very much, and thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate the opportunity.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Boozman.

## SENATOR JOHN BOOZMAN

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for being here. You served in a variety of different ways in the Executive branch, I know in national security and then also chief of staff to President Obama. And I have had the opportunity to be around

the table with you on many occasions and always found you somebody that was willing to listen and then also very, very informed on whatever issue that we were talking about.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator BOOZMAN. And then, very importantly, I know that the President has a great deal of trust in you and respects your opinion. So I think that is good for veterans. So we appreciate your willingness to serve very, very much and look forward to working with you.

We had a good conversation not too long ago. I want to followup on something that really is a significant issue facing veterans in the country. Some of these are too large for any one organization or department to solve. Veteran's suicide is one of those enormous issues. Last Congress we passed a bipartisan bill, the Commander John Scott Hannon bill, to begin to encourage the VA to work more closely with communities in trying to address the issue of veteran suicide.

If confirmed, would you describe how you would lead the VA to create more partnerships with veteran-serving community organizations while, at the same time, incentivizing those same organizations to partner and work with the VA?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you so much, Senator. The crisis facing the country related to veteran suicide is tragic. We face a national crisis on suicide as well. The first and most important thing that I will do, if confirmed, is underscore that comprehensive health for our veterans includes mental health, it includes effective mental health, includes reducing the stigma associated with seeking help, and that also includes increasing access to mental health services through any number of opportunities, and in particular, given the enhanced authorities that you have now made available to the Department through community organizations.

So, using those resources and using the networks that are being built around Community Care gives the Department a unique opportunity to ensure that it is drawing on all the available resources on this national crisis.

Senator BOOZMAN. We appreciate that. The VA does a very, very good job and works really hard at this crisis. On the other hand, there are so many entities out in the community that also are doing a very good job and ready and willing. So many of these people fall through the cracks, and for one reason are not in the VA. So, if we can get them in a program and then encourage those programs to get them back into the VA we will be in good stead.

One of the most common things I hear from veterans in Arkansas is regarding the multiple different enrollment processes for VHA, VBA, sometimes NCA, when in fact they are all part of the same agency. So you have got different processes within the same agency.

If confirmed, can we work together, can we work together as a committee, and explore a more human-centric design approach, in other words, making it simpler to help the enrollment process for veterans, more of a one-shop approach?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Absolutely, Senator. I would look forward to the opportunity to work together on that.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. And I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Boozman. Senator Brown remotely.

**SENATOR SHERROD BROWN**

Senator BROWN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Nice to see you there and call you that. And I thank Senator Moran for his gracious comments also. Mr. McDonough, I enjoyed the conversation we had remote or remotely—whatever is grammatically correct—the other day. Thank you, and thanks for your commitment to work with VSOs and VA employees and VA unions like AFGE, so thank you for that.

We see unprecedented backlog in claims processing in compensation and pension exams because of the pandemic, and the pandemic is affecting operations in National Personnel Records Center. I know you will be busy on day one, working on that and so many other things. With my staff I met with veterans and VA employees throughout Ohio. Recently there have been concerns about VA closing units and downsizing services, at one specific facility especially, because of the virus. The VA has not committed as of yet to reopening the unit once the pandemic is over. My concern with that approach is that if VA starts to close units or services or facilities it will push veterans into the community for care. Some want to do that, but others, most want the option of always going back to the VA.

Would you commit to reopening those units or services lines closed due to COVID–19, and will you work with OMB and the White House to make sure that VA has the resources and personnel to reopen those facilities?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you very much, Senator. Obviously the slow-down in fulfillment of claims processing as a result of the pandemic is a principal concern that I would have, if confirmed, and making sure then that we have the resourcing after the pandemic to not fall back into backlog once the Department gets its hands around the existing cases would be really important.

So, I will absolutely take this question of those facilities. I will work with the White House and work with OMB on it, to make sure that we have the resources to fulfill a critical assignment of timely access to benefits that veterans and their families have earned.

Senator BROWN. Okay. Thank you. We have seen far too many veterans and military families targeted by predatory, for-profit institutions since passing the post-9/11 GI Bill. Those institutions misrepresent themselves and often saddle student veterans with mounds of debt. Do you plan to exercise additional oversight to root out misrepresentation of predatory, for-profit institutions that target student veterans?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Every decision that I make, if confirmed as Secretary of the Department, will be asking two simple questions and to advance two simple principles, which is are the decisions we are taking increasing access for veterans and are they improving outcomes for veterans? Outcomes on education programming and employment programming have to be a critical part of how the De-

partment implements that and executes those programs, so the short answer is yes.

Senator BROWN. Thank you. And we know that the Protect the GI Bill Act's provisions bans the deceptive recruiting of college third-party lead generators and following the law to cutoff the flow of GI benefits to those kinds of schools. Obviously that is really important.

Let me shift. I hope you will come to Dayton at some point to visit the National VA History Center. I will followup and talk to you about that. I wanted to talk about veteran homelessness. I will soon be the chair of the Banking Housing Committee. Veteran homelessness is an important part of your mission and an important part of my mission too there. We made great progress there but still have a way to go to complete the job, including making sure that VA has adequate staffing to support the successful HUD-VASH housing voucher program. Will you work with Chairman Tester and HUD nominee Marcia Fudge, whom I just spoke to literally 30 minutes ago, and make sure all veterans have a place to call home? That is a really high priority.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, I will.

Senator BROWN. Okay. Thank you. Last thing, last month VA proposed a program that would require military borrowers exiting a COVID–19 mortgage forbearance to pay back their missed payments with interest within 10 years. This is more expensive than what other Fed mortgage programs are offering. It would make it more likely that VA borrowers will fall behind on these new highly monthly payments. Veterans and servicemembers should not be given worse options than other borrowers with federally backed loans. Do you agree with that?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I do.

Senator BROWN. Okay. Will you look into the rule and work with us, look into the rule and make sure that no VA homeowner is left with worse options than borrowers in other federally backed loan programs?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I would be happy to work with you on that.

Senator BROWN. Okay. We will followup. Thank you, Mr. McDonough and good luck on your confirmation.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Brown. Senator Cassidy.

**SENATOR BILL CASSIDY**

Senator CASSIDY. Hey, thanks for being here.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator CASSIDY. I enjoyed our conversations. Thank you for the phone conversation. Some of this will be repeated, just because I think it is so important for my colleagues. We spoke about how those of us on this Committee will ask questions of the VA—I used the term "rope-a-dope" and you immediately got it. We got a reply back which is off-point, about 2 months later. We asked for clarification and 2 months later we get another slightly off-point, or more than off-point. And then finally it just kind of tapers out.

You have a different philosophy, so do you mind sharing with us all how you intend to share data with us as regards the VA itself?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you for the question, Senator. I think the free flow of accurate data is the lifeblood of a well-functioning

organization. Consistent with that and consistent with the view I have been espousing of close collaborative, consultative relationship with this Committee and with Congress, I would intend to make sure that we have the free flow of information between and among us. I also said, when we talked earlier, that it could be that because we are moving quickly we provide inaccurate information, and I will work to quickly come back with more accurate information on that. But as I said, the lifeblood of any well-functioning agency or organization is accurate, timely data.

Senator CASSIDY. You know, you used a couple of adjectives there, and I am going to explore them because I loved them—"quickly" and "timely."

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, fair enough.

Senator CASSIDY. Which is not really—now the VA, by the way, recently they answered a question very quickly, and so I am saying that at times it works and at times it does not. But can you just give me a sense of, when you say "quickly" and "timely," like the timeframes that you would be considering quick and timely?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Well, it is hard to answer that question in the abstract, but I guess what I would say to that question, Senator, is I would want it back to you in a timeframe that is useful to you.

Senator CASSIDY. That works. Okay. Thank you.

Following up on something that Senator Brown said, that Senator Murray alluded to, Senators Carper, Lankford, Tester, and I will soon be reintroducing the Protect Vets Act. Now I do not expect you to be up to speed on this because you are just starting, but it seeks to close the 90/10 loophole to ensure that veterans' educational benefits, such as the GI Bill, are treated as Federal funds for accountability purposes. And just kind of background, if a for-profit university is allowed to get 90 percent of its funds from the Federal Government and 10 percent from outside the Federal Government, veterans' benefits have been included in that 10 percent.

And so when Senator Murray speaks of targeting veterans, yes, they have been targeted because they would fill up this gap that the free market would not provide, but rather people with veterans' benefits could provide that 10 percent match for the remainder of the 90.

We worked very hard to get a compromise that would protect the veteran, protect the good schools, and that would kind of be sensitive to sensibilities in both the Republican and the Democratic caucus. And again, protecting the good schools but isolating out the bad.

So just to say that we are going to be bringing this forward, knowing that you will have to look at this, but we would love your engagement on this issue because we think it is important that we address it.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I would be happy to work with you on it, and I commit to being engaged, if confirmed. Absolutely.

Senator CASSIDY. I appreciate that. With that I yield back.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Cassidy. Remotely, Senator Hirono.

**SENATOR MAZIE HIRONO**

Senator HIRONO. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and welcome, Mr. McDonough. It was good to talk with you when I had the opportunity.

I think my colleague, Amy Klobuchar, gave one of the best testimonies where she made it very clear that you listen and then you actually do something. You get things done. And you are about to head, should you be confirmed, one of the largest Federal agencies and the largest health care system, and very uniquely the VA actually provides health care across 50 States and territories. So this is a very unique agency with just ongoing challenges—homelessness, mental health, health disparity treatments, all kinds of things.

Not to mention, by the way, when I talked with you, you said that from a very pragmatic standpoint that getting the veterans vaccinated and dealing with the pandemic is one of your first priorities. Joe Biden has said that he is going to have 100 million people vaccinated within the first 100 days, so should you be confirmed, do you have an idea, or would you determine how many veterans you would want to get vaccinated, and would you have a way to determine whether you are actually meeting those goals? Would that be one of the ways that you will tackle this pandemic with regard to our veterans?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. In fact, it would be. A principal priority in helping veterans through the pandemic is ensuring that they have access to care, if sick, and vaccinations to prevent getting sick. The way I intend to work this question is I will demand a seat at the table, and I will, as the President has asked me to do, be a staunch and fierce advocate for veterans getting access to the kind of care and the kind of resources that ensures the kind of outcome that you have just highlighted.

Senator HIRONO. I think that you actually have to have numbers, such as you are going to have X percent of the veterans out there, and you are going to need to find some of them because they are not all in the system. And then you need to figure out a way to make sure that those vaccinations are actually occurring.

One of the initial questions I ask of every nominee for these kinds of appointed positions, just to ensure their fitness to serve, I ask the following two questions, which I will now ask you. Since you became a legal adult, have you ever made unwanted requests for sexual favors or committed any verbal or physical harassment or assault of a sexual nature?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. No, I have not.

Senator HIRONO. Have you ever faced discipline or entered into a settlement relating to this kind of conduct?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. No, I have not.

Senator HIRONO. One of the ways that we can really ensure that our veterans get the health care they need is to create community-based outpatient clinics, and I talked with you about some of the long delays with regard to some of these clinics on Oahu as well as on some of the neighbor islands. And each one of these projects is unique. There may be some unique State requirements or limitations that make it really hard for these projects to proceed.

So it requires somebody within the VA to pay attention and move these projects along, whatever the specific concern might be, so that the veterans in these places are not waiting for a decade, as is the case with some of the projects in Hawaii.

I would just like you to really focus on the need for community-based clinics where the veterans can have access to the care that they need. Will you commit to making that happen?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Senator, I will. If confirmed, I will.

Senator HIRONO. So one of your predecessors made eliminating homelessness among veterans to be a top priority, and he engaged a whole-of-government kind of approach and yet homelessness continues to be a concern. And yes, you responded to my questions to you, but truly, what are you going to do that is different from what one of your predecessors, who said, "I am going to eliminate homelessness among veterans," and that did not happen. What are you going to do to ensure that there will be more measurable success in eliminating homelessness among veterans?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. The President has made clear that this will be a priority of the administration. What I will do to implement that priority is obviously make it an intentional priority, one. Two, work with the other agencies in the Federal Government to increase access to available options. And three, make sure that the VA is providing access to all the other services that are important as it relates to access to mental health, access to substance use disorder, treatment, access to education, employment, and training support. And using all of those tools, working with other Federal agencies, and the holding ourselves to account to you to measure that progress is how we fulfill that objective.

Senator HIRONO. I think you have a commitment from Sherrod Brown and from Marcia Fudge to enable you to succeed, and I will certainly be wanting to engage with you on that score, because nothing could be as important as to have a roof over their head, food, and a job, if that is what is available to them, made available to them.

I do not know. I cannot see the timer.

Chairman TESTER. You are over by about a minute and a half, and we can have a second round if you would like.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you very much.

Chairman TESTER. You bet. Thank you, Senator Hirono. Senator Rounds.

**SENATOR MIKE ROUNDS**

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and it is truly refreshing to see that we have a Chairman and a Ranking Member who are both concerned about our rural veterans as well, and I thank you and I look forward to working with you.

Mr. McDonough, first of all, I want to thank you for the phone call the other day. The opportunity to visit with you was good, and I appreciate the knowledge that you bring, your preparation for our visit, and your understanding of some of the challenges that the VA faces. I also—look, I plan on supporting you in your nomination for this position, and I thank you for your service to our country.

Mr. McDonough, the Hot Springs VA facility in Hot Springs, South Dakota, is a critical part of the Department's Black Hills

health care system. In October, Secretary Wilkie rescinded a record of decision on the future of the campus which provides vital health care services not only to South Dakotans but to residents of Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, and so forth.

I would like your commitment, if confirmed, to work on moving the Hot Springs facility and literally the Black Hills facilities themselves up into the century with regard to the services that they are providing, and literally lay out a long-term plan for their success for the veterans in the rural areas.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. I really appreciated our conversation on this, and I committed to you then, and I recommit myself to you now to work closely with you on this, and addressing the needs in and around the Hot Springs facility, in as much as it is such a critical piece of the delivery capability, not only in South Dakota, but as you say, in Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming.

Senator ROUNDS. The MISSION Act, which is what we operate under now for our health care, is an item that I did not vote for. I did not vote for it because it took away guarantees of a veteran to be able to find a physician of their own choice if they could not get an appointment within 30 days or if they were more than 40 miles away from a health care facility that the VA sponsored. I thought they were making promises in the MISSION Act that we might not be able to keep.

I think you step into the administration of this facility, of this agency, this administration, in which you are being asked to do a lot of things and you are going to get pulled in a lot of different directions. I do not expect you to be able to see the detail of this chart, but this is a chart of the VA and what it has. You are expected to provide educational opportunities, you are expected to provide housing, you are expected to provide final expenses, a final resting place, and you are also expected to provide health care to VAs across the entire country.

If you look at this, you can go down 13 levels before you actually get to where a real doctor is at, where a hospital is at in the chart. And for me, that says a lot about the challenge that you face. I do not think that is something that a lot of people realize, when they talk about the VA and what happens. When you promise everything to everybody and lay it within an administration like this, whether it is a Republican or a Democrat administration, the challenges of handling a bureaucracy are huge. You walk into a bureaucracy with perhaps as many as 380,000 individuals, some of which are providing direct care, others of which are trying to find reasons why the care can't be provided.

Specifically, what my concern is, is this. Right now, in the approval process, when we ask for someone to participate in the care for the community, it is not veteran-friendly. Too many of the approvals are made by people who work to make sure that the veteran stays within the VA system, regardless of whether or not it is good for the veteran or not. While the flow chart says that the veteran's decision is the veteran's decision, as Senator Moran suggested it always come back to the VA for approval. In my opinion, it is tailored for an urban veteran with easy access to tertiary services and not the rural veteran who may have to drive well over 50 miles for access to see a primary care provider.

If confirmed, what will you do to afford veterans their choices as to where they receive their health care?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator, and I really appreciated our conversation before on these questions as well. Any credible strategy as it relates to rural care for our vets has to have at least three components. One, community care, and community care has to ensure that more timely payment of bills. It also has to ensure a more vibrant network of providers, providers who want to be part of that network. And I think in both of those cases a more active, or a higher set of expectations for the third-party administration, for example, is probably wise.

The second thing is using access to new platforms. We had a very useful conversation, I thought, about telehealth, as I did with several other members of the Committee. Consolidating those gains and growing those.

And then third is getting more aggressive about using the authorities that you have given the Department to recruit and to fill the vacancies in the facilities that VA already has.

And so, among those three prongs of a strategy I think are the answers to ensure that the best medical outcome for the vet, which as I read the statute is what you all have demanded, ends up being the deciding variable in the equation.

Senator ROUNDS. My time has more than expired, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for your thoughts, and particularly the one about timely payments for those providers.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator ROUNDS. Thank you, sir.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Rounds. Senator Blumenthal.

**SENATOR RICHARD BLUMENTHAL**

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for having the hearing. Thank you, Mr. McDonough, for your service, your very extensive service, your commitment to veterans, your conversation with me about your dedication to them, and your testimony here today, which has been excellent. I have been following it from afar, and apologize I was not here before now.

I want to first of all followup on part of a conversation we had about the VA facility in West Haven, where there were two deaths. It is an aging, in fact, aged facility that is badly in need of reconstruction Like many facilities across the country, it was built in another century, literally, and we owe it to our veterans to rebuild that infrastructure. There are several critical construction projects in the design phase at the West Haven VA, including a new sterile processing service building and surgical and clinical space tower, but what is really needed is a reconstruction of the entire facility, which does great care for our veterans. The doctors, nurses, administrative staff are superlative, and they are really dedicated patriots, but they are working a structure of bricks and mortar that fails to keep faith with our veterans.

So I would like your commitment to work with this Committee and ensure that the VA prioritizes infrastructure, rebuilding, and most especially, obviously, for the interests of our Connecticut veterans, the facility in West Haven.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator, and my commitment—my recommitment now, as it was in our earlier conversation, is to really dig in on these questions upon confirmation, to keep a very close collaborative relationship with you on it, to ensure that it is proceeding consistent with the needs of our vets and consistent with the two principles that I have laid out, which is increasing access for vets and improving outcome for vets.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And I would like to invite you to West Haven, as I did privately, to come visit. They are doing a great job there, by the way, on vaccines. I have visited the clinic where they are administering vaccinations. They are increasing the number.

I would like to know from you how you will ensure that there is adequate access to vaccinations by minority veterans, communities of black and brown veterans, and staff members in that category.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. So, I thank you very much, Senator. The President has made clear that equity will be a fundamental consideration across the pandemic preparedness and response, and it would be my expectation, if confirmed, that I will assume my seat at that table, in those deliberations, and I will be a fierce, staunch advocate for all vets to have access to care and treatment and vaccines, consistent with the improved access and the improved outcomes that will drive any decision I make as Secretary, if confirmed.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You are familiar, no doubt, with the reports about the numbers of veterans who were involved in the assault on the Capitol, which reflects a phenomenon that probably is no news to a lot of folks, that white supremacists, extremists ideology often find fertile ground among veterans, just as they do in the general population, regretfully, tragically, and unnecessarily. So I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how, under your leadership, you will take steps to educate veterans about online disinformation and coordinate with other agencies like the Department of Defense in this effort.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. I would just say I was struck by the activity, the actions that you and your colleagues took the evening of January 6th, reconvening to continue the democratic process. I thought that was a very strong Statement. I am also struck that both throughout that day and in the days hence there were remarkable stories of veterans associated with the Washington D.C. police force, Capitol police force, veterans who are members themselves, all taking valiant action to defend democracy, a continuation, as we have said throughout the day, of how veterans continue to serve outside of uniform.

On the question of the threat of mis-and disinformation, it is as important an assignment to protect our democracy as any. I could see a variety of opportunities for the VA to be an important actor in those efforts, to protect vets, to highlight the threats of online activity, trying to provide or insert disinformation. And it would be my intention to work with my interagency colleagues, the NSC and others, to make sure that is receiving appropriate consideration.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. My time has expired but I want to congratulate and thank you again, and I will very enthusiastically support your nomination on the condition that you come to Connecticut and visit us there.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I would be happy to go to Connecticut. Thank you, Senator.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal. Senator Tillis.

**SENATOR THOM TILLIS**

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. McDonough, congratulations to you and your family and thank you for years of service, including a lot up here on Capitol Hill.

First I want to apologize for our not being able to talk before the hearing. I think you did have an opportunity to speak with everyone else, and I would like to get your commitment between now and the time we report you out of Committee to go in, maybe to have a discussion——

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Happy to.

Senator TILLIS [continuing]. so that we could drill down on some issues that cannot be covered in 5 minutes. So thank you.

I think in your testimony you made reference to rebuilding trust in the VA, and I think always we take steps forward, we take steps back, and we have always got to make sure that we have the trust for our veterans.

I just wanted to note that I think we are at about 80 percent in trust at the VA overall and about 90 percent on outpatient health care, so it seems like we are doing something right. One of the things I would be curious, if you are confirmed, is if the metrics that we are using right now to measure our progress are appropriate, and then if you deem them appropriate then continue to commit to reporting back so that we can see the trend lines moving the right direction. If you do not think they are appropriate then make suggestions on things that we can better tailor to make sure that we are doing the best for our veterans.

So I suspect that when you get into this role, and some questions have already been asked, the question of your not being a veteran—I am not a veteran; I think there are some here who have not also served. But can you talk a little bit about the experience that you bring and why you think it makes you well-suited to take on the role of Secretary of the VA?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, thank you very much, Senator. One, I am fighter and I am relentless. I think anybody you talk to who has worked with me will affirm that. Those attributes will serve me well to fulfill the fundamental assignment the President asked me to carry out, which is to be a fierce and stanch advocate for our veterans.

Two, I know and understand the Federal Government, from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. I can unstick problems inside agencies and across agencies, and especially an agency as large as VA, that is an important skill, and in fact, I have spent a lot of time working with many members of this Committee on doing just that.

And then there is something more. Going back to those attacks on 9/11, for 20 years I have been afforded, in my public service, something relatively few Americans are granted, which is to see up close the excellence, the execution, the talent of Armed Forces. And I have been deeply moved by that. And I have also seen, in trips

into the field, in Iraq and Afghanistan, on a very regular basis, the impact of our troops and the impact of long deployments on them and their families. And I have made it a point to visit at Walter Reed, and to even be at Dover on the final arrival home for some of our heroes.

And I am not telling you that I am a vet, but I am telling you that I have come to understand the massive sacrifices that they have made, and I have come to witness the amazing skill with which they have done it. And there is no higher calling than to use my skills to ensure that we make good on our promises to them, to serve them as well as they have served us.

Senator TILLIS. Well, thank you. I am going to try to keep to time for my other colleagues who have yet to speak.

But I actually wanted to thank the Chairman. For the past, I do not know, Jon, going back four years, with Chairman Isakson's approval, he and I met with two Secretaries to track on some of the transformation efforts, the electronic health record system, which is something I want to continue to be focused on. I am hoping the Chair, now that you are in that lofty role of Chair you may want to have somebody else on the Committee meet with them. But to meet with you all on a regular basis. I really believe in the electronic health record implementation. I think the integration with the DoD, as I think some other member may have alluded to it, is critical to provide that seamless transition. There are some other transformation projects that I am very interested in. Also, when we have a follow-up discussion, I want to talk about the concept of rebalancing Community Care, what that would really mean. And I look forward to setting up a phone call or in-person visit over the next few days.

Thank you all. Again, congratulations to your family. Did you say you came from a family of 10 kids?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, 11. So I have 10 brothers and sister.

Senator TILLIS. Were you an altar boy?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I was.

Senator TILLIS. One of the best jobs I ever head.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes. There is a nice honoraria every once in a while.

Senator TILLIS. Yes. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Tillis, and we will continue to work on EHR. Thank you.

Next we have up Senator Bernie Sanders, remotely.

**SENATOR BERNIE SANDERS**

Senator SANDERS. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much, and Denis, great to see you again.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Nice to see you, sir.

Senator SANDERS. I am sorry we did not have a chance to chat before the hearing, but I am more than aware of your years of public service, and I have absolute confidence that your knowledge of the bureaucracy is exactly what we need to head up the VA and make that important institution as efficient and useful to our veterans as it can be. So I look forward to working with you. And if it's Okay with you, let's see if we can chat a little bit in the next couple of days. Is that something we can do?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Very much. Yes, I would very much appreciate that.

Senator SANDERS. Okay. I would also love to welcome you to come to Vermont and chat with some of the folks at our very good hospital in White River Junction. They would love to meet with you and have you learn a little bit about the problems facing veterans' care in rural America. Is that something you might be interested in?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I would be happy to do that. I would be happy to do that, absolutely.

Senator SANDERS. Okay. A couple of issues that I wanted to touch on—and I apologize, I was in another meeting—is the trend that we have seen in recent years toward privatization. In talking to veterans in Vermont, and as former Chair of the VA Committee, talking to veterans all across this country, I find that veterans, by and large, with exception, feel that the quality of care that they are getting at the VA is very good, and they very much appreciate the level of staffing and people who often come from their backgrounds, and many of them veterans themselves, who understand the particular problems that veterans face.

Can you say a word about trying to maybe reverse the efforts toward privatization and adequately fund the VA so that veterans can get the quality care in a timely manner that they deserve?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. I have indicated that every decision that I make will flow from two principles, which is does the decision increase access for veterans and does it improve outcomes for veterans. And that, at the end of the day, has got to be the defining set of principles on every decision.

I think, as I have discussed with many members of the Committee, I do not support privatization. I do recognize that Community Care will continue to be a part of how the VA provides care to veterans, so we have to ensure that Community Care, that VA is being a good partner in Community Care, timely paying of bills, maintaining an effective, vibrant network.

At the same time, we have to ensure that this integrated health model continues to draw on the success and the excellence that is obvious throughout its work force. So that is how I see this, Senator.

Senator SANDERS. And I would agree with you. I just wanted to touch on an issue which is of concern in Vermont, and I think nationally. When I look at health care, Dennis, I see dental care as an integral part of health care, and yet dental care is not available to the average veteran except when there is—when it is associated with an injury, a service-related injury. Would you work with me in trying, perhaps, to expand dental care as a basic benefit for our veterans?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. I will absolutely dig into this question, if confirmed, and continue to work with you and other members of the Committee in a consultative, collaborative way to try to address these concerns, absolutely.

Senator SANDERS. Okay. Well, Mr. Chairman, that is all that I have. I think we are looking at somebody who stands the chance of being a really, really great VA Secretary, and I certainly look

forward to working with him in the future. So thank you very much, Denis, and I look forward to chatting with you shortly.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you so much, Senator.

Chairman TESTER. Yes, thank you, Senator Sanders. Next we have Senator Sullivan.

**SENATOR DAN SULLIVAN**

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. McDonough, thanks for your conversation and meeting yesterday. As I mentioned, I am proudly serving the State with more vets per capita than any State in the country—Joe, it is true, sorry. West Virginia is close, patriotic communities, both of ours. And I reached out to a number of our veterans for questions that they can ask you, and I got a lot, of course. And I would say that you could boil them down to a couple things. They want a Secretary who understands what it means to serve, who will vigorously tackle the benefit and health care challenges facing them, and who listens, who does not prioritize the needs of, say, a veteran in Los Angeles or a big city over the needs of those in rural communities like Utqiagvik or Kotzebue, who works with Congress on finding solutions, not politicizing.

And in the spirit of a great Marine, former constituent of mine, unfortunately we lost him last year, Marine Gunnery Sargent "Cajun Bob" Thoms from Wasilla, Alaska, six Purple hearts, on the cover of Life magazine, for his Silver Star of valiant heroic for his tour in Vietnam, in the confirmation of Secretary Shulkin, he had asked the question of saying he simply wants a VA Secretary who "will kick ass and take names."

So what do you say to my veterans on these issues, and can you take a minute—I know you did with Senator Tillis—to speak directly to the legitimate concerns that Alaska veterans have raised who feel as though military experience is the prerequisite for the VA Secretary, to understand and have a baseline understanding of their needs, their service, their experience.

So if you can address all those I would appreciate it.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator, and I appreciate the question, and I appreciate the concern at the heart of the question about who is best prepared to be VA Secretary.

I am not a gunnery sergeant, but I am a fighter and I am relentless. Anybody who has worked with me knows that. Two, I know how the government works, and importantly, I know when and how it does not work. And I will fight relentlessly to ensure that it works for our vets.

Senator SULLIVAN. So I think my constituents, my veterans, their families, they want to know, will you have their back?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I have spent the last 20 years involved in decisions about when and where—as a staff person I am not going to over state my role, but as a staff person, when and where our men and women go to fight. And I have gone and seen and met and witnessed what they are doing, and I have gone to visit them when they are injured, here at home. And I have seen and internalized their excellence, and I know that the basic requirement of VA Secretary is to have their back, to ensure that I will fight like hell to take as good a care of them as they have taken of us.

Senator SULLIVAN. So in the immortal words of Cajun Bob, you will——

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Kick ass and take names.

Senator SULLIVAN [continuing]. kick ass and take names on behalf of our veterans?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, sir.

Senator SULLIVAN. That is important. They need to know it.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, sir.

Senator SULLIVAN. I also want to get your commitment, first year of your tenure, to get up to Alaska and meet with my veterans, see our State, see the challenges. Can I get your commitment on that?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. You have got that commitment.

Senator SULLIVAN. Can I get your commitment—you know, if confirmed you are going to be running a big bureaucracy—can I get your commitment to kind of do a VFR direct with all of us on this Committee, when we have issues, we can go directly to you and not through the 18 layers of bureaucracy?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, you have that commitment.

Senator SULLIVAN. Let me ask one final question. Again, these were concerns from my veterans. You served in the Obama Administration. My first 2 years in the Senate were the last 2 years of the Obama Administration. A lot of the issues I was dealing with were some of the big VA problems. The Choice program, which, in my State, the implementation was an utter disaster. It actually collapsed the system in Alaska. I mean, total disaster. The Phoenix wait time scandal. What did you learn from these, and do you think that experience is going to help you? Is that a liability, give your background? And can you assure my veterans that we are not going to go back to those days, which I do not think anyone on this Committee thinks were good days for our veterans. We have made a lot of progress since that, we have made a lot of progress back home in Alaska, particularly as it relates to putting together an Alaska plan that got us out of the hole the Choice program put us in.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. The lifeblood of a well-run, well-functioning organization or agency is timely, accurate information. That was not the case in Phoenix. The lifeblood of a well-run organization is accountability. Accountability happened in Phoenix, but it was slow. You all have subsequently changed the statute to make that easier, and it will not ever happen again.

At the end of the day, the principle that will inform my leadership of the VA, if I am confirmed, is whether any decision increases access and improves outcomes for our vets. That is what we owe the vets. That is what my commitment to you, to the VSOs, and to them, and to the President, is that I will deliver, if confirmed as Secretary.

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Sullivan. Senator Joe Manchin III. Hallelujah.

**SENATOR JOE MANCHIN**

Senator MANCHIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and congratulations on your lofty position. First of all, Mr. McDonough, thank you very much, and if I may say, Denis, we have known each other for

a while, and I am glad my colleagues brought up about, you know, sometimes they think we need to be veterans, and I never had the honor and the pleasure of being able to be a veteran. I think that is a void in my life. I think back—I was an altar boy for 12 years. I was a Boy Scout for a long time. I never made it to the military, and that is something I really think there is a void, and I think it is a special opportunity. But we know that it takes a person who cares and has the experience to do the job, and that is where you come in. And I think, Denis, that says everything.

Let me tell you a little bit of what you are facing and what I have faced in the 5-years I have been on this Committee. I came on this Committee in the 114th Congress in 2015. Since then, they talked about the wait time scandals. That led to the VA Choice Act. It led to the MISSION Act, which needs a lot of repairs, as you know. The veterans' unemployment and hiring after the financial crisis, we had more veterans unemployed. It took longer to get them back employed, and we started I Hire a Vet, a campaign all over the country.

Toxic exposure, Agent Orange, burn pits—I know you are very much aware of those and it is really wreaking havoc today. The veteran suicide and mental health that we deal with on a daily basis. Veteran homelessness is something that I cannot comprehend at all how we can have any veterans that we would not have better care for.

The women veteran health care access. Women think they have been left out or are not a high priority, and they are an integral part of our military and our defense today. The hiring backlog, over 40,000 vacancies in the VA. Veterans Affairs IT infrastructure delay. At Clarksburg VA, murders. If anything I have ever experienced in my life is knowing that we could have veterans who were murdered in a veteran's hospital, and we have eight confirmed, a woman that will be serving many life sentences over and over. And there might be as many as three more. We have had sexual abuse, just found it in another Beckley VA hospital, four veterans we know of and probably 40 more over a 25-year span.

There is a breakdown somewhere, sir, and we are just going to need someone like you who can dig into that, because to me it would be vetting. We are not vetting people properly. We are not having strict rules adhered to.

But more importantly, we passed, in 2017, the Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act. We wanted to make sure that we could basically get rid of the people that were not doing their job. I do not think that has been exercised much since then, and I will give you a perfect example. The people that I hold responsible for the VA hospital deaths in Clarksburg have been moved to other places in the VA system. Unheard of. And I knew way back when this happened, in a meeting with them, that someone was either lying to me or totally incompetent. And now when I found out, we brought new leadership in, they were moved somewhere. I cannot find them. And I would like to know on that, if we could bring that to the highest priority.

I think to put the credibility back in the VA, the care and the desire for the care that they deserve, I would ask you, as one of your first visits, to come to Clarksburg VA and set down what your

mission would be. And I think, sir, that could set the tone for the entire VA system all over the country. It is just unbelievable, totally unbelievable. And now families—I have families calling me daily. Did my father or grandfather lose their life because someone murdered them when they were there, still not knowing for sure. These are all the things that we are dealing with today. You can help ease that pain, I think.

But, Denis, I look forward to you. We need someone of your ability more now than ever, and like I said, I am in awe today of every person I see in uniform, all the people you see out here guarding this great republic of ours, and anybody who has served, to give them the greatest care.

So with that I know the challenges are great. If you would like to comment on any of that, I know you have probably been following some of this, but I do not know to what extent on that.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Well, I thank you very much, Senator, and I have been following it, and we had a very good conversation, which I appreciated.

Senator MANCHIN. Thank you for that.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. And my commitment is, as I assured you before, which is to work in close consultation and collaboratively with you and with the rest of the members of the Committee on these question.

Senator MANCHIN. I think you are going to find a committee that has worked in—I am just about finished—a committee that has worked in a most bipartisan way. And I have said this before, and I mean this with all my heart. Men and women in uniform are the glue of this country. They keep us together. They keep us talking. They keep us finding ways to work together, to make sure that we are taking care of those who are taking care of us. So you have got it in your hands now, the cradle, basically, of the people who have made the country what we are today, and we owe it to them.

So with that being said, you are going to find all the support. If we do not have a piece of legislation that allows you to reorganize, that allows you to basically get rid of the dead wood and the people who do not care—my grandmother always said, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." I know how much you care. Now you have to show the rest of the world.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator MANCHIN. Thank you, sir. I look forward to voting for you too.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator MANCHIN. Count me in. Put me in again, Coach.

Chairman TESTER. You have got it, big boy. Thank you, Senator Manchin. Remotely we have Senator Blackburn.

**SENATOR MARSHA BLACKBURN**

Senator BLACKBURN. Yes, thank you. I appreciate that, and Mr. McDonough, thank you so much for the time this week. It was wonderful to visit with you by phone. Let me just—and I appreciate your commitment. You have talked some about your passion and that relentless commitment to doing the job and to public service. So very quickly, what would uniquely qualify you to lead the VA, with a budget that is nearly a quarter of a trillion dollars and

400,000 employees, and it serves 9 million enrolled veterans? So kind of following on to Senator Manchin's question, what is your unique qualification?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. As you have indicated, I am a fighter and I am relentless, and that means I will fight to get our vets' backs, and I will ensure, relentlessly, that the resources that you have authorized and appropriated for the Committee are invested wisely and with the veteran at the center of those investments.

I also understand how the government works, from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. That means demanding excellence. That means enforcing accountability. That means being in close collaboration and consultation with you and other members of this Committee, to ensure that we are using all the available power of the U.S. Government to get our vets' backs.

Lastly, for 20 years now I have been involved in these decisions about when and where to send our men and women to war, not as a decider—I am not trying to over state my role-—but as a staff person. And I have also seen the excellence of our military and I have seen the challenges of long deployments, and I have seen the sacrifices, but I have seen the resilience. And there is no higher calling than to be able to use my skills and my experience to repay and to ensure that we live up to the promises we have made to our vets.

Senator BLACKBURN. Yes. Let me jump in there, because Senator Moran and others have talked about Community Care, and you and I talked a little bit about this. You have got Choice. You have got MISSION. We have got, as part of repaying these veterans, many that want to get care in their communities. You talked about the right balance of care, and I would like for you to bring just a little bit of clarity to that. What do you see as the right balance of care, and would you commit that you are not going to roll back on standards and reverse the intent of a veteran-centric care and addressing the whole health of the veteran?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. Community Care will continue to be a fundamental way that the Department provides care to our veterans, one. Two, the statute is clear on this. It says that best medical outcome for the veteran is the objective, and that will continue to be my priority, if confirmed as Secretary.

Third, every decision I make as Secretary will come back to this principle, which is, is it increasing access for veterans and is it improving outcomes for veterans? If the answer to those questions are no then we will not do it.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. Well, and you and I discussed the health records, the electronic health records.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, ma'am.

Senator BLACKBURN. And others have brought that up today. And, you know, my frustration with a $4 billion IT budget and they cannot seem to get it right, indeed Senator Tester and I had legislation this year that would have improved the management of that. And for the record, we are about out of time. I will send you a QFR on the management of those programs, and then you and I also discussed purchasing, and for the record I will send you a question delving a little bit more into that purchasing.

But thank you for the time today. Thank you for your commitment. And, Mr. Chairman, I will send the time back to you.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Blackburn. Next we have, remotely, Senator Sinema.

**SENATOR KYRSTEN SINEMA**

Senator SINEMA. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I appreciate Mr. McDonough joining us today. My office is increasingly hearing from Arizona veterans asking for clarification on how to receive the COVID vaccine from the VA and when they will be able to receive it. My staff has been working locally to make sure information is getting out to the community, and this highlights the importance of having Senate-confirmed leadership at the Department of Veterans Affairs as quickly as possible.

I have introduced, with Senator Tillis, the Ensuring Survivor Benefits During COVID legislation to address concerns that survivors of veterans who died from COVID may not be granted their earned benefits if the death certificate only identifies COVID–19 as the cause of death, without considering the impact of other service-connected illnesses.

If confirmed, will you work with me to ensure that processes are in place to address these concerns?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, Senator, I will.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. Over the last year, my office has worked with the VA, American Legion, and Philips North America to bring an Atlas site to Arizona. We hope to provide more details about that site in the coming weeks. The Atlas, or the Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations program, is part of VA's Anywhere to Anywhere telehealth initiative to bring a VA telehealth access point to underserved communities. In Arizona, there may be many rural and tribal communities that could benefit from this and other telehealth initiatives.

If confirmed, will you continue to work with our office to expand telehealth opportunities to rural and tribal communities?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Yes, I will.

Senator SINEMA. As we consider expansion, we have to acknowledge the challenges of access to broadband in these communities. As the VA continues to expand its telehealth initiatives, what role do you feel the VA should play in addressing broadband access?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. I think the VA has a key role to play in coordinating with other Federal agencies and with the FCC to ensure that the kinds of access questions that VA can lead on, including on telehealth, can be expanded by better broadband access more universally available. So I think there is a critical role to play within the interagency, and that, if confirmed, would be precisely what I intend to do.

Senator SINEMA. Thank you. You know, in Arizona the Navajo Nation has been hit particularly hard by COVID. The CDC notes that Native Americans are at a disproportionate risk for complications from COVID due to health and socioeconomic disparities in these communities. They also experience other inequities such as high instances of homelessness and challenges accessing clean drinking water and sanitation.

If confirmed, what steps will you take to ensure the VA is best serving Native American veterans?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. This would be a fundamental priority, consistent with the President's Stated priorities on equity and consistent with what I have said throughout the day today, which is how are we increasing access and improving outcomes for all vets. And third, consistent with the direction to me from the President to ensure that VA is welcoming of all veterans, including, obviously, Navajo and other Native American veterans.

So, there is a fundamental role for us, for the VA to play there, and if confirmed I would intend to play that role.

Senator SINEMA. I appreciate that. Thank you.

Information technology modernization has been and continues to be a central focus for the VA. If confirmed, you will be responsible for overseeing these major modernization efforts. As cybersecurity threats continue to increase across the U.S., what steps will you take to ensure that VA is equipped to protect against cyber threats and is practicing good cyber hygiene?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. Obviously, the range of cyber threats that we confront as a country is only growing. Having cybersecurity, cyber hygiene front and center, not only for the major programmatic efforts at the Department but also for individuals in the work force at the Department will have to be a fundamental priority for the next Secretary, and if that is me I would intend to make cybersecurity a key priority.

Senator SINEMA. Thanks. You know, the VA still has a number of legacy systems it is supporting. These cannot only be costly but also generally do not follow or accommodate today's security best practices.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Right.

Senator SINEMA. What would be your approach to addressing legacy systems, if confirmed as VA Secretary?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator. Obviously there has to be a fundamental focus on cybersecurity and cyber hygiene across the enterprise, one, and then two is effectively performing on the modernization efforts will allow VA to not only increase security and increase performance and outcomes for vets but will also reduce costs over time of these legacy systems. So executing on the modernization has to be a key priority.

Senator SINEMA. And I see that my time has expired. With your indulgence, Mr. Chair, I will submit the rest of my questions for our nominee, and I want to thank him for joining us here today.

Chairman TESTER. Thank you, Senator Sinema, and in that regard the questions need to be in by tomorrow at 5 p.m.

Last but certainly not least, and I have been in your position before, Senator Cramer. Senator Cramer.

**SENATOR KEVIN CRAMER**

Senator CRAMER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Mr. McDonough, and I do not mind, frankly. It means that I do not have to ask Denis about rural veterans, Native American veterans, telehealth, COVID–19, MISSION Act or Community Care Network. So we can get right down to the business of Clemens Stadium,

Johnnies football, and Jake Christiansen Stadium versus the Cobbers. How about that?

Mr. MCDONOUGH. I like that.

Senator CRAMER. All right. Well, we will get to that on your way to Alaska, when you stop in Fargo. Okay? But you and I did have a wonderful discussion. I want to tell you how much I appreciated the meeting we had earlier this week. We did drill down on a number of these issues, as well as one of my most important issues, that is probably a little more unique to me, and that is, of course, the use of alternative forms of therapies, treatments, particularly hyperbaric oxygen treatment.

And the reason I am such a proponent of hyperbaric oxygen treatment and therapies for veterans is because I have seen it work so well. A number of veterans that I know have really had their lives changed, and in some cases saved, by this important therapy, as well as others, who have had injuries that come from sports, particularly head trauma, traumatic brain injuries.

And so I am a strong proponent of it, and by the way, I very much appreciated your dialog with Senator Moran, because he was getting to the heart of an issue that I think a lot of us, as you could probably tell, are challenged by, and that is just how large the bureaucracy is and how difficult it can be to maneuver it, and how often we will actually pass legislation that is signed into law only to have it sort of either slow walked, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and I happen to believe that most of the time it is with good intentions.

But with regard to HBOT, I was able to get language in the John Scott legislation, that you are very familiar with, that would authorize the Secretary of the VA to enter into public-private partnerships to research the effectiveness of hyperbaric oxygen therapy. And it would require—and I stress require—the VA to use an objective test to measure the effectiveness of hyperbaric oxygen therapy, and it would commission a comprehensive review and study of HBOT, both within the VA, and I think importantly, with outside organizations as well, because there is just a lot of experience out there that, to this point, has not been brought, in my view, into a good peer-reviewed objective study. But it would be completed with a recommendation then from the VA about the effectiveness of HBOT.

I stress that because that is language in the bill that makes it law, and I believe there are, as I said, real benefits to this innovative therapy, and by the way, other innovative therapies. And I think you and I talked about the important role the VA has played, the leadership role it has played in some very effective alternatives to traditional medicine or in addition to traditional medicine.

And really want to just, I guess again, thank you for listening and get a reaffirmation of your commitment to fulfill both the letter of that law and then the spirit of it, and then accept my invitation to Fargo on your way to Alaska to see Dan Sullivan.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Any time I can go to Fargo I will take it, one. Two is I would be happy to recommit to making sure that we dig into the analysis of the therapy, consistent with the intent in the statute, and consistent with getting to the brass tack here, to find

out what is the best way and best vehicle to deliver the kind of care to our vets that they have earned.

Senator CRAMER. I appreciate that. I have written down a number of the things you have said, in quotes. I will not repeat all of them, but one thing you have said a couple of times in response to the question about your cred, if you will, your street cred for this job—and I love when you say "I know how government works." I think that is oftentimes an underappreciated skill set and gift and experience. So I believe you when you say that. You have every reason to know how government works. As you have said, you have seen it from both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. And count me as an affirmative vote——

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator CRAMER [continuing]. and someone who looks forward to working with you once you are confirmed.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you, Senator.

Senator CRAMER. And with that I yield the rest of my time, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Chairman TESTER. Yes, thank you, Senator Cramer. Before I have my closing remarks I will turn it over to the Ranking Member, Senator Moran.

Senator MORAN. Chairman Tester, thank you very much. It was tolerable to have you in the chair today, and it is not exactly what I wanted but it is not a bad deal either, so thank you for working with me and my colleagues on this side of the aisle as we commit to do to you and your colleagues.

Mr. McDonough, before I ask you a question I wanted to point out to the Committee that we have a new staff director, now on the minority side, who came from the House minority side but was in both the minority and majority staff world in the Senate, and is returning now to the Senate. This is his first meeting since his arrival, and John Towers is behind me, and we look forward to having him and his help. And we make him available to you, Mr. McDonough, should you be confirmed.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator MORAN. Mr. McDonough, would you commit to me that you are a fan of the Chiefs?

[Laughter.]

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Senator Moran, I am a big fan of Patrick Mahomes, but I am a Vikings fan, and I hate to admit that I am kind of old school that way.

Senator MORAN. Well, you could have answered the question in a worse way.

Mr. McDonough, I thank you for your interest in serving as the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. I thank you for your testimony today. I just wanted you to know, based upon what you have said and what I have learned about you that I will vote for your confirmation.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

Senator MORAN. And I will ask my Republican colleagues to do the same. And I look forward to working with you, and your commitment is evident to me, and I think we can accomplish a lot on behalf of those who served our Nation, working together.

So best wishes to you and your family, and I thank them. I know your wife, in particular, is involved in veterans' services, and I would express my gratitude, as I did personally to her, but here publicly, for her efforts. And so as a family we wish you all well in this new endeavor——

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you very much.

Senator MORAN [continuing]. and I am grateful for your service. Thank you.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you so much, Senator.

Chairman TESTER. Senator Moran, Mr. McDonough, I do not know if Moran had that question that he asked you and knew the real impact of it, but not only is Jerry Moran a Chiefs fan but my Committee director is also a Chiefs fan. So, you know, I mean, I guess it does not matter if you are a Vikings fan as long as you root for the Chiefs in the Super Bowl. So, Okay.

I also want to welcome John Towers. John is somebody that both Jerry and I had the opportunity to work with when he was in the House. And as you well know, Denis, oftentimes a relationship between the principles is important, but the relationship between the staff is more important.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Hear, hear.

Chairman TESTER. And so I want to welcome you on board, John.

And I also want to thank your wife and your family that have sat attentively behind you, nodding their heads and paying attention. I cannot see their eyes so I do not think they nodded off, very often anyway.

But the truth is, as we all know, that the power and the ability for any of us to serve in any of these positions, whether it is elected or staffed, really relies with the family and how important they are to our ability to do our job. And I want to thank our Committee today for their thoughtful questions and their belief and the way they put across the fact that veterans are No. 1 in this Committee, and that is why we work on this Committee so well.

You know, I looked at the FBI report the day before yesterday, and I think Senator Moran is going to do it tomorrow, and I do not think I am out of school by saying that it was pretty darn stellar. In fact, I told the lady that brought it in I would have to pay a lot of money to get this many recommendations of what a fine fellow I am. And so you are a highly qualified candidate, and I believe that you will work with this Committee to ensure that we keep the promises to the men and women who have served their country, and their families too, by the way.

And Senator Moran visited, and we have an agreement that we plan to meet again on Tuesday to vote on Denis McDonough's nomination to be Secretary of the Veterans Affairs, as well the Committee rules and the budget. And that is what we are going to do. I think the fact that you had not met with Senator Tillis or Senator Sanders yet, and the fact that the Ranking Member had not seen the FBI report requires us to do it then. Otherwise, I would have tried to move it up, but I am not going to, based on that.

I would ask, as I pointed out to Senator Sinema, that any post-hearing questions be sent to the clerk by tomorrow at 5 p.m. And then we will need those responses back from you before we vote on Tuesday.

With that once again I want to thank you and your family for being here. Always a pleasure to work with Senator Moran. This hearing is adjourned.

Mr. MCDONOUGH. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 5:08 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

APPENDIX

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**Material Submitted for the Hearing Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Hearing**
**Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Denis McDonough to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs**

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Jerry Moran
Wednesday, January 27, 2021

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"Thank you, Senator, and now Chairman, Tester. Congratulations and I look forward to continuing to work together to serve our nation's veterans.

"Mr. McDonough, welcome. No mission is nobler than the one you will lead if confirmed, so I thank you and your family for your willingness to re-enter government service.

"We are going into this new Congress with new leadership and a new administration. The challenges we aim to address on behalf of our veterans will be a mix of those existing, ongoing issues we still struggle to sort out, alongside new challenges and new opportunities for our country to not only honor veterans for the service they provided, but to harness their values and talents to help them lead again.

"Mr. McDonough, in 2014 your White House Deputy Chief of Staff, Rob Nabors, reviewed the nationwide wait-time scandal and described the root causes using phrases such as 'little transparency', 'corrosive culture', 'lack of accountability across all grade levels', and 'significant and chronic system failures.'

"Six years later, thanks to the collective efforts of three VA Secretaries and thousands of dedicated employees, it is fair to say VA looks very different now than it did then. Employee engagement is at its highest level in over a decade. VA ranks 6 out of 17 among large government organizations as a best place to work, a vast improvement in just four years. And patient trust in VA health care is now over 90 percent. Your job, if confirmed, will be to solidify and build off these improvements.

"At the same time, several major modernization programs are underway with Electronic Health Record Modernization, Financial Business Transformation, Caregiver expansion, and Community Care Networks, just to name a few. These and other modernization efforts will require billions of dollars per year on top of VA's regular operations just to catch VA up with the latest best practices. VA needs strong leadership to make certain these investments achieve results and do not waste taxpayer dollars.

"With the help of our VSO partners, Congress has enacted several recent reforms to improve mental health care, protect educational assistance, enhance disability and survivors' benefits, and expand burial benefits. The next Secretary of Veterans Affairs must be ready on day one to advance and build on the progress that has been made over the last four years, must ensure that the laws are faithfully executed, and must measure results so we know veterans are benefitting as intended.

"Additionally, the next secretary must continue the fight against COVID-19, support an already-strained workforce, deliver timely vaccinations to VA patients, and be ready to assist the civilian health care system in places where it is overburdened. Furthermore, backlogs in health care and benefit claim appointments that have piled up due to the pandemic must be addressed as we return to a more stable operating environment in the coming months.

"A top concern for me, and for many of my colleagues, is how VA will care for veterans living in rural communities. Before coming to the Senate, I represented a Congressional district roughly the size of Illinois with no VA Medical Center. I look at VA through the eyes of our Kansas veterans and the feedback I receive in speaking to them is that health care access has always been a challenge. VA provides excellent health care in its own facilities, but those facilities are not in every community. The MISSION Act gives veterans the permanent choice to utilize community health care providers when it makes sense for them and NOT when it is convenient for VA bureaucrats. I asked President Biden and will also ask for your commitment to uphold the law by

supporting this common sense notion that it's the veteran who should be at the center of their health care decisions.

"We know that public health measures that reduce the spread of COVID also increase the risk of social isolation and mental health conditions. VA has tools it can use to help. Community care authorities, telehealth options, and funding provided by Congress can work together to mitigate the pandemic's impact on veterans' physical, mental, social, and economic health.

"Furthermore, programs like the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment, and the Transition Assistance Program can help veterans transition out of the military successfully and help launch them on what VA terms a 'Solid Start' entering the civilian world. Research has shown higher incomes likely lead to better health outcomes, so investing in these programs doesn't just aid veterans in transition, it helps their long-term well-being and can reduce the burden on VA's health system.

"I would ask that you consider not just how VA is doing at delivering the benefits provided by law, but also what outcomes we are trying to achieve for veterans with these benefits and if we are doing enough to measure those outcomes relative to the benefits VA is providing.

"Again, congratulations on your nomination, and thank you for your commitment to our nation's veterans. Caring for veterans has always been a unifying force during my time in Congress. It is my great hope that it will continue to be if you are confirmed as Secretary.

"Mr. McDonough, I look forward to hearing your statement and engaging with you further on these questions during the hearing

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman."

**Statement of Denis McDonough**

Chairman Tester, Senator Moran, Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I do so with great respect for your constitutional obligations to advise and consent, to fund and to oversee the Department of Veterans Affairs and the bipartisan tradition of this committee in service to our nation's veterans.

At a moment when our country must come together, the partnership between the Chairman, Senator Moran and members of this committee is inspiring. If given the honor of serving as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, I will strive to emulate that partnership in my work with you—as individual members and this committee as a whole.

We can meet today, in peace and freedom, because generations of servicemembers have stepped forward and sacrificed in our name. And though only a small percentage of Americans have served in our armed forces, the President has called on every American to embrace our responsibility to support our veterans and their families. President and Dr. Biden take this duty seriously and personally — as I know each of you do — perhaps especially since they, like so many of you, are members of a proud military family.

If confirmed, I will dedicate myself—with every fiber of my being—to fulfilling what President Biden rightly refers to as our country's most sacred obligation: To prepare and equip our troops that we send in harm's way and to care for them — and their families — when they return.

It is true that I am not a veteran. But in my years of my public service, I have had a privilege afforded to relatively few Americans: I've seen up close – and been deeply moved by -- the excellence, talents and dedication our men and women in uniform.

When visiting our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen on our bases in Afghanistan and Iraq, I have witnessed the heavy burdens of long deployments away from their families.

Beside their hospital beds when they come home, I've seen their resilience in the face of wounds—visible and invisible—that can last a lifetime. Standing there at Dover when our fallen heroes come home one final time, I've seen the unimaginable grief of military families, to whom we owe a debt that can never be repaid and whom we stand by forever.

Inside and outside of government, I've been inspired how our veterans continue to strengthen our communities and our country out of uniform—as teachers, coaches, first responders and public servants.

Most of all, like every American, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to those who have worn the cloth of our nation. It would be a tremendous honor to serve our veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors by leading the VA — to ensure our nation serves them as well as they have served us.

If confirmed, I will make it will make it my mission to fight relentlessly for our Veterans with a relentless focuson three core responsibilities of the Department:

- Providing our veterans with timely world-class healthcare,
- Ensuring our veterans and their families have timely access to their benefits, and
- Honoring our veterans with their final resting place and lasting tributes to their service.

At the same time, the President has directed me to focus on:

- getting our veterans through this pandemic;

- helping our veterans build civilian lives of opportunity with the education and jobs worthy of their skills and talents;
- ensuring that the VA welcomes all our veterans, including women veterans, veterans of color and LGBTQ veterans;
- working to eliminate veteran homelessness and reducing suicide; and
- keeping faith with our families and caregivers.

In short, if confirmed, I will work tirelessly to rebuild trust and restore VA as the premier agency for ensuring the well-being of America's veterans. After all, there is no more sacred obligation nor noble undertaking than to uphold our promises to our veterans, whether they came home decades ago or days ago.

I am ready for this mission. As a former White House chief of staff, I bring a deep and extensive knowledge of government. I understand how to untangle and solve large, complex challenges—both across and within large agencies. I have seen firsthand that when our government is at its best, it can help serve the American people—including our veterans—and allow them to live in security and dignity.

This won't be easy. The Department of Veterans Affairs faces great challenges—challenges made even more daunting by the coronavirus pandemic. Its capabilities have not always risen to the needs of our veterans. If confirmed, I promise to fight—every single day—to ensure that our veterans have the access to the world- class, compassionate care they have earned.

I look forward to being a true partner with the men and women of the VA—dedicated, highly-skilled professionals, many veterans themselves—veterans serving veterans—who deserve our profound respect and support. I will also build strong partnerships with the veteran's service organizations who devote themselves to their fellow veterans, to their communities and to our country.

I've been given a clear mission by President Biden: To be a fierce, staunch, advocate for veterans and their families. If confirmed, I will embrace that assignment with the solemnity it demands.

This is not a mission I take on alone. Every federal agency has a role in supporting our veterans — if confirmed, I will make that happen. Because, again, when it comes to supporting our veterans and their families, every American has a role to play.

Chairman Tester, Senator Moran, distinguished Members of the Committee—thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and for the opportunity to join you in caring for our veterans who served and sacrificed so that we can live in freedom today.

May God bless our troops, our veterans and their families — and, as a nation, may we always give them our very best.

I look forward to your questions.




# CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

***STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD***

**AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO**

**PROVIDED TO THE**

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**HEARING ON**

**THE NOMINATION OF DENIS R. MCDONOUGH TO BE SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS**

**January 27, 2021**

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, AFL-CIO
80 F Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 737-8700 www.afge.org

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Tester, and Members of the Committee,

The American Federation of Government Employees, AFL-CIO (AFGE) and its National Veterans Affairs Council (NVAC) appreciate the opportunity to submit a statement for the record on President Biden's nomination of Denis R. McDonough to be the next Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). AFGE represents more than 700,000 federal and District of Columbia government employees, 260,000 of whom are proud, dedicated Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) employees. Should he be confirmed, Mr. McDonough will take the helm of the agency at a time of great turmoil. In a few short months our nation will have been in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic for over a year, with over 400,000 souls lost to the disease and no end in sight. This has put an extraordinary strain on the VA system and its workforce. Every day dedicated VA employees go to work serving our nation's veterans and fighting the ongoing battle against the coronavirus. Yet over the last ten months the VA's administration – the senior executives who frontline workers rely on to protect them – have failed veterans and the VA workforce. Complicating matters for the department is that in addition to the pandemic, there are still significant numbers among the VA workforce who do not have full collective bargaining rights. AFGE appreciates the time Mr. McDonough took to meet with AFGE National President Dr. Everett B. Kelley and NVAC President Alma Lee earlier this month to discuss what the next VA Secretary needs to do to lead the VA through the COVID-19 crisis so it may thrive in the future. We look forward to working with Mr. McDonough should he become the next VA Secretary.

**COVID-19**

***Staffing***

The first and most pressing issue Mr. McDonough will face is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. From the start of the national lockdown AFGE has received reports from frontline medical professionals who have endured terrible risk to themselves and their co-workers. Recently, we were informed of a medical center director who instructed COVID-positive employees who were asymptomatic to report to work and perform their usual duties. This cruel policy resulted in a warehouse worker contracting – and later succumbing – to the virus.

AFGE learned from members shortly after the pandemic was declared that the normal staffing ratio in at least one facility was one Registered Nurse (RN) for every two COVID-19 patients. In that same facility the ratio has tripled to one RN for every six patients. This is both a result of the virus spreading at a rapid rate, and a significant number of RNs being on leave as a result of contracting COVID-19 or needing to quarantine. Additionally, it has been observed that other medical professionals who are not normally assigned to direct patient care have been put on the front lines. With the virus continuing to spread, the VA must take steps to increase the number of RNs and other essential frontline health care personnel to effectively take care of veterans and protect the workforce. Doing so will allow employees who are normally in direct patient care to return to their critical duties.

***Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)***

In another instance we received a report from a medical facility that their nursing staff received a shipment of counterfeit N-95 masks. This comes on the heels of learning from nurses at numerous facilities working in COVID-19 units that they are not automatically issued N-95

masks at work, and in some instances only receive them when a patient they are treating reaches a certain severity of illness. This careless, uncoordinated response by the VA has resulted in each medical center responding differently and limited-to-no standardization. As Secretary, Mr. McDonough will be tasked with not only developing standards for COVID response, but also with ensuring that each facility has adequate personal protect equipment (PPE).

***Telework***

AFGE strongly supports to use of telework generally and fully supports all efforts to allow VA employees to telework whenever possible during the COVID-19 pandemic for the safety of employees, veterans and the public. In the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), the benefits of telework have already been demonstrated as claims are being processed at a higher rate since employees have been required to work at home compared to before the pandemic when the VBA put up restrictions making it more difficult for employees to be granted the ability to telework. Telework at VBA should continue to be used for the duration of the COVID-19 Pandemic and beyond.

In VHA, the use of telework has not been used to its maximum availability. This is particularly true for administrative work that does not require in-person interaction with patients such as third-party collections and Office of Community Care consults. The VHA should continue expanding the use of telehealth and telemental health during the pandemic and urges it to continue to expand its telehealth capacity. It should supplement these efforts by providing more tablets and other needed technology to veterans to allow remote access.

***VBA IT Capacity***

The technological issues plaguing VBA have been thrown into sharper relief during the COVID-19 Pandemic. When VBA developed its system to allow employees to perform their duties remotely, it was not built to support the entirety of the claims processing workforce performing their duties from home simultaneously. It has become a regular occurrence for claims processors on the east coast to log in every morning and get logged out of the system in the afternoon when their counterparts on the west coast start their workday. Despite this obstacle, VBA claims production has been up during the course of the pandemic. When considering this productivity on the part of VBA employees, the benefits of keeping the workforce safe by using telework, and the possibility of other future situations requiring widespread remote work VBA must invest more money into its technology to remedy problems that allow employees to work remotely and better serve veterans.

***Premium Pay***

Finally, after nearly a year spent on the frontlines battling COVID-19 VA workers are tired and demoralized. That's why AFGE spent the majority of last year asking Congress and the previous Administration to provide VA employees with premium pay to compensate for the additional risks they are assuming. Absent a directive from the Secretary, each medical center and Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) will make their own rules for providing awards for meritorious service during this unprecedented time.

Last year AFGE and our union partners conducted a survey which showed a wide range in the amount and type of pandemic compensation given out in different facilities around the country. Many facilities provided no special pay or awards, effectively creating a system where an

employee's determination of pandemic pay is solely decided by the discretion and generosity of their supervisors. We have received reports of significantly unfair pandemic pay policies, such as supervisors with no patient contact receiving pandemic pay while frontline employees got none or in amounts that vary arbitrarily. As Secretary it will be crucial for Mr. McDonough to formalize and standardize a policy to provide pandemic premium pay to the VA workforce.

**Collective Bargaining**

The Title 38 collective bargaining rights law, 38 U.S.C. 7422 ("7422") has been interpreted and applied by the VA in an arbitrary and unfair manner for many years. As a result, the employees covered by 7422 have not been able to bargain or grieve a wide range of routine workplace issues grieved by other VA employees and health care professionals working at other agencies. In both 2003 and 2017, the White House voided a commonsense Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that had expanded Title 38 collective bargaining rights and improved labor management relations.

It will be incumbent upon Mr. McDonough as Secretary to work with the department's employee representatives to finally put an end to this unnecessary workplace practice. Creating a bifurcated system where some employees have full bargaining rights while others do not is illogical and does not serve the best interest of employees or the veterans they service. We have seen the cost of formalized inequality in the form of silenced whistleblowers and intimidated employees. Without full bargaining rights Title 38 employees fear coming forward with a complaint or to blow the whistle because of the negative consequences such an action could have on their employment. AFGE asks that Mr. McDonough use his power and authority as Secretary to bring this chapter of inadequate workplace rights to a close.

Another major area of concern for AFGE is the ongoing misuse of the disciplinary authorizations granted under the *Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017* ("Accountability Act"). This law made drastic changes to the rights of VA workers by making it easier to remove employees and eliminating the Merit Systems Protection Board's (MSPB) ability to mitigate penalties. In fact, it is easier and less time consuming to terminate a VA employee rather than place them on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). This must change, and AFGE will be asking Congress and the new Secretary to use their authorities to fix this law.

Specifically, AFGE will be asking Congress and Mr. McDonough to restore the "preponderance of the evidence" standard for supporting an adverse action taken against an employee. This means that more than 50% of the agency's evidence would need to support the proposed action. We will further be asking both to amend the law so that the MSPB will be able to look at the alleged infraction in its totality and impose a penalty that is proportional. Under existing law, the MSPB must either fully agree with the agency or fully exonerate the employee. This all-or-nothing approach has resulted in employees being terminated when a suspension would be more prudent. This is a commonsense change that we hope the new Secretary and Congress will support and swiftly enact.

**Vacancies**

For the last three years AFGE has been concerned about the growing rate of vacancies at the VA. While the department has no problem developing and applying metrics for wait times – often times used to justify outsourcing care – they have not been transparent and have been unwilling to address facility staffing. This has resulted in a VA system woefully understaffed and struggling to meet the needs of patients – even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

By the VA's own admission vacancies have been steadily rising over the last two years. According to the publicly available data released pursuant to Section 505 of the VA MISSION Act, in the third quarter of 2020 the VA reported over 55,000 vacant positions – with over 50,000 of those in the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). In the final (fourth quarter) report for 2020 vacancies suddenly dropped to only approximately 32,000 systemwide. In the Executive Summary accompanying the report the VA said this decrease was the result of a "position validation review resulting in a reduction of 22,385 vacant positions that were in excess of available funding." We find it suspect that after being routinely chastised for the rising vacancy rate the VA suddenly found a rationale for making 22,385 vacancies disappear.

This issue is not going away and has further been exploited by the ongoing pandemic. Congress and the new VA Secretary must look at internal staffing and address the needs of this understaffed workforce and the VA's long-term capacity to meet the needs of America's veterans. It is imperative that we work together to build internal capacity instead of finding rationales for sending veterans to unaccountable private contractors.

**Privatization**

Since 2018 AFGE has watched with great concern as the VA has implemented the VA MISSION Act law. Once this legislation became law, the previous Administration moved recklessly to use the broad authorization extended to the VA to outsource vital care and services. The new Secretary will need to investigate widespread reports of lack of payment to outside providers and resulting collections sent to veterans. Additionally, outside providers are not required to meet the same accountability standards as VA providers in the treatment of veterans.

AFGE will be asking Congress and the new Secretary to work to bring that care back into VA medical facilities. We also will be asking for the VA to require a remediation plan for any service line that they close through Mission Act authorization. It is important to be certain that if care and services go outside of the VA a clear plan exists to fix those deficiencies.

Additionally, AFGE is concerned with the MISSION Act's Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) portion of the law. This section would establish a BRAC-like commission tasked with making decisions about VA facility closures. AFGE opposes this commission and would instead ask Congress and the VA to put the power to close VA facilities back into the hands of the elected representatives of the people – the U.S. Congress. Unelected, politically appointed bureaucrats should not the only arbiter in making decisions about VA infrastructure.

**Veterans Benefits Administration**

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) serves as the VA's gatekeeper, and makes sure veterans receive the benefits to which they are entitled. AFGE is proud to represent this dedicated workforce, which has the highest density of employees within the VA. To improve this agency and better allow VBA employees to serve veterans, AFGE urges the next VA Secretary to make several changes in VBA.

***Performance Standards***

Performance standards exist to show employees what the expectation is of their performance and the criteria upon which they will be evaluated. These standards should be fair and attainable for all employees while retaining the flexibility to adjust for variable difficulty in an employee's workload. While this should be the case, VBA management has found different ways over the years to alter their performance. The VA has eliminated specialization from claims processing

and expects all claims processors to be generalists with limited to no expertise, hurting both veterans and employees. This has been further exacerbated by the VA measuring the processing of each case equally, regardless of complexity, demonstrating the VBA's focus of quantity over quality. The VBA has also hurt employees by not giving claims processors credit for deferring on cases that require more information and failing to give employees extra time when technology fails. The VBA has also micromanaged employees in VBA National Call Centers to a fault, limiting the amount of time a Legal Administrative Specialist can speak with a veteran before it harms their performance, again without consideration of the complexity of the call.

Working with AFGE and VA employees' representatives to address performance standards is the single most important change that the incoming VA Secretary can make to improvethe VBA workforce, and AFGE looks forward to working with the next Secretary to achieve this goal.

***Fixing the National Work Queue***

The National Work Queue (NWQ) was created with the intention of relieving the claims backlog and improving the pace of claims processing. However, its implementation has had a negative impact on veterans and frontline VA workers. AFGE agrees with a recent Inspector General's (IG) report (VA OIG 17-05248-241) conclusion that eliminating specialization has had a detrimental impact on veterans with claims, particularly claims that are more complex and sensitive in nature. As the IG report explains, prior to the implementation of the NWQ: "The Segmented Lanes model required Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs) and Rating Veteran Service Representatives (RVSRs) on Special Operations teams to process all claims VBA designated as requiring special handling, which included [Military Sexual Trauma (MST)]-related claims. By implementing the NWQ, VBA no longer required Special Operations teams to review MST-related claims. Under the NWQ, VSRs, and RVSRs are responsible for processing a

wide variety of claims, including MST-related claims. However, many VSRs and RVSRs do not have the experience or expertise to process MST-related claims."

Because of the level of difficulty in processing MST claims, AFGE supports returning MST and other former "Special Operations" cases including Traumatic Brain Injury back to a specialized lane or lanes in Regional Offices. Not all VSRs and RVSRs should be expected to process highly specialized cases, and it is both a waste of resources and a disservice to veterans filing claims.

The VA must also modify the NWQ so that cases remain within the same regional office while they are being processed, and so that VSRs and RVSRs are more clearly identified on each case file. This will allow for better collaboration between VSRs and RVSRs (as was done prior to the implementation of the NWQ) and allow the staff of Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) to better assist their members. AFGE looks forward to working with the incoming Secretary to fix the NWQ and assist veterans and employees.

**Conclusion**

The task at hand for the next Secretary is daunting, but with that comes great opportunity. As VA Secretary Mr. McDonough will have the opportunity to lead the department through the pandemic as well as to grow and strengthen the VA. AFGE and its NVAC look forward to working with him to make this a reality. We have a shared belief that our nation's heroes deserve the best care and services possible, and it's up to us to work together toward that shared goal. The VA's mission is to care for those who have borne the battle, and AFGE employees provide that care every single day. We hope Mr. McDonough will work with us to build capacity, fully staff the VA, and make sure adequate protections are in place for workers battling the COVID-19

pandemic. AFGE stands ready to be a true labor partner with the Secretary and we ask that he work with us in good faith to resolve any differences and accomplish great service.

Thank you.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Denis McDonough, Presumptive Nominee to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**From Senator Jerry Moran**

*Question 1.* **Would you please detail what professional experiences you have had that helped prepare you to lead VA?**

**RESPONSE:** For the last twenty years I have worked in leadership positions in the federal government on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. In those positions I have demonstrated an ability to work with and manage large and diverse teams and have demonstrated a particular ability to work with not just like minded political appointees but also with career officials in national security agencies on complex and controversial policies and the implementation of those decisions.

I have overseen core management functions across the Federal government, including during periods of significant process changes and challenges. My experience on Capitol Hill and proven ability to work with Republicans and Democrats is a particularly important part of my professional experience that has helped prepare me for this position.

*Question 2.* **What do you see as the most significant challenges facing VA, what would be your highest priorities if confirmed as Secretary, and how did your time as White House Chief of Staff inform your perspective on the role of VA Secretary and what your priorities would be if confirmed?**

**RESPONSE:** Like the entire country, VA is facing multiple challenges at the same time. First and foremost, VA must address the pandemic and its associated challenges, including treating veterans who are ill with the most advanced, evidence-based, treatments; robust testing protocols for veterans and employees; and vaccine distribution for veterans and employees. In addition, secondary effects of the pandemic including deferred healthcare and a growing claims backlog because of deferred compensation and pension physical exams must be met head on.

Of equal importance to me is to make every veteran feel welcome at all VA facilities. If confirmed, I will work diligently to end sexual harassment of veterans and staff, to include ending the culture of impunity reflected in recent IG reports. Part of creating a welcoming environment is to restore trust with veterans and their families, with key stakeholders, and with you and each member of the committee through increased transparency in decision making and regular communication.

My overarching priorities would be consistent with what the President has described as his vision for VA: delivery of world-class health care to America's veterans, as measured by access, quality, and satisfaction; timely and accurate adjudication of benefits claims; and more aggressive efforts by VA and other agencies to increase access to mental health care, reduce stigma associated with that care, and reduce veteran suicide.

If confirmed, I will work to (1) achieve the right balance between care provided in the community and care provided through VA to ensure that veterans have timely access to the highest, world-quality, healthcare services. I will (2) provide women veterans with access to the services they need, in a welcoming environment. I will (3) work diligently to implement a whole of government approach to fight suicide, including (4) timely access to mental health services at VA and in the community. I will (5) increase support to families, caregivers, and survivors as partners in caring for veterans to ensure they receive the services they need for themselves and for the veterans they love.

*Question 3.* **What do you see as the role of this Committee in conducting oversight regarding VA and what steps would you take to ensure that the Committee is promptly consulted on any emerging trends, issues, or policy developments at VA?**

**RESPONSE:** As a former Senate staffer, I know first-hand the important role the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee plays in conducting oversight of VA. Congressional oversight of the execution of policy and the investment of resources is a critical ingredient to successful policy for veterans. This Committee can't perform its Constitutional duty to the American people if VA doesn't provide timely and complete information, and the Department can't succeed if there is not sufficient communication and collaboration with the Committee. If confirmed, I will work to earn your trust and restore trust between VA and this Committee by establishing regular lines of communication and ensuring that you have the information you need to conduct the necessary oversight.

*Question 4.* **The Committee is concerned with accountability for policy decisions made by VA personnel without the direction of the Secretary, but pursuant to their delegated authority. This is particularly important when the Committee is seeking a better understanding of how or why the Department came to a certain decision. How will you ensure that the Committee receives timely explanations of Department actions that, due to practicality and delegation, didn't necessarily receive your sign off?**

**RESPONSE:** I believe that a good leader will delegate authority but not responsibility; so I would ultimately remain responsible - to veterans, to the President, and to you - for what VA does or fails to do. However, if confirmed, I would effectively work with my Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries to ensure they have clarity on my goals and vision, in order to make decisions in alignment with those objectives. And I will make clear to the Under and Assistant Secretaries - and through them to the VA chain of command - that what we owe one another as well as to the co-equal branch of Congress is transparency around our decision making, a commitment to explain that decision making and an ethos of "no surprises" in how to carry out the responsibilities that are shared with you. If confirmed, I will work to establish a transparent agency at all levels -transparency among us within the Agency and between VA and Congress.

*Question 5.* **Congress has provided VA the authority to use expedited procedures and pay waivers to hire critical employees and suspend or remove employees who don't meet the standards of the Department. If confirmed, how would you approach workforce management at VA, and what principles would you apply to ensure the right employees get hired and the wrong employees are removed?**

**RESPONSE:** I believe that the vast majority of the VA workforce consists of employees who are, both personally and professionally, deeply committed to VA's mission, are proven leaders and innovators in their field, and burn deeply with a

commitment to show up for work every moment of every day to serve veterans. If confirmed, I will work hard to make sure that VA's workforce is first and foremost defined by that hard work - both to acknowledge the efforts of these employees, and to set that as the expectation.

With that said, if there are employees who are not living up to VA's core values, the Department should use the legal authorities provided to ensure they do so. Most importantly, VA needs to use those authorities as Congress intended - by conducting fair, transparent and timely investigations that address the root cause of what went wrong, and ensures that consequences are meaningful, long lasting, and keep us focused on the mission. From a hiring perspective, if confirmed, VA will fully use the authorities provided by Congress to have the workforce necessary to meet Mission at every step and with a team that represents the diversity and diverse strength of America.

*Question 6.* **VHA and the healthcare provided to our Veterans continues to be a top priority of this committee and of the Department. You were White House Chief of Staff during the Phoenix scandal and subsequent passage of the Choice Act. However, there is another piece of VA's mission that is a priority of this Committee and is important to our Veterans, and that is the services that VBA and NCA provides to Veterans and their families. How will you work to elevate the importance of these services and the benefits these two administrations provide?**

**RESPONSE:** VBA and NCA are core missions at VA. The Department must demonstrate excellence in these areas in order to gain the trust of veterans, the President, Congress, and stakeholder organizations. If confirmed, I will focus on all three missions of VA - providing word-class healthcare, timely benefits and economic opportunities, and supporting families through a dignified memorial at the end of life. Working with Congress, I will ensure that each Administration has world class leadership and I will ensure that at all levels of all VA components parts of VA understand and focus on excellence in execution of the mission they have to support veterans and their families.

*Question 7.* **Each administration at the Department provides important services to our Veterans and their families. However, as the years have gone on, we continue to see these services become more soloed in their approach. How, if confirmed, will you work to unite the Department and provide a better centralized customer/client-service focused approach to what the VA provides on a daily basis to the Veteran or their dependent?**

**RESPONSE:** I agree; it is striking the degree to which each Administration jealously - and increasingly - guards its resources and prerogatives from one another. If confirmed, I will work with the leadership team to ensure they understand my expectation that all decisions should be made with the veteran and family at the heart of those decisions and demonstrate how unity of effort across one VA will ensure best outcomes for veterans. That means the Department must strive to be user-friendly to the people using VA

services, and that means breaking down silos and serving veterans as one Department. The Veteran Experience Office at VA has done significant work since it began and building on its initial success and staffing it with world class leadership and talent will be a day one priority for me if confirmed.

*Question 8.* **Veterans sometimes face challenges gaining meaningful employment, and the pandemic has caused Veteran unemployment to spike. How will you leverage departmental resources to improve Veteran employment considering the economic challenges of COVID-19?**

**RESPONSE:** All Americans have suffered during the pandemic-related economic downturn of the past year; veterans have suffered economically too. If confirmed as Secretary, I will build an all of government approach - with the White House, Commerce, Labor, and the Small Business Administration, among others - work through DOL VETS and other programs to help unemployed or underemployed veterans have lives of meaningful employment and opportunity that their skills and experience dictate should be more readily available to them. Success in this important mission will require effectively administering the VA retraining and education programming and demanding high quality outcomes from the same as well as using the power of VA and the broader inter-agency to argue publicly for the manifold strengths that veterans bring to the American economy. Additionally, I will work with my agency leaders to continue to hire as many veterans and veteran family members as possible to fill the tens of thousands of vacancies which exist at VA. The Department could additionally leverage procurement spending to drive economic growth and opportunity for veteran-owned businesses to the maximum extent possible.

*Question 9.* **In your view, what is the Department's role in protecting Veterans with VA-guaranteed home loans who are experiencing economic uncertainty due to COVID-19 from foreclosure**?

**RESPONSE:** The COVID Pandemic has created both a public health crisis and an economic crisis, which has devastated the lives of far too many Americans, including many veterans and their families. Nobody wants for veterans to lose their homes. Recognizing that housing stability is pivotal to positive economic outcomes for veterans, if confirmed, I will review legal authorities surrounding this issue, and work with the members of this Committee to determine how best to help veterans who have suffered financial hardship as a result of the COVID crisis, including those who are recipients of VA home loans.

*Question 10.* **Under current regulations, the VA sends to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) the names of beneficiaries (Veterans, surviving spouses, children, and parents of Veterans) for whom VA has appointed a fiduciary. Once on the NICS, beneficiaries are prohibited from exercising their Second Amendment right to purchase a firearm. Hundreds of thousands of Veterans have been denied their right to purchase or own firearms as a result of this bureaucratic requirement that circumvents due process and puts government employees at the VA, rather than courts of law, in a position to deprive Veterans of their Constitutional rights. If confirmed, how would you protect Veterans' Constitutional rights and ensure that accessing care and benefits at VA will not mean giving up those rights without recourse?**

**RESPONSE**: If confirmed as Secretary, I will implement the law regarding VA's policies, processes, and practices for adjudication of fiduciaries and reporting of fiduciaries to other agencies of the federal government, providing all appropriate due

process to veterans in this system. If required by law to report such adjudications to other agencies, VA will continue to comply with the law.

*Question 11.* **The National Cemetery Administration currently has several cemetery projects underway with a strategic goal of providing 95% of Veterans with reasonably accessible burial options when completed. NCA defines reasonable access as a national or state Veterans' cemetery being located within 75 miles of Veterans' homes. If confirmed, how would you approach Veteran access to burial options, and how would you prioritize cemetery construction among VA's infrastructure needs?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would work with this committee to determine if that definition is appropriate for reasonable access, and work to expand access, acquire land, and prioritize opening new cemeteries in urban and rural areas as needed.

*Question 12.* **Exposure to contaminants or other environmental hazards continues to be a significant health issue for Veterans of all generations, but contemporaneous data is sparse. The benefit determinations process, including presumptive service-connection decision- making, is associated with evidence standards assessed by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine. It is based on defined categories of association between a particular health effect and exposure, which is then provided to VA. Balancing the need for scientific evidence while still providing timely access to quality care poses a significant challenge. VA does not yet have an enduring framework for all cohorts of Veterans to promptly identify toxic exposure events, research associated health outcomes, and employ evidence-based decision-making mechanisms to deliver care and benefits. With regard to evidentiary standards, we have seen how difficult it can be for Veterans and the VA to verify exposures and connect them to health outcomes Veterans are experiencing. What is your philosophy on the level of evidence needed to determine that a health condition is associated with a particular exposure encountered in service? If confirmed, how would you balance the need for scientific evidence with the responsibility to provide timely access to quality care?**

**RESPONSE:** We need to do the right thing by veterans, and that needs to be supported by evidence and science. My philosophy will be to rely on the most comprehensive science and data about exposure to contaminants and other environmental hazards. If confirmed, I would work with the committee on setting up the evidentiary framework that is needed in order for decisions of this nature and to ensure that that framework informs to be a more transparent process. If confirmed, I would review in depth the history of this challenge and endeavor to make decisions that will not require veterans to climb an insurmountable paper mountain to prove their injuries or illnesses are service-connected.

*Question 13.* **In March 2016, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) reported limited or suggestive evidence of positive association between herbicide (Agent Orange) exposure and three diseases: Bladder cancer, Parkinsonism, and hypothyroidism. Although VA recommended adding these diseases to the list of service-connected presumptions for Vietnam Veterans, OMB disagreed and the administration did not add the diseases to the list of presumptives.**

> *Question 13a.* **What role did you, as White House Chief of Staff, and Vice President Biden each have in the administration's deliberation on both VA's and OMB's positions, and in the decision to not add the three diseases to the list despite NASEM's findings?**

*Question 13b.* **What were the key factors considered by the Obama administration on whether or not to add the three diseases to the list of presumptives, and how would your experience with that process influence your approach to adding new presumptive diseases, either for Agent Orangeor another toxic exposure?**

**RESPONSE:** I had no role and was not involved in these discussions at that time, so have no specific knowledge about any deliberations. I agree that these decisions must be based on science, and understand the key role played by NASEM. When questions of this nature come up if I am confirmed to lead VA, I will be as transparent with stakeholders and the Congress as possible.

*Question 14.* **The Veterans Health Administration Homeless Veterans Program Office received increased flexibilities, additional funding, and authorization for program expansion during the 116th Congress to provide services for homeless Veterans and those at-risk for homelessness. If confirmed, how would you safeguard against mismanagement under the increased flexibility while still carrying out the expansion of programs?**

**RESPONSE:** While I obviously was not involved in deliberations to provide the additional flexibility and authorizations last Congress, I feel compelled to thank the Committee and its then Chairman for the decision to do so. I recognize, too, that with the increased flexibility and authority comes a justified demand from Congress for increased oversight and transparency on the exercise of that flexibility and authority. If confirmed, I will honor that demand.

Homelessness among veterans is unacceptable and something that if confirmed, I intend to establish as an agency priority. It is clear that to best serve unhoused veterans, VA needs strong partnerships with other federal agencies and community partners, as well as flexible funding that can meet the unique needs of this population. To ensure VA is doing everything possible to not only serve this population but to be good stewards of the resources committed, if confirmed, I intend to use data and outcomes to track the efficacy of these dollars and am committed to continuous improvement, informed by national experts and most importantly, informed by veterans who are or have experienced homelessness. It's no question that programs like HUD-VASH are held up as national best practices for tackling the homelessness crisis, I intend to maintain VA's position as an innovator and leader in this space, if confirmed.

*Question 15.* **The landmark VA MISSION Act included sweeping reform to non-VA health care and established the Veterans Community Care Program. However, previous VA leadership administered the Veterans Community Care Program in contravention of the letter and spirit of the law. If confirmed, how will you ensure Veterans are at the center of the health care decision-making process and have access to community care as Congress intended? Do you believe VA has authority to curtail Veteran access to community care despite the access requirements in the MISSION Act and what a Veteran and their VA provider determines is best?**

**RESPONSE:** Providing veterans with timely access to high quality health care is absolutely essential. Because of the MISSION Act, VA now has more flexibility to partner with community providers to best serve veterans. It is clear to me that Congressional intent is for veterans to be at the center of their own healthcare decisions. If confirmed, I will work with this Committee to ensure that VA is implementing this important program as Congress intended.

*Question 16.* **Women and minority Veterans are expected to account for 16% and 35% of the general Veteran population by 2045. As these subpopulations grow, VA must adequately account for this changing composition and remove barriers that can lead to disparities—especially within the health care environment. If confirmed, what steps will you take to reduce disparities in health care treatment and outcomes related to race, ethnicity, and gender within VHA?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will make it a top priority to ensure all veterans feel welcome and comfortable in VA facilities, to restore damaged trust, and to identify and eliminate policies and practices that deter veterans from seeking the care they have earned with their service. A central priority in this effort will be to soundly and transparently implement the Deborah Sampson Act, which I intend to do in partnership with this Committee.

*Question 17.* **One of my top priorities continues to be mental health and suicide prevention. If confirmed, what changes would you implement to ensure that VHA provides Veterans the highest quality mental health care and wrap-around suicide prevention services?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, access to mental health resources and proven suicide prevention tools will be top priorities for VA. My first priority will be to push back against the stigma that remains for those who seek access to such care and programming. Relatedly, VA's reach - and thus veteran access - must be expanded through telehealth platforms medicine and virtual care. Leveraging telehealth and other similarly innovative approaches will be key to best serving veterans moving forward. Suicide prevention requires a whole of federal government approach and I will work tirelessly with my colleagues at DOD, CDC, SAHMSA, and other federal agencies to develop and implement an approach to suicide prevention that works.

*Question 18.* **Access to high quality care for rural Veterans has always been a primary focus of mine, but the COVID-19 pandemic has further brought to light the health care quality and access disparities of rural and highly rural Veterans versus Veterans who reside in urban areas. If confirmed, how would you lead the Department to equalize health care access and quality among Veterans in rural areas?**

**RESPONSE:** Veterans deserve access to high quality, convenient care regardless of where they live. Increasing access for rural and highly rural veterans requires at least three steps. First, VA must leverage partnerships with community providers. Success here means doing a much better job than has been done to date to promptly and accurately remunerate care in the community. Second, the Department must build on the progress to date in telehealth and virtual care, which will also require thinking creatively about how to facilitate use of these technologies when access to internet is limited. Key to that will be making full use of the authorities and funding provided in the CARES Act and partnering with FCC to increase access. Lastly, there must be much faster progress made on recruiting and retaining talent to staff existing rural VA facilities. Each of these lines of effort will be priorities for VA if I am confirmed.

*Question 19.* **Inspector Generals are critical to improving VA and ensuring veterans receive the best care and benefits possible. I expect the VA Secretary and every leader in the department to cooperate fully with any**

**IG investigation, but an ongoing IG investigation does not relieve a Secretary from taking timely corrective action or complying with Congressional oversight. How will you ensure that VA leaders at every level help the Inspector General fulfil his statutory duties?**

*Question 19a.* **Often, both the VA and OIG have interest in a particular allegation of wrongdoing. IG investigations, especially those that are criminal in nature often take time to complete. How will you manage to avoid interfering with an IG investigation while ensuring the necessary steps are taken to provide timely corrective action?**

**RESPONSE:** I agree with your view about the importance of Inspectors General and the need to cooperate with Inspectors General. My previous experience working with departments across government makes me acutely aware of the importance of independent Inspectors General. If confirmed, I will ensure that VA cooperates fully with any future OIG investigations.

*Question 20.* **How do you see the role of information technology and the CIO across VA, and how do you see the current Electronic Health Record Modernization Office in relation to that role?**

**RESPONSE:** In my view, if we look at veterans at the center of the decision-making process, the role of information technology and the CIO is to support the customer-facing components across VA to facilitate access for veterans and to improve outcomes for veterans. All decisions about IT should flow from those two objectives. Relatedly, the role of the Office of the Electronic Health Record Modernization Office is also to support VHA as it rolls out the health IT system that will help VA better serve veterans. If confirmed, I will ensure that OERHM prioritizes veteran access and improved veteran outcomes and will insist that it collaboratively work across VHA to ensure the same across VHA.

*Question 21.* **The VA does not currently have a functioning requirements process for planning, budgeting, and execution (PPBE). If confirmed, how would you use data and metrics to drive planning and budgeting, and what role will VA's Digital Transformation Strategy play in your efforts to improve VA's functions?**

**RESPONSE:** It is clear that the Department's budget process has been a point of frustration. If confirmed, I will work to institute a clear process to make sure appropriate resources are being allocated against the Department's priorities and greatest needs. VA's Digital Transformation Strategy should assist in aligning IT capabilities to VA's strategic priorities, while also providing transparency in spending and progress on investments. If confirmed, I will also work closely with VA's Chief Data Officer to utilize data as a strategic asset to better understand and support the veteran experience at VA.

*Question 22.* **VA operates the largest integrated health care system in the country, and although it is a government agency, it strives to achieve many of the same outcomes as large companies that operate health care systems. If confirmed, how would you achieve excellent health outcomes for Veterans while pursuing efficient use of tax dollars?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will invest in VA. I will focus on bringing in clinical and support staff necessary to provide world-class healthcare for veterans, and will use data and metrics around veteran satisfaction and employee engagement to achieve the health outcomes that veterans deserve.

*Question 22a.* **Should the Veterans Health Administration see itself a business, or as something else?**

**RESPONSE:** My experience suggests that the highest performing service organizations see themselves as advocates for and operating on behalf of their customers first. As such, VHA is not a for profit business. VHA should manifest that it is a service organization who puts the veteran patient at the center of the decision-making process. If confirmed, I would work to leverage best practices based on that veteran-first focus from within VHA as well as from private healthcare systems in order for veterans to see the best health outcomes possible.

*Question 23.* **One of the major pillars of the MISSION Act is the Asset and Infrastructure Review Act (AIR). AIR contains an expedited process through which VA's aging infrastructure nationwide can be modernized, realigned, or closed based on myriad factors to ensure Veterans receive modern, high-quality healthcare in a timely manner. What is your view of VA's capital infrastructure?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed as Secretary, I would look forward to better understanding the state of VA's facilities and infrastructure. I will review the VHA market assessments that are underway now, and also work with my staff to develop draft and final criteria for assessment of VHA facilities. If confirmed, I will work with the Committee to make sure the Department is moving out consistent with the intent of Congress as articulated in the VA MISSION Act. To the extent that there are opportunities to modernize, upgrade, improve, or realign facilities to better serve veterans and their families, VA should seize those opportunities.

*Question 23a.* **If confirmed, what will guide your decisions during this process and will you commit to faithfully following the AIR Act's requirements and timelines specified in the law?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will work within the MISSION Act-mandated AIR Commission's recommendations and timelines, to the best of my ability.

*Question 24.* **In any organization accountability for poorly performing employees is essential. Four years ago Congress passed the bipartisan Accountability Act to reduce the length of time it takes to discipline or fire employees who are failing in their job of service to Veterans and/or taxpayers. What is your view of that law and the issue of accountability generally?**

**RESPONSE:** Congress provided VA with the tools and processes to ensure the right employees are in place to meet its mission. VA, in turn, must ensure that it uses those tools fairly, equitably, and in the manner that Congress intended. If confirmed, I am committed to doing that, and to ensuring that investigations undertaken by the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection are fair, transparent and effective, and that those employees who raise issues do not experience retaliation.

*Question 25.* **If confirmed, do you pledge to hold your senior leadership team and all VA employees accountable for their performance on the job?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I will hold myself, and all of those in senior leadership accountable for their performance. Most important, however, I will ensure that accountability reflects true root cause analysis when something goes wrong, and that VA - and senior leaders - avoid a "pointing fingers" culture that substitutes quick fixes or personal blame over fixing processes that fail, so that corrective action is sustainable, long lasting, and in the best interests of serving veterans.

*Question 26.* **VA now has a quarter-of-a-trillion dollar budget. Notwithstanding this budgetary support, we must always be on the lookout for waste, fraud, and abuse. If confirmed, will you commit to reviewing agency programs and offices to ensure they're delivering high quality services to Veterans and taxpayers?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. The size of the VA's budget demands aggressive leadership in order to assure fiscal stewardship. If confirmed, I will review agency programs, and further ensure IG has adequate authorities and resources to identify and investigate waste, fraud, and abuse across the agency.

*Question 27.* **What is your assessment of VA's COVID response to date? Where do you see room for improvement?**

**RESPONSE:** VA, and especially front-line healthcare workers, seem to have done well in treating veterans and responding to this unprecedented challenge. The VA team should take pride in their performance in their effective use of aggressive protocols to protect veteran residents in Community Living Centers. There is always room for improvement, however, potentially in the area of supply chain management.

If confirmed, I will have a particular focus on supporting the President's plan to administer 100 million vaccinations within the first 100 days. If confirmed, I will work with the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Defense, and Department of Homeland Security to ensure that VA is not only receiving the appropriate amount of vaccinations for veterans and employees, but also to offer any VA assets available to support the effort throughout the country.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Denis McDonough, Presumptive Nominee to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**From Ranking Member Jon Tester**

*Question 1.* **What are your top three specific and measurable goals if confirmed as Secretary of Veterans Affairs and how would you achieve them?**

**RESPONSE:** My top three specific goals would be consistent with what you and the President have described as your vision for VA: delivery of world-class health care to America's veterans, as measured by access, quality, and satisfaction; timely and accurate adjudication of benefits claims; and more aggressive efforts by VA and other agencies to increase access to mental health care, reduce stigma associated with that care, and reduce veteran suicide.

*Question 2.* **What is your vision for your leadership team at VA? Have you spoken to the President-elect about on the type of individuals you want on your team?**

**Will you have a role in selecting the team who will help lead the Department?**

**RESPONSE:** My vision for the leadership team is a diverse team of professionals who look like America, are called to serve, who are ready to put veterans and their families at the center of every decision they make and who understand that VA's success demands close partnership with Congress and other stakeholders.

*Question 3.* **If confirmed, how do you intend to delegate responsibilities while ensuring initiatives are executed according to your vision?**

**RESPONSE:** I believe that a good leader will delegate authority but not responsibility; so if confirmed, I ultimately remain responsible - to veterans, to the President, and to you - for what VA does or fails to do. However, if confirmed, I would effectively work with my Under Secretaries and Assistant Secretaries to ensure they have clarity on my goals and vision, in order to make decisions in alignment with those objectives. And I will make clear to the Under and Assistant Secretaries - and through them to the VA chain of command - that what the team owes one another as well as our colleagues in the co-equal branch of Congress is transparency around our decision making, a commitment to explain that decision making and an ethos of "no surprises" in how the Department carries out the responsibilities that is shared with you. If confirmed, I will work to establish a transparent agency at all levels - transparency among us within the Agency and between us and you here in Congress.

*Question 4.* **How do you anticipate building and maintaining a positive relationship with the Department's Inspector General? What have been your dealings with Inspectors General previously? Did those experiences color your view of the work of the Office of Inspector General?**

**RESPONSE:** Inspectors General are key to a successful VA and cooperation with Inspectors General is critical. My previous experience working with departments across government makes me acutely aware of the importance of independent Inspectors General. If confirmed, I will ensure that VA cooperates fully with any future OIG investigations.

*Question 5.* **Since the President-elect announced his intent to nominate you as Secretary of veterans Affairs, have you met with veterans and Military Service Organizations, and other stakeholders? Please describe those encounters. Please give specific examples of how you anticipate involving VSOs, MSOs, and other stakeholders in informing decisions you make on behalf of the Department.**

**RESPONSE:** VSOs are vital partners and advocates here in Congress and at every level of government across the country. They speak on behalf of their members, whom VA is privileged to serve. Over the past several weeks, I have met in group settings with leaders of the Big Six VSOs with a broad array of veteran-serving nonprofits and MSOs that serve and support veterans, and with veterans groups on specific issue areas - including the tragedy of military sexual trauma. I have also had individual conversations with leaders and policy experts from veteran service and veterans serving organizations.

Their diverse perspectives have been enlightening and valuable. If confirmed, I will ensure VSOs are true partners in VA's efforts to care for veterans. I will establish regularlistening sessions with

VSOs to hear directly about the issues that are most important to their members, and to seek feedback on how VA can do better. I will also seek their inputas different policy outcomes are considered to ensure I benefit from the wisdom of their counsel.

*Question 6.* **If confirmed, how will be you work with employee unions? Do you believe they play an important role in bridging communication between VA employees and management? What is your experience in dealing with unions or employees who have collective bargaining rights?**

**RESPONSE:** I see partnership with the workforce serving veterans and their unions as critical to the success of the Department's mission. In introductory conversations with leadership of VA's employee unions, I conveyed this message directly. I am committed to fair, equitable collective bargaining rights and believe that when those rights are recognized and celebrated it results in an engaged workforce and ultimately better outcomes for veterans. If confirmed, these views would inform how I engage with unions.

*Question 7.* **What is your view of the role of whistleblowers? If confirmed, will you encourage whistleblowing by the Department's employees? Please explain. How do you plan to deal with incidents of senior leader misconduct to include whistleblower retaliation?**

**RESPONSE:** I believe that whistleblowers are critical to the success of any large organization, particularly the size and with the mandate of VA. As such, whistleblowers must be guaranteed protections that the concerns they raise will be treated seriously and that their efforts to highlight malfeasance do not result in retaliation against them.

If confirmed, my intention is to develop a culture in VA where employees share their concerns openly and with confidence that they are a part of a learning organization that is constantly improving. Protecting individuals who come forward with concerns is essential to creating such an environment. If confirmed, I am committed to making sure that the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP) has the staff and resources to ensure that investigations undertaken are fair, transparent and effective, and that the mandates are used fairly across the VA workforce.

*Question 8.* **If confirmed, will you commit to making data public, including the Monday morning workload report, wait times by medical facility and wait times for community care?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes, I commit to making this data public and will push VA to become more transparent.

*Question 9.* **The Government Accountability Office recently found that 22 percent of VA employees experienced workplace sexual harassment in 2014-2016, and the Department's policies to prevent and address harassment are inconsistent and incomplete. We need clear messaging from the top that harassment and assault will not be tolerated at VA. Will you commit to expediting the resolution of the seven open recommendations from the July 2020 GAO report and making VA a harassment-free workplace? How will you approach reviewing and updating sexual harassment and assault policies at VA medical centers to ensure the safety of veterans, staff, contractors, and other visitors?**

**RESPONSE:** I am aware of the GAO report you cite and I am appalled by its findings. All VA staff must feel safe, in a workplace free of harassment and discrimination, in order to focus on their mission. All VA patients and their families, other visitors and advocates must also feel safe. Such a change must start at the top and if confirmed, I will set the clear expectation that discrimination, harassment and assault will not be tolerated at any level, at any facility, in VA.

*Question 10.* **When implementing laws, will you commit to working with Congress to ensure intent is carried out appropriately? Describe your vision for how you will execute that in practice and how you plan to work with Congress, generally.**

**RESPONSE:** As a former Senate staffer, I know first-hand the important role the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee plays in conducting oversight of VA. If confirmed, I believe that part of my duty as Secretary includes ensuring that legislative intent is fulfilled through our execution of VA's statutory mandates. The Department can't succeed if there is not sufficient communication and collaboration with the Committee. If confirmed, I will work to earn your trust and restore trust between VA and this Committee by establishing regular lines of communication and ensuring that you have the information you need to conduct the necessary oversight.

*Question 11.* **VA should be the flagship hospital system in the United States. As Secretary, what would you do differently than previous VA leadership to get it there? What specific actions would you take to make VA an employer of choice in the medical community?**

**RESPONSE:** Workforce empowerment is a priority for the President, and for me as well. If confirmed, I will work with VA's labor unions, its senior executives, and its rank and file personnel, to make VA a values-based, purpose-driven, high-reliability organization that is a model for the rest of government and the private sector. That includes using data and feedback - both from veterans as well as those who represent them - to find areas to improve, cut red tape, and eliminate barriers to access for veterans.

*Question 12.* **How will you consider the needs of minority Veterans – including women Veterans, racial/ethnic minority Veterans, LGBTQ Veterans, Native American Veterans, and others– and prioritize the reduction of disparities when allocating VA resources?**

**RESPONSE:** Meeting the standard of excellent care and provision of benefits that the President, Congress and the country expect of VA is not possible without providing such excellence for every veteran. If confirmed, I will take proactive efforts to reduce disparities, and make clear that these initiatives should be prioritized across the Department. I will solicit input from veterans and their representatives to learn how best the Department can serve them, and will push for adequate funding for initiatives designed to support minority veterans. This will include working to swiftly implement the many measures of the Deborah Sampson Act, recently signed into law, that aim to improve care and services for women veterans.

*Question 13.* **My bill adding three new conditions to VA's list of conditions presumed to be caused by Agent Orange exposure was recently signed into law. This law was**

**necessary because the current administration believes scientific evidence provided by the National Academies was insufficient and needlessly delayed the care and benefits Vietnam veterans earned through service to this nation. While I understand these benefits will not be delivered overnight, veterans will be better served knowing there is a plan in place to provide their benefits. Will you commit to providing this committee, within your first 100 days, a detailed plan and timeline of how you will implement this new law? Will you commit to using scientific evidence not as a roadblock, but as a tool to ensure that we are aggressively prioritizing careand benefits the nations veterans were exposed to toxic substances? How do you intend to approach future presumptions related to toxic exposure, not only for Agent Orange, but for more recent issues such as burn pits, and exposures related to service at K2?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I commit to providing a timeline for implementation of these presumptive diseases. We need to do the right thing by veterans, and that needs to be supported by evidence and science. My philosophy will be to rely on the most comprehensive science and data about exposure to contaminants and other environmental hazards. If confirmed, I would work with the committee on setting up the evidentiary framework that is needed in order for decisions of this nature and to ensure that that framework informs to be a more transparent process. If confirmed, I would review in depth the history of this challenge and endeavor to make decisions that will not require Veterans to climb an insurmountable paper mountain to prove their injuries or illnesses are service-connected.

*Question 14.* **As you know, VA is the early phases of deploying a new electronic health record (EHR) system. This is a complex multi-year, multi-billion initiative. However, there are no publicly-facing metrics Congress, Veterans, and the American taxpayers can use to evaluate the success of the EHR modernization initiative. As Secretary, what metrics would you use to evaluate the progress of the EHRM initiative? If you find the program is not achieving established targets, what steps would you take to direct changes so that this program delivers tangible value for Veterans, VA health care providers and taxpayers?**

**RESPONSE:** I am committed to working with Congress, both collaboratively and transparently if confirmed. This is a major initiative, to which you have dedicated significant resources, and you should have access to metrics, milestones, and implementation timeline. If confirmed, I would look to data from the initial rollout and feedback from clinicians and veterans to inform the way forward. If the initial results are not what we want, if confirmed, I would assemble an advisory team of external and internal health IT experts with experience in this arena to ensure VA uses industry best practices to further avoid potential pitfalls and develop an effective change management strategy to ensure the system is adopted properly across the VA to best serve veterans.

*Question 15.* **Nearly 18,000 HUD-VASH are vouchers are available and unassigned nationwide as of November 30, 2020. How would you address this long-term issue so that Veterans can make use of this important transitional benefit as Congress intended?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed I will make veteran homelessness one of my key agency priorities and would look forward to working with you and with the Department of

Housing and Urban Development, to reimagine the HUD VASH program, including staffing levels within the agency, to ensure it's meeting the needs of veterans. VA cannot do this alone, so I am committed to working with other federal agencies, with state and local authorities and with community partners to help serve and rehouse veterans experiencing homelessness.

*Question 16.* **After a year delay, VA recently published the final rule for the expanded Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers that included requirements that a veteran be at least 70 percent service-connected and need assistance with an activity of daily living each time it is performed in order to be considered eligible for the Program. Would you commit to reviewing the VA MISSION Act, the regulations that followed, and comments from members of Congress and stakeholders regarding these requirements and report to Congress within 100 days of confirmation on whether you agree they are appropriate and what steps you would take to revamp eligibility if necessary?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I agree to review the statutory language, regulations, and important input and work with the Committee on the way forward. Family caregivers are the backbone of the care that VA provides to veterans, and VA must support families as they support veterans.

*Question 17.* **The VA MISSION Act allows VA to extend eligibility for the expanded Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers in waves to prevent overwhelming the Program with new participants that VA cannot support appropriately. If confirmed, within your first 100 days in office, will you review the resource and personnel requirements of bringing the next wave of participants into the expanded Program sooner in order to determine whether VA can support an expedited expansion to the next wave of participants? If you determine VA cannot support an expedited expansion with current resources and personnel, will you provide information on what the Department would need in order to execute the expansion more quickly?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I will review the timeline for expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to determine if the timeline can be expedited. I will share my findings with the Committee and work with you on next steps.

*Question 18.* **The current Administration recently made the decision to send nearly all of VA's disability exams for compensation and pension to the private sector. If confirmed, will you provide the Committee with a cost/benefit analysis of this decision within your first100 days in office and determine whether it is in the best interest of Veterans and taxpayers to have this work done primarily by the private sector?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I will look into the approach taken by VBA during the past administration, including its decision to outsource all claims examinations, and I will report back to this committee on what I find.

*Question 19.* **VA recently eliminated the 48-hour VSO representative review period for not-yet final decisions on Veterans' claims. The practice of allowing a technical**

**review by the VSO representative dates back decades and allows for a second set of eyes on a decision to ensure there are no technical errors before final promulgation. Within your first 30 days in office, if confirmed, will you commit to meeting with representatives of VSOs and appropriate stakeholder organizations to listen to their concerns regarding the removal of this important quality check? Will you then commit to reporting to the Committee within30 days of your meeting with your view of whether Veterans would be better served with reinstatement of the review period?**

**RESPONSE:**VSO representatives play an essential role in supporting veterans as they file claims with VA, and in meeting with VSOs since my nomination, I have heard consistently how difficult this change has been for veterans and have heard that the change contributes to prolonged - and unnecessary - delays. If confirmed, I will work with VA's counsel and consult with VSOs and Congress to ensure we provide appropriate transparency and review opportunities in the claims process.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Denis McDonough, Presumptive Nominee to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**From Senator Blumenthal**

*Question 1.* **What will be your top five priorities as VA Secretary?**

**RESPONSE:** My overarching priorities would be consistent with what the President has described as his vision for VA: delivery of world-class health care to America's Veterans, as measured by access, quality, and satisfaction; timely and accurate adjudication of benefits claims; and more aggressive efforts by VA and other agencies to increase access to mental health care, reduce stigma associated with that care, and reduce Veteran suicide.

If confirmed, I will work to (1) achieve the right balance between care provided in the community and care provided through VA to ensure that veterans have timely access to the highest, world-quality, healthcare services. I will (2) provide women veterans with access to the services they need, in a welcoming environment. I will (3) work diligently to implement a whole of government approach to fight suicide, including (4) timely access to mental health services at VA and in the community. I will (5) increase supportto families, caregivers, and survivors as partners in caring for veterans to ensure they receive the services they need for themselves and for the veterans they love.

*Question 2.* **What do you believe will be the biggest challenges VA faces in the next four years?**

**RESPONSE:** Like the entire country, VA is facing multiple challenges at the same time. First and foremost, VA must address the pandemic and its associated challenges, including treating veterans who are ill with the most advanced, evidence-based, treatments; robust testing protocols for veterans and employees; and vaccine distributionfor veterans and employees. In addition, secondary effects of the pandemic including deferred healthcare and a growing claims backlog because of deferred compensation andpension physical exams must be met head on. Of equal

importance to me is to make every veteran feel welcome at all VA facilities. If confirmed, I will work diligently to end sexual harassment of veterans and staff, to include ending the culture of impunity reflected in recent IG reports. Part of creating a welcoming environment is to restore trust with veterans and their families, with key stakeholders, and with you and each member of the committee through increased transparency in decision making and regularcommunication.

*Question 3.* **How has your previous experience as White House Chief of Staff prepared you to remedy the leadership gaps that have impacted public trust in the VA?**

**RESPONSE:** For the last twenty years I have worked in leadership positions in the federal government on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. In those positions I have demonstrated an ability to work with and manage large and diverse teams and have demonstrated a particular ability to work with not just like minded political appointees but also with career officials in national security agencies on complex and controversial policies and the implementation of those decisions. My experience on Capitol Hill and proven ability to work with Republicans and Democrats is a particularly important part of my professional experience that has helped prepare me for this position. I recognize - and celebrate - the Constitutional responsibilities and prerogatives that inform Congressional interests and activity on Veterans Affairs. Additionally, it is well established that the SVAC - and its counterpart HVAC - have a history of working closely across party lines to enact new legislation and conduct oversight of the Department, so successfully fulfilling the Department's solemn obligation to veterans requires partnership with Congress. I understand Congress, have partnered with Congress in the past, and will do so again if confirmed for this position.

*Question 4.* **What would you do ensure that Congressional oversight requests receive thorough responses from VA within a reasonable timeframe**?

**RESPONSE:** As a former Senate staffer, I know first-hand the important role this committee plays in conducting oversight of the VA. This Committee can't perform its duty to the American people if VA doesn't provide timely and complete information, and the Department can't succeed if there is not sufficient communication and collaboration with the Committee. If confirmed, I will work to restore trust between VA and this Committee by establishing regular lines of communication and ensuring that you have the information you need to conduct the necessary oversight.

*Question 5.* **Do you believe that VA is doing enough to protect Veterans' personal data and how would you work to improve VA systems in light of the recent hacks of federal agencies?**

**RESPONSE:** This is an issue that plagues all federal agencies and VA is not alone. Protecting personal data housed at VA is a critical task. If confirmed, I will work with the Office of Information Technology leadership to ensure the Department is doing everything possible to protect Veterans' data assets and most importantly, their trust.

*Question 6.* **How do you plan to address the significant challenges VA faces in modernizing its aging infrastructure?**

**RESPONSE:** I recognize that the VA infrastructure is aging and in need of repairs. In order to provide veterans with high quality healthcare, and to ensure that VA remains the

provider of choice to veterans, the facilities must reflect the importance of the mission. If confirmed, I will work to develop a better understanding of the process by which the Department makes decisions about facilities and work in collaboration with Congress on ways to improve this process.

*Question 7.* **What would you do reduce the backlog of maintenance projects and advance plans for building badly-needed new facilities?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would look forward to the challenges to addressing this backlog and would work closely with Congress to improve the Department's performance in this area.

*Question 8.* **What do you see as your role in addressing the ongoing mental health crisis among our nation's Veterans, particularly in light of the addedstrain of COVID-19 and related necessary precautions?**

**RESPONSE:** VA must ensure that veterans have access to the highest quality mental health care possible. If confirmed, I would leverage technology, where available and appropriate, to enhance the Department's reach. The Department must also conduct outreach, often working with VSOs and other organizations, to ensure veterans are aware of the opportunities they have to seek care.

*Question 9.* **How do you plan to manage the distribution and administration of the COVID-19 vaccine amongst our Veterans, who often represent members of our most vulnerable demographic over the age of 75**?

**RESPONSE:** Distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to veterans and employees will be among the most important initial decisions I would make, if confirmed. The existing distribution system must be leveraged to ensure that adequate supply is delivered wherever veterans are-- including highly rural veterans. VA must also work closely with the CDC, and advocate that prioritization favors older and medically vulnerable veterans.

*Question 9a.* **How would you ensure that racial and ethnic minority Veterans have equitable access to approved COVID-19vaccines?**

**RESPONSE:** This is a very important priority, as minority populations have been hit hard by this pandemic. If confirmed, it will be important to make sure that vaccines are sufficiently available at facilities that serve veterans of color- and if there are gaps, vaccines must be available where people are with mobile delivery options. Second, data should be collected on how well the Department is reaching people of color with vaccine deliveries. If confirmed, I will ensure that VA is an active voice in the federal response to the COVID Pandemic.

**Pre Hearing Questions for the Record**
**From Senator Sinema**

*Question 1.* **Please briefly describe what experience you have either directly managing or overseeing the core management functions of an organizations (human capital, acquisitions, information technology, and financial management).**

**RESPONSE:** For the last twenty years I have worked in leadership positions in the federal government on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. In those positions I have demonstrated an ability to work with and manage large and diverse teams and have demonstrated a particular ability to work with not just like minded political appointees but also with career officials in national security agencies on complex and controversial policies and the implementation of those decisions.

Specifically, I have overseen core management functions across the Federal government, including during periods of significant process changes and challenges. This includes implementation of policy changes around "Don't Ask, Don't Tell", involving organizational culture change, setting up the US Digital Service Team across the government, leading major IT and hiring initiatives when serving in the White House, and overseeing execution of plans related to ethics, openness and transparency of operations also at the White House. I have an ability to lead large organizations and have a proven history of collaborating across party lines to effect change.

*Question 2.* **If confirmed, you will be one of only two VA Secretaries in history serving without military experience. What steps will you take to build trust in your efforts and integrity from Veterans and Veteran stakeholder groups?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will work to earn the trust of veterans and veteran stakeholder groups by being transparent, consultative and collaborative, and by centering the veteran experience in each policy and leadership decision I make. I am not asking for the benefit of the doubt, but plan to earn trust by demonstrating success in VA's core mission. Their partnership - and yours - will be critical in that effort.

Question 3. **What do anticipate being the greatest challenges you would face as the VA Secretary? If confirmed, how would you prepare for these challenges?**

**RESPONSE:** Among many major challenges at VA, the challenges associated with the pandemic are the most pressing. The Department must immediately address the impacts of the pandemic on veterans -by providing advanced, evidence-based care for those who are ill, and access to tests and vaccines to prevent infection; and on the workforce - by providing appropriate PPE, access to vaccinations, and further support through filling vacancies.

And the pandemic has already had significant impact on the VA mission and services to veterans, and these impacts must be addressed. Among those impacts are as many as 13 million delayed health care appointments, a claims backlog of at least 208,000 due to deferred compensation & pension exams, and family members being forced to wait to memorialize their veterans.

If confirmed, I will work with Congress to address the pandemic in the veteran population, as well as its impacts on other VA services.

*Question 4.* **If confirmed, what will be the immediate highest priority issues at VA that you expect to address and how will you go about addressing them?**

**RESPONSE:** Like the entire country, VA is facing multiple challenges at the same time .First and foremost, VA must continue to address the pandemic and its associated challenges, including treating veterans who are ill with the most advanced, evidence-based, treatments; robust testing protocols for veterans and employees; and vaccine distribution for veterans and employees. In addition, secondary effects of the pandemic including deferred healthcare and a growing claims backlog because of deferred compensation and pension physical exams must be met head on.

Of equal importance to me is to make every veteran feel welcome at all VA facilities. If confirmed, I will work diligently to end sexual harassment of veterans and staff, to include ending the culture of impunity reflected in recent IG reports. Part of creating a welcoming environment is to restore trust with veterans and their families, with key stakeholders, and with you and each member of the committee through increased transparency in decision making and regular communication.

*Question 5.* **What longer-term goals would you like to achieve if confirmed as VA Secretary?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will work to achieve the right balance between care provided in the community and care provided through VA to ensure that veterans have timely access to the highest quality healthcare services. I will provide women veterans with access to the services they need, in a welcoming environment. I will work diligently to implement a whole of government approach to fight sucide, including timely access to mental health services at VA and in the community. I will increase support to families, caregivers, and survivors as partners in caring for veterans to ensure they receive the services they need for themselves and for the veterans they love.

*Question 6.* **For rural communities, access to care can be a challenge. Initiatives like the ATLAS project can be a great asset for these communities. What goals do you hope to achieve specific to expanding access to care in rural communities?**

**RESPONSE:** Veterans deserve access to high quality, convenient care regardless of where they live. Increasing access for rural and highly rural veterans requires at least three steps .First, VA must leverage partnerships with community providers. Success heremeans doing a much better job than has been done to date to promptly and accurately

remunerate care in the community. Second, the Department has to build on the progress to date in telehealth and virtual care, which will also require thinking creatively about how to facilitate use of these technologies when access to internet service is limited. Key to that will be making full use of the authorities and funding provided in the CARES Act and partnering with FCC to increase access. Lastly, there must be much faster progress made on recruiting and retaining talent to staff existing rural VA facilities. Each of these lines of effort will be priorities for VA if I am confirmed.

*Question 7.* If confirmed, what methods would you take to ensure timely and effective communications with Congress? More generally, what kind of relationship would you envision between your office and Congress, especially this committee?

**RESPONSE:** I understand that information from VA is necessary to support this Committee in its constitutional duty to perform oversight of the Department. In order for that to happen, VA must provide timely, complete, and accurate information. If confirmed, while that will be my goal, there may be occasions when you are provided incomplete initial information in an effort to ensure you have a timely response, and then a more full response once all the facts are available. If confirmed, I will work to restore trust between VA and this Committee by establishing regular lines of communication with all levels of the Department.

*Question 8.* If confirmed, you will be leading VA at a critical time—addressing the needs of Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic. How will you go about supporting the VA workforce and the Veterans that VA served during this pandemic? What steps will you take to implement an organized national strategy to support Veterans experiencing homelessness ,including COVID testing and vaccinations? What steps will you take to support Tribal Veterans to ensure they have access to COVID testing, care and vaccinations?

**RESPONSE:** Handling the pandemic on behalf of veterans will be among my first priorities, if confirmed. That means ensuring VA staff has access to PPE and safety protocols, quickly hiring new staff as needed to meet veteran care demand, and leveraging telehealth and other innovative care models to support continued access to treatment. All veterans, including homeless veterans, should have access to testing and care, and if confirmed, I will explore every available option to do so.

If confirmed, I would leverage the Department's partnerships with IHS and other federal agencies to ensure Tribal veterans have access to testing, care, and vaccinations.

*Question 9.* The Veterans community has expressed concern that survivors of Veterans who die from COVID may not be granted their proper benefits if the death certificate only identifies COVID-19 as the cause of death without considering the impact of other service- connected illnesses. What steps will you take to address these concerns? How will you work with Congress to ensure these concerns are addressed? Will you consider requiring a second medical opinion in these instances to ensure survivors receive properadjudication of their claim.

**RESPONSE:** I understand that most people who pass away after contracting COVID-19 do so because of complications that result from underlying conditions that increase risk. Veterans are often in the VA system because they have service-connected conditions, and therefore, their families deserve these benefits commensurately. I have heard that this may be a significant issue, and I pledge to look into it swiftly if confirmed to ensure that benefits decisions are taking into account this broader concern.

*Question 10.* If confirmed, how do you intend to ensure that all of the VA's Administrations, and particularly the Veterans Health and Benefits Administrations, are working together in a coordinated manner to support Veterans and provide the health care and benefits they have earned?

**RESPONSE:** It is also my impression that each Administration jealously - and increasingly - guards its resources and prerogatives from one another. In fact, it is striking the degree to which they do so from what I have been able to witness. If confirmed, I will work with the leadership team to ensure they understand my expectation that all decisions be made with the veteran and family at the heart of those decisions and demonstrate how unity of effort across one VA will ensure best outcomes for veterans. That means the Department must strive to be user-friendly to the people using our services, and that means breaking down silos and serving veterans as one Department. The Veteran Experience Office at VA has done significant work since it began and building on its initial success and staffing it with world class leadership and talent will be a day one priority for me. If confirmed, I will continue the important work of VEO and expand customer experience efforts into all aspects of the Department.

*Question 11.* Information Technology modernization has been and continues to be a central focus for the VA. In your career, what experience have you had working withChief Information Officers and IT experts to oversee IT modernization efforts?

**RESPONSE:** As White House Chief of Staff, I worked closely with Information Technology leaders across the federal government to modernize our systems to keep pace with the rest of industry. As an example, the US Digital Service was launched during my time as Chief of Staff, whose goal is to use design and technology to deliver better services to the American people. US Digital Services transforms critical, public-facing services, rethinks how the Government buys digital services, and brings in top technical talent into civic service. This type of innovative and transformative approach is necessary at VA as well.

*Question 11a.*What do you believe to be VA's top IT modernization priorities and how will support these priorities if confirmed?

**RESPONSE:** VA has three ongoing large-scale modernization efforts, including electronic health record modernization, supply chain modernization, and financial business management transformation. If confirmed, I will take a holistic approach to these projects because of the interdependencies. It is critical that an enterprise

integrated master schedule be used to manage these efforts, along with being transparent with Congress, Veterans, and the general public about progress with these projects to ensure VA is a good steward of taxpayer dollars and best serves veterans in the process.

*Question 11b.* As opportunities for automation in the workforce increases, what is your view concerning workforce automation and what place to you feel automation can play in efforts to modernize VA and improve efficiencies?

**RESPONSE:** As a federal employer with a large percentage of veteran employees, VA must carefully consider decisions around automation. However,automation can play a critical role in helping to accelerate simpler tasks to free up VA employee time to focus on more complex tasks. If confirmed, I would support utilizing modern technologies to work smarter and faster to best serve the Department's customers.

*Question 11c.* As cybersecurity threats continue to increase across the United States, what steps will you take to ensure VA is equipped to protect against cyber-attacks?

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will work with my colleagues across agencies and national security experts to prevent foreign adversaries from disrupting our systems and impacting veteran data. As Deputy National Security Advisor, I worked to tackle cybersecurity threats and have extensive experience working with stakeholders within agencies and across government to design systems and processes to prevent them in the first place.

*Question 12.* The VA continues to have a long list of major and minor construction projects that need to be addressed. How will you work with Congress to address these infrastructure needs?

**RESPONSE:** I believe we must invest in VA to maintain it as a provider of choice for veterans seeking care. I understand the importance of, and am committed to being a good steward of federal resources and taxpayer dollars. I also recognize that VA infrastructure is aging and in need of repairs. If confirmed, I would look forward to working closely with Congress on this important issue.

*Question 13.* GAO continues to include strategic human capital management as a high-risk area across the Federal Government. The VA continues to work to attract and retainstaff to support its mission.

*Question 13a.* What do you believe is the biggest impediment to addressing strategic human capital at the VA?

**RESPONSE:** Even as VA is are fortunate to have some of the world's most innovative clinicians and a massively dedicated workforce, VA and VHA continue to face challenges in staffing, particularly in positions that are hard to fill either because positions require clinical or technical expertise that are not easily found, or because of location. As noted by the GAO, the Federal staffing system

has long presented structural challenges in recruiting, hiring and paying, particularly in these more technical positions. I am committed to ensuring that VA will fully use the authorities provided by Congress to ensure that the Department has the workforce necessary to meet its mission at every step.

*Question 13b.* What are some steps you would take to address challenges with hiring and retaining staff at the VA, particularly in more remote regions where recruiting can be more challenging?

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would work to ensure that the Department's recruitment and hiring efforts are "right sized" and focused on the Mission. There must also be an effective and appropriate utilization of the various tools within the federal system to incentivize and compensate employees. Finally, VA must remain focused on employee engagement and work to communicate that service to the nation's veterans through employment with VA can lead to a rewarding and meaningful career.

*Question 13c.*The VA workforce has been under great demand during the last year as they worked to support the needs of Veterans and their families during a pandemic. What steps do you need to take to earn the trust of the workforce and support them through what has been a very challenging time in our recent history?

**RESPONSE:** The VA employees on the front lines continue to provide excellent care to veterans. It is the job of senior leaders to support the workforce as they continue to deliver the mission on a daily basis, especially in these challenging times. If confirmed, I would be relentless in ensuring that the workforce has the PPE and other equipment necessary to do their jobs safely, including available vaccines. VA leadership must communicate and acknowledge the service that the workforce has performed for our nation during this challenging time.

*Question 14.* Protecting whistleblowers from retaliation is of utmost importance. Please describe your experience working with whistleblowers, if any. During your career in public service, how have you addressed whistleblower complaints and enforced policies preventing whistleblowers from retaliation, to the degree your role required you to do so? How do you plan to oversee the VA's Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protections and what steps will you take to ensure that it is fulfilling the purpose Congress intended?

**RESPONSE:** In my career, I have developed the culture in organizations I have led where employees share their concerns openly and with confidence that they are a part of a learning organization that is constantly improving. If confirmed, I would develop that same culture at VA. Protecting individuals who come forward with concerns is essential to creating such an environment. If confirmed, I am committed to making sure that the Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection (OAWP) has the staff and resources to ensure that investigations undertaken are fair, transparent and effective, and that the mandates are used fairly across the VA workforce.

*Question 15.* The Veterans Benefits Administration is increasingly relying on contracted services to conduct compensation and pension exams. Members of this committee have expressed concern about VA's intention to fully utilize private contractors without evidence that this is the best decision for Veterans. What steps will you take to review this decision to ensure it is the right one for Veterans? Will you commit to working with Congress, answering outstanding questions on this issue and providing complete transparency moving forward as you consider this issue?

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will look into the approach taken by VBA on this issue, and I will report back to this committee on what I find. The decision must be evidence-based on what is best for veterans.

*Question 16.* In October, the VA implemented the expansion of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers (PCAFC) as required under the VA MISSION Act. What steps will you take to review the steps taken to date to implement this expansion and ongoing to plans to further expand the program? Will you commit to examining opportunities to ease the burden of enrollment from Veterans and their
caregivers, including the possibility of auto-enrollment options for eligible Veterans and their caregivers?

**RESPONSE:** Family caregivers are a critical component of the care that VA provides to veterans. If confirmed, I commit to reviewing the implementation of the expansion of the Caregivers Program, with an eye to easing the burden of enrollment. I will report back to this committee on my findings, and would intend to work together on further implementation and adjustments necessary, including the possibility of auto-enrollment.

*Question 17.* The Daniel Somers Veterans Network of Support Act was signed into law in the 116$^{th}$ Congress. This legislation requires the VA to create a pilot program for transitioning servicemembers, allowing them to identify up to 10 individuals who would receive information from the VA regarding programs and services available to the Veteran. A similar program is also being set up through the Department of Defense for newly enlisted servicemembers. Will you work with my office to provide regular updates to Congress on the implementation of the program, any challenges that are identified during implementation and steps to overcome them? How will you provide fulltransparency regarding the execution of this program, including ensuring VA and DOD meets the intent of Congress? Given that DOD is working on a similar program, what steps can the VA take to successfully coordinate with the DOD on this topic?

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will provide updates on implementation to the Committee, identifying any challenges that have been encountered. Additionally, I will work in partnership with the Committee so that the law is implemented in accordance with Congressional intent. I have spoken with Secretary-designate Austin, and will continue to do so if confirmed, to ensure close coordination with DoD on the issues of suicide prevention and mental health, as well as on the full array of issues where veterans need both agencies to work together.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Denis McDonough, Presumptive Nominee to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**From Senator Sherrod Brown**

*Question 1.* **Mr. McDonough, how would you rebuild VA's workforce- at VHA and VBA to ensure Veterans received access to timely care and have their claims and appeals processed quickly?**

**RESPONSE:** Delivering benefits to the veterans who have earned them in a timely manner is a sacred obligation. Workforce empowerment is a priority for the President and for me. If confirmed, I would utilize all available hiring authorities to fully staff the Department, recruit talent in key regions and specialties, and work with VA's labor unions to enhance the Department's retention of high performing employees. Leadership and front line employees must work in partnership in order to succeed in the Department's mission.

*Question 2.* **One of the biggest criticism of current VA leadership is that during MISSION Act implementation, there was limited engagement and consultation with VSOs regarding the Community Care Network and Caregivers expansion implementation. If confirmed, will you commit to making sure VSOs, Veterans, Congress and VA employees will be consulted in a meaningful way when implementing laws and establishing new policies?**

**RESPONSE:** VA can only be successful in fulfilling its mission by engaging with key stakeholders, VSOs, veterans, Congress and VA employees. Refusing or missing an opportunity to engage and consult with Veterans Service Organizations and Veteran Serving Organizations is foolhardy. If confirmed, I will partner on key issues like these, both to seek input and perspectives on implementation decisions, as well as to transparently update on progress.

*Question 3.* **Do you think VA has an obligation to provide medical care and disability compensation for Veterans who have been exposed to toxic chemicals while serving our country?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. I believe we must do right by veterans. Under the laws established by this Congress, VA has an obligation to those who are injured or made ill by toxic chemicals while serving our country, whether at home or abroad. If confirmed, I will work to ensure veterans who have been exposed to toxic chemicals during their service have access to the care and benefits they have earned.

*Question 4.* **What is your position on the NAM's recommendation that Agent Orange presumptive conditions include hypertension?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will review in depth the history of this situation, including the scientific evidence considered by NAM. I will be transparent about my findings with Congress and hope to partner on the way forward. I expect to make decisions that will not require veterans to climb an insurmountable paper mountain to prove their injuries or illnesses are service-connected.

*Question 5.* **Each new generation of servicemembers confront issues of exposure to toxic and hazardous materials during service. Will you commit to addressing the full scope of health issues faced by Veterans and their families as the result of exposure to things like Agent Orange, burn pits, or nuclear material?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I commit to working with the Committee to find the right way for the Department to address the illnesses and injuries associated with exposures during service.

*Question 6.* **Do you think VA has the authorities it needs to quickly onboard medical professionals and human resource personnel?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will review all of VA's current hiring authorities, including those authorities that have been put in place during the COVID pandemic to quickly on-board essential personnel. If I identify additional authorities that would assist VA in providing world-class healthcare to veterans, I will work with the Committee to identify ways to put those authorities into place. In order to meet its mission, VA must embrace the rich diversity of America and its veterans, and fully leveraging the talent and passion of all who work there. In order to do that, VA must, at a minimum, provide a safe, inclusive, equitable environment for its workforce and the veterans they serve.

*Question 7.* **Do you have a plan to ensure that every medical facility is staffed fully with medical, administrative, and support staff so that Veterans can receive timely care within VA?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will direct VA to fully use the authorities provided by Congress to ensure that the Department has the workforce necessary to meet VA's mission at every step. If additional authorities are needed, I will work with Congress to obtain those authorities.

*Question 8.* **As Secretary, will you ensure that all stakeholders- VA front line employees, VSOs, Congress, and VA unions- are all part of the policy making process at VA?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. VA cannot fully meet its Mission without transparency and engagement with all of its stakeholders. If confirmed, VA at all levels will undertake meaningful, consistent engagement with VSOs, its employees, unions and Congress to ensure that their experience, feedback and perspective is considered at every level as the Department executes the mission to serve our nation's veterans.

*Question 9.* **Just over a year ago, we passed legislation that would ensure any VA delay or mistake processing benefits, would be recognized as a Department error. These errors can resulting overpayment to a Veteran and then a debt back to VA. Will you commit to working with Congress to reduce VA overpayment and improve the VA debt process by making more transparent and Veteran friendly?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I intend for the veteran to be at the center of each action and decision that is made. Review of the debt process will be an important priority to make sure veterans are not being penalized for VA errors.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Denis McDonough, Presumptive Nominee to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**From Senator Mazie Hirono**

***Management of Large Organization***

*Question 1.* **The VA is one the largest federal agencies and the largest integrated health care system in the country. How does your past experience prepare you to lead an organization of this size?**

**RESPONSE:** For the last twenty years I have worked in leadership positions in the federal government on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. In those positions I have demonstrated an ability to work with and manage large and diverse teams and have demonstrated a particular ability to work with not just like minded political appointees but also with career officials in national security agencies on complex and controversial policies and the implementation of those decisions.
My experience on Capitol Hill and proven ability to work with Republicans and Democrats is a particularly important part of my professional experience that has helped prepare me for this position.

***Treatment of Employees***

Under the Trump Administration, the VA's relationship with its employees has been extremely troubled. When we last spoke in December, you had mentioned that you had spoken with the heads of some unions.

*Question 2.* **Since then, have you given any more thought to actions you may take to improve the VA's relationship with its employees, the backbone of how the VA delivers services to our nation's Veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** The men and women of the VA, many of whom are veterans themselves, work tirelessly to take care of veterans, and their demanding jobs have been made even more so by the pandemic. They deserve VA leaders who value their work and acknowledge their rights. That is why I am committed to fair, equitable collective bargaining rights and believe that acknowledging those rights results in an engaged workforce and ultimately, good relationships between management and workers. Let me also say that I am aware that the VAs relationships with its unions need repair. I am committed to establishing communication channels with the VA unions that are transparent and inclusive. If confirmed, I will work to rebuild the kind of relationship that VA needs with its union partners to successfully fulfill its mission.

*Question 3.* **VA employees are also worried about insufficient personal protective equipment and want to be notified if they've been possibly exposed toCOVID-19. What are your thoughts on steps the VA should be taking to protect its employees from COVID-19?**

**RESPONSE:** The COVID Pandemic has made it clear that PPE is a lifeline for all of our front-line health care heroes. If confirmed, communication around ways to keep employees safe during this pandemic will be a priority. That includes ensuring their access to PPE, vaccinations, and information about their potential exposures. If

confirmed, I intend to pay close attention to VA's PPE stock, which means getting regular reports on stock and breaking any barriers needed to acquiring and distributing PPE to all of our health care workers, including connecting meaningfully with the President's efforts on shoring up the strategic national stockpile.

***Construction Projects***

For years, I have worked to move forward a long-delayed VA clinic on Oahu. The Advanced Leeward Outpatient Health Care Access (ALOHA) Project was authorized in the VA Choice Act of 2014, and was originally supposed to come online this year, but the project has been held up due to the cost of the lease, and a lease still has not been awarded. Earlier this month, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approved a revised lease prospectus, but it seems approval from the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will have to wait until next year. The delays this project has encountered show the need for advocates in the administration to be problem solvers.

*Question 4.* **Will you work with me, my staff, and any other relevant government entities to make sure this project moves forward without any additional delay?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes, I commit to working with you if confirmed to eliminate any delays and move this project forward.

*Question 5.* **Do you have any ideas about how VA and Congress could improve the process for awarding major medical leases so they do not get bogged down in years-long delays?**

**RESPONSE:** I understand that this is a well-earned point of frustration. If confirmed, I will work to understand the current process, authorities, and interagency components, and work with you to explore options to improve and streamline the process for major medical leases as well as for construction.

***Whole of Government Approach***

In our meeting last month, you said you want to make sure the whole of government works for Veterans, and cited the ALOHA Project as an example of how it sometimes does not work for Veterans.

*Question 6.* **How do you plan to engage across the whole of government to ensure the entire apparatus is working for Veterans, and not presenting stumbling blocks for VA and Veteran priorities?**

**RESPONSE:** Helping drive a whole of government approach to support veterans and military families aligns with campaign commitments and policy priorities. I will work with my counterparts across the administration to ensure that unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape are not getting in the way of VA serving veterans. Further, the collaboration intended by the President will be necessary to make progress on tackling long standing systemic challenges like veteran homelessness and unemployment.

***Equal Treatment of All Veterans***

In our previous conversation, we talked about how the culture and policies at VA need to change so that all Veterans – including women, minorities, and LGBTQ+ Veterans – feel safe and welcome, and receive equitable treatment from VA.

*Question 7.* **What are some steps you have already taken or will soon take to move that goal forward?**

**RESPONSE:** Since my nomination, I have met with organizations that represent minority veterans, who have traditionally felt underrepresented - and I am committed to continuing to ensure these groups have a seat at the table if I am confirmed. It's imperative that all veterans feel safe and welcome, and if confirmed I will work to enhance the environment of care for all.

*Question 8.* **Will you support policy changes to ensure full and equal access to reproductive healthcare for women, including abortion and contraceptives?**

**RESPONSE:** Reproductive care is a part of comprehensive health care. If confirmed, I will direct a full review of statutes and regulations related to reproductive care at VA, including a comparison to what other women using federally provided health care are able to access. I will work with Congress on my findings.

*Question 9.* **Do you view it as an essential service for the VA to provide health equity and comprehensive care to LGBTQ+ Veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** VA must provide all veterans with comprehensive health care, including veterans who identify as LGBTQ+. If I am confirmed, VA will work with DoD and key stakeholders in the VSO community to ensure that there is a culture where all who have served our country are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

***Homeless Veterans***

As we discussed, Veterans' homelessness has frequently been designated as a top priority by incoming VA Secretaries, but it still remains a persistent issue.

*Question 10.* **How do you plan to approach solving homelessness in our Veterans community differently than your predecessors?**

**RESPONSE:** I agree that there is still more work to do to address this tragic situation. If confirmed, I will work to refocus on veteran homelessness as an agency priority and will conduct a focused review of staffing levels to support this initiative, as well as identify creative ways to serve veterans experiencing homelessness. I will further work to rebuild strong partnerships across federal, state, local and community lines - this is a problem that requires engagement at every level.

***Telehealth and Rural Communities***

During COVID-19, the use of telehealth has greatly increased so that Veterans can continue to receive care while staying safe.

*Question 11.* **Will you consider permanently expanding any telehealth authorities to improve access for rural communities?**

**RESPONSE:** COVID-19 led to a significant expansion of telehealth across the country in order to safely provide continued access to care. I do believe there is room for telehealth to grow as an essential component of overall care for veterans. If confirmed, I will work with VA stakeholders to permanently expand telehealth to provide veterans with an option to receive services within their own homes.

***Transition from DOD to VA***

In our meeting, we discussed the lack of interoperable records between the Department of Defense (DOD) and VA and how that is one barrier to a seamless transition out of the military. Undoubtedly, other barriers exist too.

*Question 12.* **Have you had any discussions with Secretary-designate Austin about how your two Departments can work together to improve the transition from the military?**

**RESPONSE:** I have spoken with Secretary-designate Austin and we are committed to working together on this issue, if confirmed. Successful transitions for veterans require strong commitment and collaboration among government agencies and all levels in good faith and true partnership with the private sector. If confirmed, I will work to leverage an all of government effort to help veterans thrive when they transition from the military to civilian life.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Denis McDonough, Presumptive Nominee to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**From Senator Bernie Sanders**

*Question 1.* **Privatization: Over the past four years, I have been alarmed by the significant privatization taking place at the VA. Community Care was intended to help Veterans who could not receive care from the VA in a timely manner, however, I consistently hear from Vermont Veterans that they have to travel further and wait longer for community care than they do for care within the VA. Instead of providing more funding to community care, we should be investing in VA programs so that the department can provide the care we know our Veterans want. How will you reverse the pernicious trend at the VA toward privatization and ensure robust funding for VA programs?**

**RESPONSE:** I oppose privatization. The President has charged me with right-balancing community care, and if confirmed, I commit to investing in VA services, staffing, and technology, so that VA is a high quality and timely option for veterans. In instances where a veteran does not have timely access to care - either due to wait time or distance - the Department should partner with providers in the community to serve that veteran. Ensuring that veterans are seen by providers is the most important outcome.

*Question 2.* **Robust Funding: Members of Congress are fond of pointing out that VA budgets continue to rise year after year. However, if you talk to local VA officials, they will tell you that they do not have sufficient funding to meet the needs of their**

**Veterans. I believe that if VA is going to survive, it cannot do so without robust funding from Congress or without a VA Secretary willing to unapologetically advocate for that funding. Mr. McDonough, are you willing to build a budget not based on prior years', but on a comprehensive assessment of the VA's needs – including capital improvements and comprehensive health care services for all Veterans who want them – and ask Congress to provide the funding needed to make those investments?**

**RESPONSE:** When President Biden asked me to serve as his Secretary of Veterans Affairs, he gave me clear instructions to fight like hell to give veterans and their families the health care, respect and dignity they deserve. If confirmed, I will question assumptions when building the budget, and will advocate for the level of funding necessary for VA to execute its mission.

*Question 3.* **Caregivers: After 9/11, Congress created the Caregivers Support Program, which provides a variety of important support services for family members who care for ill or disabled injured Veterans. In 2018, Congress expanded this program to include pre-9/11Veterans. However, I am deeply concerned that the VA has not requested enough funding over the past two years to properly see this program's successful expansion. How will you work to ensure that adequate funding is budgeted for expanded Caregivers? How much more funding do you think is required to successfully expand the program?**

**RESPONSE:** Family caregivers are the backbone of the care that VA provides to veterans. VA must support families as they support veterans. If confirmed, I will review the implementation of the Caregiver Program, including its budget, and work with you to appropriately resource the program and ensure that families have the supports and services they need.

*Question 4.* **COVID and PPE: Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the VA has faced significant challenges in ensuring sufficient PPE for our Veterans and its workforce. N95Masks have been rationed and only given out when an employee is in a room with a COVID-19 patient. What steps will you take to fix the VA's supply chain and ensure an adequate supply of PPE for all Veterans, employees, and caregivers? What steps will you take to ensure that the VA is prepared for another national health emergency in the future?**

**RESPONSE:** PPE is critical for all of our health care heroes, and I understand this was a problem across the healthcare industry, not just in VA. If confirmed, I intend to pay close attention to VA's stock as the country proceeds through this pandemic to make sure that front-line employees have what they need to stay safe and healthy. That means getting regular reports on stock and breaking any barriers needed to acquiring and distributing PPE, including connecting meaningfully with the President's efforts on shoring up the strategic national stockpile. VA will be a key player at the table in the Biden administration's major efforts to ensure that PPE stock is fortified and delivered throughout the nation. Relatedly, in the period since President Biden announced his intent to nominate me for this position, I have focused intently on the issues related to the COVID pandemic. It is apparent after even this cursory review that while VA performed well in a number of areas, there is room for improvement.

*Question 5.* **Vaccine: I am relieved that the United States has begun the critical task of deploying theCOVID-19 vaccines to the American public—especially Veterans and VA employees. However, I am concerned that we are still far behind schedule and not**

**vaccinating enough people. What is your plan to ensure that every Veteran, caregiver, and VA employee receives a vaccine? How will you ensure all medical personnel and high-risk Veterans get the vaccine? How will you work with CDC and the states to ensure proper data sharing is in place so all information on Veteran and staff vaccinations is available to all those involved in the nationwide vaccination effort?**

**RESPONSE:** Distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to veterans and employees will be among the most important initial decisions I would make, if confirmed. The Department must leverage the existing distribution system to ensure that adequate supply is delivered wherever veterans are-- including highly rural veterans. VA must also work closely with the CDC, and advocate that prioritization favors older and medically vulnerable veterans. I believe data sharing is an essential part of the whole-of-government approach that the President will be taking, and I will do my part to ensure that VA data on everything from vaccine distribution to dose injections are captured accurately and shared across the administration as appropriate.

*Question 6.* **Health Care Provider Shortage: As I'm sure you will agree, we have a health care provider crisis in this country. I believe the good news is that the VA can play an important part in addressing the shortage we are currently experiencing and help prepare us for the future. Will you commit to working with me to expand existing programs and find innovative ways to address the provider shortage crisis, particularly for primary care, dental, and mental health providers?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would be fully committed to using all of VA's authorities to build and sustain the workforce needed to meet its mission at every step.If confirmed, I will work with my VA leadership team to leverage all of the agency'shuman capital authorities to recruit, train, and retain the nation's best and brightest health care providers. I would welcome the opportunity to work with you on any additional authorities necessary to achieve this goal.

*Question 7.* **Disability Backlog: The COVID pandemic is further stressing the VA's ability to process disability claims, including compensation and pension (C&P) examinations, which are not currently able to be conducted by VHA employees. What will you to do make long-term and sustainable progress on the disability claims backlog? How will you ensure that C&P exams are able to be conducted in away that provides the best possible service to Veterans, ensure they don't have to travel excessive distances for these exams, all without stressing the capacity on VHA. Finally, what will you do to make sure that the claims process is easier for Veterans and to make the appeals process faster and fairer?**

**RESPONSE:** Delivering benefits to the veterans who have earned them in a timely manner is a sacred obligation. I believe that there is a way to meet requirements and standards set by the law while also easing the burden on veterans who are seeking their earned benefits. If confirmed, I would review the existing process and work with Congress and stakeholders to determine if there are changes that can be made. VA relies on other agencies in many cases to provide information necessary to decide a veteran's claim, and if confirmed, I will work across government to expedite these processes to benefit veterans.

*Question 8.* **Women Veterans: As women continue to play a vital role in our military operations, we have an obligation to honor their service and sacrifice**

**when they return home and transition to civilian life. Can you expand on how you will specifically address and improve all health care services and treatment for women Veterans at VA facilities?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will make it a top priority to ensure all veterans feel welcome and comfortable in VA facilities, to restore damaged trust, and to identify andeliminate policies and practices that deter women veterans from seeking the care they have earned with their service. A key part of that effort will be to transparently and in partnership with this Committee implement the Deborah Samson Act.

*Question 9.* **Homelessness: I believe it is a national disgrace that more than 40,000 Veterans experience homelessness on any given night of the year, and another 1.4 million more are considered at risk of experiencing homelessness due to poverty, lack of support networks, and unsafe or unstable housing. What will you do to bolster successful programs that help Veterans and their families find long-term housing, including those that assist specific populations, including those needing substance use disorder treatment, Veterans with families, and LGBT Veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** I agree. While there has been a significant reduction in veteran homelessness, there is still more work to do. If confirmed, I will work to rebuild strong partnerships across federal, state, local and community lines. This includes reviewing staff levels within the Department who are focused on this critical issue, and thinking creatively about how to best support veterans where they are. I want to refocus efforts to reduce and end veteran homelessness.

*Question 10.* **Dental Care: I believe strongly that every Veteran, regardless of disability rating or income, should be able to rely on the VA for high-quality dental care. What are your thoughts on the feasibility of ensuring that at least one VA Medical Center in each state is capable of providing dental services?**

**RESPONSE:** I agree that dental care is an important component of health care. If confirmed, I would review the feasibility and current authorities surrounding VA's provision of dental care to veterans and would look forward to working with you on how best to address the issue.

*Question 11.* **Integrative Medicine: I have long believed we must increase access to and studies on integrative medicine practices, sometimes known and complementary and alternative medicine. If confirmed, will you commit to work with me to continue the expansion of these medicine practices within VA medical centers and outpatient clinics?**

**RESPONSE:** VA should use all tools, especially those evidence based, to support the whole health of veterans. If confirmed, I would work with Congress and all stakeholders to expand the kinds of whole health services available to veterans and their families.

*Question 12.* **LGBT Veterans: LGBTQ+ Veterans have served in our military for generations. However, they have not always been able to do so openly or provided the specialized care needed upon returning home. I am proud that VA made strides in expanding services for LGBT Veterans under President Obama. What will you do to ensure VA meets its obligation to these Veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** Building an inclusive culture starts with listening to all voices, to include employees, veterans and their families, or community stakeholders. I believe

this last year has shown us that diversity and inclusion and achieving equity requires deliberate engagement and a strategic focus to root out practices, policies and directives that may contribute to an inequitable environment. If confirmed, I will workto make VA even more welcoming to all veterans, including women veterans, veterans of color andLGBTQ+ veterans.

*Question 13.* **"Bad Paper" Discharges: As you know, thousands of Veterans do not have access to VA services because of so-called "bad paper" discharges. Will you work with me and other members of this committee to review the discharge status of these Veterans and work? Are you also willing to work with the Secretary of Defense to ensure the character of discharge process is applied fairly across the branches now and into the future?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would work with the Secretary of Defense on the review of character of discharge process. Many veterans who have OTH discharges are also the veterans who most need VA support. I commit to working with the Committee, the Department of Defense, and stakeholders on this important issue.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Mazie Hirono**

*Question 1.* **Events of the past year – namely the COVID-19 pandemic and violence against unarmed Black Americans – have put a spotlight on longstanding disparities that have existed in our country for too long. When the top leadership ofour agencies does not reflect the people they serve, that can have real, lasting consequences. Do you believe that diversity in leadership is necessary to provide truly equitable services?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes, I absolutely believe that diversity in leadership is necessary in any highly functioning organization.

*Question 2.* **Will you commit to building a senior VA team that reflects the diversity of the veteran population?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes, I will commit to building a senior leadership that reflects the country and the veterans we are entrusted to serve.

*Question 3.* **What will you do as VA Secretary to incorporate a diverse set of voices and experiences into VA's decision-making?**

**RESPONSE:** President Biden has pledged to promote diversity across the entire federal government. I strongly believe diversity is one of our country's greatest strengths. My vision for the leadership team is a diverse team of professionals who look like America, are called to serve, who are ready to put veterans and their families at the center of every

the decision they make and who understand that VA's success demands close partnership with Congress and other stakeholders.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Joe Manchin**

*Question 1.* **During this COVID-19 crisis, I've heard from more Veterans about broadband access and appointments with the VA than any other single issue. While the lack of reliable broadband access has often been presented as a long-term infrastructure issue, the current pandemic has made the short-term challenges imposed on Veterans even more acutely felt. Unfortunately, this has been an ongoing and unacceptable situation. West Virginia Veterans face a three-pronged challenge of having to navigate and drive long distances in rural and mountainous terrain to access in-person VA healthcare, sometime driving even further because of the lack of specialty care at VA clinics. To top it off, West Virginia Veterans have greater difficulty than most Veterans accessing telehealth services due to the severe lack of high speed broadband across my state. That's why I introduced the ACCESS the Internet Act last congress to expand VA telehealth options. Telehealth programs, such as ATLAS, are currently helping to provide crucial telehealth services to Veterans in only a handful of states and these nationwide efforts are still in the early stages. How will you prioritize the need for expanded telehealth options, particularly in rural areas like WV?**

**RESPONSE:** Veterans deserve access to high quality, convenient care regardless of where they live. If confirmed, I am committed to increasing access for rural and highly rural veterans, particularly through expanded use of telehealth options. Telehealth is a critical component of achieving the goals of increased access and improved outcomes for rural veterans. I would also work across government agencies to address barriers to access faced by rural veterans, and, in addition to telehealth, focus on recruitment of rural providers and developing relationships with key community providers.

*Question 2.* **One in four VA patients suffer from diabetes, and COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect upon management of this disease for many. Clinic closures due to quarantines have resulted in more diabetic foot ulcers, or DFUs, which can quickly lead to amputation, one of the costliest and most devastating complications of diabetes. A single diabetic amputation costs as much as $100,000, and patients who receive minor diabetic amputations have survival rates worse than many cancers – 44 percent at five years. DFUs are responsible for 80 percent of the non- traumatic amputations in the VA, which last year treated 115,000 diabetic foot wounds and spent more than $3.6 billion on DFUs. Remote temperature monitoring is an effective telehealth early warning system, allowing for preventative interventions. A recent study of at-risk patients[RK1]enrolled in remote temperature monitoring suggests a reduction in all lower-extremity amputations by 71%, all-cause inpatient hospitalizations**

**by over 50%, and Emergency Department visits by 40%. Does VA have a strategy for scaling the use of this care management technology to mitigate theperilous effect that COVID-19 is playing in the management of diabetes in veterans, to improve quality of life and radically reduce the need for costly amputation?**

**RESPONSE:** Telehealth, including remote monitoring of chronic conditions like diabetes, is a key component to medical care and emerging technologies allow healthcare providers to monitor these types of chronic issues in order to better track veteran health. If confirmed, I will look into the data supporting these initiatives in order to increase access and improve outcomes for veterans.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Jerry Moran**

*Question 1.* **With approximately 80% of VHA enrolled veterans also covered by other health insurance (OHI) and more than 50% of VHA enrollees eligible for Medicare, how do you plan to address that overlap and ensure that VA health care is coordinated, including payment by other payers, OHI and Medicare, to cover costs when appropriate?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will review the approach taken by the Department on this issue, and work with the Committee on any adjustments that may be appropriate. I intend for the veteran to be at the center of each action and decision that is made.

*Question 2.* **Do you support efforts that would address this coverage overlap from multiple program eligibility for community care as well as for services provided internally by VA?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will seek information on how VA currently handles this and consider it with an open mind. I would welcome the input of the Committee as decisions are made regarding any changes to the current approach. I intend for the veteran to be at the center of each action and decision that is made.

*Question 3.* **One in four VA patients suffer from diabetes, and COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect upon management of this disease for many. Clinic closures due to quarantines have resulted in more diabetic foot ulcers, or DFUs, which can quickly lead to amputation, one of the costliest and most devastating complications of diabetes. A single diabetic amputation costs as much as $100,000, and patients who receive minor diabetic amputations have survival rates worse than many**

**cancers – 44 percent at five years. DFUs are responsible for 80 percent of the non-traumatic amputations in the VA, which last year treated 115,000 diabetic foot wounds and spent more than $3.6 billion on DFUs. Remote temperature monitoring is an effective telehealth early warning system, allowing for preventative interventions. A recent study of at-risk patients enrolled in remote temperature monitoring suggests a reduction in all lower-extremity amputations by 71%, all-cause inpatient hospitalizations by over 50%, and Emergency Department visits by 40%.What are your thoughts on scaling the use of this care management technology or other new technologies to mitigate the perilous effect that COVID-19 is playing in the management of diabetes in veterans, to improve quality of life and radically reduce the need for costly amputation?**

**RESPONSE:** Telehealth, including remote monitoring of chronic conditions like diabetes, is a key component to medical care and emerging technologies allow healthcare providers to monitor these types of chronic issues in order to better track veteran health. If confirmed, I will look into the data supporting these initiatives in order to increase access and improve outcomes for veterans.

*Question 4* **MISSION Access Standards are the cornerstone of the community care program and veterans have come to rely heavily on these standards over the past two years. Do you believe a veteran seeking primary care, mental health care, or non- institutional services should have the choice to seek care inthe community if VA cannot schedule an internal appointment within 20 daysor schedule the appointment at a VA facility within a 30-minute drive time of the veteran's residence?**

**RESPONSE:** Community care will continue to be a part of how VA delivers care to veterans. If confirmed, I will review how current access standards are working for veterans, and consider whether adjustments are necessary in order to achieve the goal of increased access and improved outcomes for veterans.

*Question 5.* **Do you believe a veteran seeking specialty care should have the choice to seek care in the community if VA cannot schedule an internal appointment within 28days or schedule the appointment at a VA facility within a 60-minute drive time of the veteran's residence?**

**RESPONSE:** Veterans deserve access to high quality, convenient care regardless of where they live. If confirmed, I will work to achieve the right balance between care provided in the community and care provided through VA to ensure that veterans have timely access to the highest quality healthcare services.

*Question 6.* **While the VA uses MISSION Access Standards to determine veteran eligibility for the Veterans Community Care Program, the VA has neglected to modify contracts with Third Party Administrators to incorporate these same standards as access measures for receiving community care. Do you support incorporating the current MISSION Act Access Standards into the Community Care Network contracts to create uniformity?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will work collaboratively with Optum and TriWest to make refinements to the network as necessary, and also improve the tools VA can use to hold Third Party Administrators accountable to ensure the Department is

providing veterans with increased access to care. I pledge to work with the Committee on this issue.

*Question 7.* **Often times when VACO Leadership implements a major shift in policy, we have found that these changes are not properly communicated to the staff on the ground that are responsible for implementation and interfacing with veterans. If confirmed, how will you ensure that policy decisions made at the VACO-level are successfully communicated and carried out on the ground?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will work with the leadership team to ensure they understand my expectation that all decisions be made with the goal of increased access and improved outcomes for the veteran. That means there must be effective dissemination within the Department, and I would prioritize creating a culture that supported an open flow of communication of central office directives, while empowering local leadership to make on-the-ground decisions that are consistent with the Department's goal.

*Question 8.* **In areas where there is a lack of access to broadband, would you be open to exploring remote monitoring devices to help provide the real-time or asynchronous data to VA providers via lower frequencies, like 2G or 3G, to help provide additional data for providers and opportunities for intervention when live visual telehealth isn't an option? Beyond providing tablets to veterans, what are your thoughts on other innovative strategies to ensure veterans without access to high-speed internet still have access to innovative solutions to improve their health?**

**RESPONSE:** VA has a key role to play in coordinating with other federal agencies and with the FCC to ensure that the kinds of access questions that VA can lead on, including in telehealth, can be expanded by making better broadband access more universally available. So, I think there's a critical role to play within the interagency, and that, if confirmed, would be precisely what I intend to do.

*Question 9.* **The VA Office of Rural Health has identified to my Committee staff in a recent briefing that transportation is the primary issue for missed appointments among veterans in rural and highly rural areas. Looking towards a post-COVID VA health care system, how do you propose addressing this access gap? Additionally, how can Congress work with the Department to ensure that our rural and highly rural veterans who still prefer in-person appointments have that opportunity through enhanced transportation benefit programs?**

**RESPONSE:** Veterans deserve access to high quality, convenient care regardless of where they live. Increasing access for rural and highly rural veterans requires at least three steps. First, VA must leverage partnerships with community providers. Second, the Department must build on the progress to date in telehealth and virtual care. Lastly, there must be much faster progress made on recruiting and retaining talent to staff existing rural VA facilities. Given the information you have shared about transportation challenges to appointments, if confirmed, I will look into the authorities VA has to address this challenge and work with the Committee to resolve this issue for veterans.

*Question 10.* **The VA's Anywhere to Anywhere telehealth initiative and the Digital Divide Consult has an ambitious goal of improving care for veterans who live in rural areas. The Philips Accessing Telehealth through Local Area Stations**

**(ATLAS) collaboration with the Department offers veterans the ability to securely access VA health care providers in private settings in easy to access locations in their communities. There are currently ATLAS pods in California, Montana, Pennsylvania, Arizona,New York, and Virginia, one currently under construction in Texas, and the strong likelihood the next will be placed in Kansas. Can you share your plan to accelerate the deployment of these clinical telehealth delivery systems to every state in an effort to better address this gap in access to care? Will you commit to providing this Committee regular status reports on, and anticipated timelines for,the expanded use of these platforms?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will investigate the approach taken by VHA on this issue. I commit to providing the Committee with updates and anticipated timelines for any decisions related to the expanded use of the ATLAS platform.

*Question 11.* **Beyond implementation of the Commander Hannon Act, what will be your specific approach to suicide prevention, if confirmed? More specifically, will you focus on a one-size-fits-all approach or a balance between a public health and clinical health approach to suicide prevention and personalized treatment?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, access to mental health resources and proven suicide prevention strategies will be top priorities for VA. My first priority will be to reduce barriers to care for veterans, this includes working to reduce the stigma that remains for those who seek access to such clinical care and programming. Relatedly, VA's reach - and thus veteran access - must be expanded through telehealth platforms medicine and virtual care. Leveraging telehealth and other similarly innovative approaches will be key to best serving veterans moving forward.
As suicide prevention is a nation-wide public health crisis, it requires a whole of federal government approach and I will work tirelessly with my colleagues at DOD, CDC, SAHMSA, and other federal agencies to develop and implement an approach to suicide prevention that works.

*Question 12.* **President Biden's emergency COVID-19 proposal includes a request for $20 Billion for veteran health care. Of the $20 Billion provided to VA last year for COVID response, only $8.3 Billion has been obligated so far. Further, the FY 2021 appropriation for veterans medical care was just provided and I'm unaware of any surge in demand or shortfall in resources requiring an emergency $20 Billion. Can you explain the need for this additional request?**

**RESPONSE:** As I am not confirmed, I have not been involved in developing this specific request. However, it is clear to me that in addition to providing direct COVID care to veterans, VA will also have to address the COVID-related impacts on its core functions, including millions of delayed care appointments, a significant increase in the claims backlog, and delay of memorial services. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the Committee to provide additional details on the President's plan.

*Question 13.* **Professional organizations representing nurses, physicians, and other health professionals have separately advocated both for and against expanding "full practice authority" for VA providers beyond what their state license allows. Do you support providers delivering care to veterans beyond what their state license allows? If VA allows providers to practice beyond their license, what responsibility does VA**

**assume for filling the accountability and disciplinary role that a state licensing board would otherwise perform?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I commit to reviewing this issue with objectivity and working to find a solution that supports both increased access and improved outcomes for veterans. VA must continue to provide high quality, safe, and effective health care to our nation's veterans.

*Question 14.* **Several high-profile cases recently showed worst-case scenarios involving VA doctors and nurses harming patients. We know these instances are rare exceptions to the world- class care VA typically provides, but they also offer an opportunity to learn how VA can prevent similar tragedies from happening in the future. How will you, as VA Secretary, improve patient safety and provider accountability so warning signs are not missed and quality of care issues are not ignored by medical center leadership?**

**RESPONSE:** Veteran patient safety while under the care of VA providers is critically important to the success of VA's mission. If confirmed, I would work to determine the appropriate metrics to use at facilities to track any concerns of this nature, and would welcome the Committee's ongoing partnership on this issue.

*Question 15.* **The Department recently lost the domain for "gibill.com," which provided resources and oversight functions for veterans as they choose a school to attend. Will you commit to working to get that functionality back, or incorporating similar resources on the Comparison Tool if VA is unable to get the website back?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, you have my commitment that I will work to get that functionality back, or incorporate similar resources on the Comparison Tool if VA is unable to get the website back.

*Question 16.* **During your confirmation hearing, you mentioned the need for improved outcomes and measuring those outcomes. During COVID-19 we saw how important a seamless transition, education and economic opportunities were to the well-being of veterans after military service. Education, employment, housing, vocational training and economic resources, are vital to the overall well-being of veterans and their families. The VSO community and others believe that elevating these economic opportunity programs out from under the focus of compensation, pension and insurance would finally highlight the importance of these programs for a veteran's success and livelihood post-active duty service. Do you believe that these specific economic empowerment programs, currently buried at VBA, should be highlighted and elevated to an equal footing as VBA's other priorities? Do you believe this elevation would improve outcomes for veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** A fundamental priority for the President is to ensure veterans have access to employment and education opportunities consistent with their experience, skills, and talent. This must be the case wherever these initiatives are housed within the Department. If confirmed, it would be my responsibility to ensure appropriate oversight of these programs to increase access and improve outcomes. I look forward to working collaboratively with the Committee to ensure aggressive oversight and measurement on quality outcomes.

*Question 17.* **Last year, Congress passed two GI Bill COVID relief packages to ensure student veterans and their dependents were able to continue their education**

**and were not negatively impacted by schools' changing their teaching structure or closing due to COVID. As VBA continues to implement these changes, their IT systems will need to be updated and resources provided to implement these changes. How will you prioritize limited department resources to make certain VBAcan continue making the needed upgrades to provide these education benefits in a seamless and timely manner?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will look into the approach taken by the Department on this issue, and how prioritization decisions are made. The types of COVID-related impacts on VA's existing systems that you raise may be appropriate for consideration in COVID-related legislation. I will fight for our veterans with a relentless focus on ensuring veterans and their families have timely access to their benefits.

*Question 18.* **The seamless transition from active duty to veteran status is a priority of this Committee. Great strides and improvements have been made in recent years to improve this transition, however improvements still need to be made. How will you work with your interagency partners such as the Departments of Defense and Labor, and with community partners, to provide thorough resources and assistance to veterans and their families as they leave the military? In your opinion and based on your previous role at the White House, what additional work needs to be done to ensure veterans properly transition to a civilian role?**

**RESPONSE:** Successful transitions for veterans require strong commitment and collaboration among government agencies at all levels, and working in good faith and true partnership with the private sector. The President has made this a priority, so if confirmed, I will work to develop an all of government effort – including DOD and DOL – to help veterans thrive when they transition from the military to civilian life.

*Question 19.* **The process for addressing cases of veterans encountering toxic exposures during service, and associated health outcomes, is broken and needs reform. Legislating benefits for each group of affected veterans is slow, costly, and far from the best way to serve those who became ill through service. In your prehearing questions response, you committed to relying on comprehensive science and data associated with exposure to toxic substances.**

**In the absence of scientific data linking particular exposures with particular health consequences, how would you guide the VA team, within both VHA and VBA, to provide care for today's veterans facing negative health outcomes while also creating an enduring, evidence-based framework to identify, research, and address toxic exposures for tomorrow's veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** We need to do the right thing by veterans, and that needs to be supported by evidence and science. We continue to learn more about the health impacts of exposures that veterans experienced while in service. It is important for the Department to work with the Committee to support research at VA and with academic partners, and to create transparent process and framework that is based on scientific evidence, in order to inform decision making regarding service-connection.
Under the laws established by Congress, VA has an obligation to those who are injured or made ill by toxic chemicals while serving our county. In the absence of clear and specific scientific linkages, the Department should continue to treat the conditions that veterans are presenting with.

*Question 20.* **The Biden Campaign plan includes an expansion of the list of presumptive conditions associated with exposure to toxic substances, specifically focusing on diseases associated with burn pit exposure. According to a National Academies report published last year, there was inadequate or insufficient information to evaluate the association between service of veterans of the Southwest Asia conflicts and certain respiratory health outcomes. If confirmed, how would you go about addressing the National Academies' recommendations for more research while also focusing on burn pit claims that need action now?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would review the reports and recommendations in this space. I would direct VA to expand research efforts within the Department, as well as collaboratively across agencies and academic partners so that we could learn as much as possible. Under the laws established by Congress, VA has an obligation to those who are injured or made ill by toxic chemicals while serving our county.

*Question 21.* **As you may know, there has been some concern from some of my colleagues regarding the contract exam program and the quality of this program, as well as a concern that VA is just pushing more services outside of VA and onto contract vendors. In my opinion, these contract exams have been a useful asset to the Department and to the veteran to ensure more timely exams. Can you discuss how you perceive the contract exam program and what your future plans for the contract exam program are?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will look into the approach taken by VBA on this issue, and any data on which they based their decision, including cost, timeliness metrics, and the veteran experience. I will make decisions based on providing veterans with increased access and improved outcomes.

*Question 22.* **Due to COVID, there was an impact on C&P exams both at the department and through contract exams, which led to the current backlog of exams and disability claims decisions. What efforts will you make with VBA to bring down the backlog and get claims adjudicated?**

**The slowdown in fulfillment of claims processing as a result of the pandemic is a principal concern that I would have, if confirmed.**

**RESPONSE:** I expect that the backlog will continue to grow, as new claims begin to be filed as a result of the additional diseases that are now presumed service connected to Agent Orange. This will be a challenge for the Department, but I commit to advocating for the resources necessary to address this, and to being transparent with the Committee on the challenges and approaches that are being taken.

*Question 23.* **Additionally, as you may know, VBA worked with its contract vendors to conduct as many telehealth and acceptable clinical evidence exams (ACE) during the suspension of in-person exams last year. What will be your strategy going forward to continue enhancing and expanding access to telehealth and ACE exams to tackle the claims backlog, and what role do you see for ACE exams long term?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would support efforts to provide veterans with

increased access and improved outcomes, so I will look into the approach taken by VBA on this issue. Any decision must be based on what is best for veterans, as demonstrated by timeliness, accuracy, and other metrics.

*Question 24.* **In December, the Department noticed a proposed rule to establish a temporary partial claim program to assist VA-guaranteed borrowers impacted by the pandemic. This proposal appears to have the potential to provide valuable relief to veterans experiencing economic hardship due to the pandemic, but concerns surrounding the proposal remain. If confirmed, will you commit to reviewing this proposed rule and working with this Committee to make certain that a potential VA partial claim program best serves veterans and service members?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, you have my commitment to review this proposed rule and to work with the Committee on a path forward that best serves veterans.

*Question 25.* **Three IT modernization programs—Electronic Health Records Modernization, Financial Management Transformation, and Medical Logistics Supply Systems—will eat up nearly two-thirds of VA's Information Technology budget in Fiscal Year 2021. None of these programs was started under your leadership and none are expected to be finished before President Biden's first term. Each IT program has different management structures and their management processes appear to be ad hoc. How do you intend to manage these programs to ensure each one produces satisfactory results worthy of continued investment?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will take a holistic approach to these projects because of the interdependencies that exist in these large-scale modernization efforts. It is critical that an enterprise integrated master schedule be used to manage these efforts, along with being transparent with Congress, veterans, and the general public about progress with these projects to ensure VA is a good steward of taxpayer dollars and best serves veterans in the process.

*Question 26.* **VA has attempted for years to fully integrate its electronic health records with DoD's health records system. That effort has made significant progress in recent years, but implementation is facing serious delays. What are the major challenges you see in fully implementing EHR interoperability with DoD and how will you address those challenges?**

**RESPONSE:** I am committed to working with Congress, both collaboratively and transparently if confirmed. This is a major initiative, to which you have dedicated significant resources, and you should have access to metrics, milestones, and implementation timeline. If confirmed, I would look to data from the initial rollout and feedback from clinicians and veterans to inform the way forward. If the initial results are not what we want, if confirmed, I would assemble an advisory team of external and internal health IT experts with experience in this arena to ensure VA uses industry best practices to further avoid potential pitfalls and develop an effective change management strategy to ensure the system is adopted properly across the VA to best serve veterans.

*Question 27.* **VA is unlike many other federal agencies in that it employs a number of medical providers who care directly for patients. VA recently limited the ability of these employees to perform work for unions on official time in order to ensure doctors and nurses are providing the direct medical care they were hired to deliver instead of performing administrative or clerical work unrelated to that care. Do**

**you believe VA should use taxpayer dollars to pay salaries for doctors and nurses performing union work unrelated to the positions for which they are hired?**

**RESPONSE:** This is the first I am hearing of this particular issue, as I have not been involved in substantive discussions with unions as a nominee. I appreciate you bringing it to my attention. If confirmed, I will dig into this issue and will take your perspectives into account as I learn and make decisions in this space.

*Question 28.* **NCA has 13 new cemetery projects which were all originally projected to open by the end of 2017. To date, exactly one has opened on time, and six have yet to be completed with two sites still in the land acquisition phase. If confirmed, how would you direct the Department to complete these projects in a timely manner?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will look into this concern, and I will work with this Committee on what I find. It will be my mission to ensure we honor our veterans with final resting place and lasting tributes to their service, and make projections for delivery schedules that are achievable.

*Question 29.* **A 2019 GAO report noted that the data used by NCA to locate unserved veterans, and prioritize states and localities for the grant program, was lacking in precision. The GAO recommended that NCA use census-tract level data instead of the currently utilized county-level data to estimate numbers of veterans within the service areas of prospective sites, noting significant differences yielded between the two. If confirmed, what do you expect your guidance to NCA will be to make certain that any new cemeteries will be where they are needed to afford as many veterans as possible an honored, and perpetually maintained resting place?**

**RESPONSE:** I believe that the Department should provide increased access for veterans and their families to these VA benefits. If confirmed, I will look into the approach taken by NCA on this issue, and I will work with this Committee on this issue moving forward.

*Question 30.* **Currently, the Department of Veterans Affairs reports as "prohibited persons" to the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System, or NICS, beneficiaries who have had a fiduciary appointed for them by the VA, effectively prohibiting them from owning a firearm. Do you agree that the VA's non-judicial process for appointing a fiduciary to help a veteran manage their benefits falls short of the legal standard needed to deprive someone of their Constitutional rights? If confirmed, how would you ensure veterans do not avoid seeking help from VA due to fears of having their rights infringed upon? If confirmed, will you commit to review of the Department's compliance with the requests of the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives in what I believe is an arbitrary and unfair process?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will review this issue to ensure that VA is compliant with all applicable laws, including the Constitution.

*Question 31.* **VA's acquisition management process is now on GAO's high risk issue list since its acquisition regulations have not been updated since 2011. What principles should guide VA's acquisition management? How would you lead VA in**

**addressing this issue if confirmed?**

**RESPONSE:** VA has work to do to become more efficient and effective with supply chain and acquisition management. If confirmed, these must be priorities at the Department, and VA must work to remove themselves from GAO's high-risk rating. I understand that acquisition management has been a challenge at the Department for some time, and if confirmed, my leadership team will focus on this issue and work with the Committee on ways to improve the process.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator John Boozman**

*Question 1.* **We have witnessed the incredible leadership experience veterans bring to their communities and employers after their military service is complete. If confirmed, how will you lead the department to engage veterans so they believe their best years in life and service are in front of them not behind them?**

**RESPONSE:** The President has made clear that he places a priority on providing veterans with economic opportunity and mobility following their service. I will work within VA to be forward leaning on outreach to veterans and development of initiatives that will be attractive to this generation of service members who are leaving active duty. Further, I will work with private sector organizations, state and local government, and the rest of the federal government interagency and the Joining Forces initiative to provide veterans with a range of opportunities following their service.

*Question 2.* **If confirmed, how will you prioritize the need for expanded telehealth options, particularly in rural areas, where in-person healthcare options are more limited? Will you commit to reviewing the ATLAS program and consider accelerating the deployment of clinical telehealth delivery systems to more states and communities, as necessary?**

**RESPONSE:** Veterans deserve access to high quality, convenient care regardless of where they live. If confirmed, I am committed to increasing access for rural and highly rural veterans, particularly through expanded use of telehealth options.

*Question 3.* **The VA experienced an over 1,000% increase in video visits between March and June of2020. How do you expect to continue utilizing telehealth beyond the duration of the pandemic, and how will the VA encourage veterans to make even greater use of current resources, such as ATLAS?**

**RESPONSE:** The Department has to consolidate the gains it has made in provision of telehealth services and has to build on the progress to date in telehealth and virtual care, which will also require thinking creatively about how to facilitate use of these technologies when access to internet service is limited. Key to that will be making full use of the authorities and funding provided in the CARES Act and partnering with FCC to increase access to broadband. If confirmed, I will work with VA stakeholders to permanently expand telehealth to provide veterans with option to receive services within their homes.

*Question 4.* **Through a $100 million investment, the VA's and Philips' Tele-Critical Care program is currently working to create the largest available system for veterans to access remote intensive care expertise. This is crucial for the 9 million veterans enrolled in the VA Health Care system, particularly the 3 million in rural areas. Will you support efforts to continue this program and, if so, by what means?**

**RESPONSE:** I support expansion of telehealth access for veterans. If confirmed, I will make decisions based on increased access and improved outcomes for veterans, and will review the effects of this program through that lens. I will review the metrics of this program, and work with the Committee on this issue.

*Question 5.* **One in four VA patients suffer from diabetes, and COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect upon management of this disease for many. Clinic closures due to quarantines have resulted in more diabetic foot ulcers, or DFUs, which can quickly lead to amputation, one of the costliest and most devastating complications of diabetes. A single diabetic amputation costs as much as $100,000, and patients who receive minor diabetic amputations have survival rates worse than many cancers – 44 percent at five years. DFUs are responsible for 80 percent of the non-traumatic amputations in the VA, which last year treated 115,000 diabetic foot wounds and spent more than $3.6 billion on DFUs. Remote temperature monitoring is an effective telehealth early warning system, allowing for preventative interventions. A recent study of at-risk patients[RK1] enrolled in remote temperature monitoring suggests a reduction in all lower-extremity amputations by 71%, all-cause inpatient hospitalizations by over 50%, and Emergency Department visits by 40%. Does VA have a strategy for scaling the use of this care management technology to mitigate the perilous effect that COVID-19 is playing in the management of diabetes in veterans, to improve quality of life and radically reduce the need for costly amputation?**

**RESPONSE:** Telehealth, including remote monitoring of chronic conditions like diabetes, is a key component to medical care and emerging technologies allow healthcare providers to monitor these types of chronic issues in order to better track veteran health. If confirmed, I will look into the data supporting these initiatives in order to increase access and improve outcomes for veterans.

*Question 6.* **Veterans suffer higher than normal incidences of traumatic brain injuries while serving our country. Veterans who suffer severe traumatic brain injuries may require residential care, a need that Congress recognized with its Assisted Living-TBI pilot program. However, after the sunset of the program, the VA has not made any provision for further care of these individuals. With the MISSION Act, Congress has demonstrated that it wants veterans to have appropriate care whether it is within the VA system or through a**

**private provider. Will you commit to working to find a solution for this issue and getting these veterans the care they deserve?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. I will commit to reviewing what the Department has learned from the Assisted Living –TBI pilot program, and finding a solution to provide appropriate care for these veterans, in consultation with the Committee.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Bill Cassidy**

*Question 1.* **Last April, Richard Stone, M.D., the Executive in Charge of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), issued a memorandum strongly encouraging VA facilities to change their bylaws to permit nurse anesthetists to have full practice authority, or the authority to practice in a nurse-only model of care. The traditional model of anesthesia care for Veterans is the physician-led, team-based model of anesthesia involving an anesthesiologist and a nurse anesthetist working together to provide care. There are reports that this memo, developed without the involvement of VA's National Anesthesia Services or any frontline physicians, has caused workplace conflict and disruptions in care in VA facilities at a time when VA should be operating optimally. I'm also told of other concerns expressed about quality of care. What is the status of this memorandum, and do you expect to respond to the invocation we've been told of the "Stop the Line "patient safety program?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will review the status of the guidance, and the overall approach taken by VHA on this issue. Decisions in this area must be based on best medical outcomes, and expanded access for veterans.

*Question 2.* **I understand that the VA's fastest growing sector is Veterans over age 75, and VA is facing this increase earlier and at a faster rate than the rest of the nation. By 2023, approximately 28% of all veterans will be 75 years of age or older. For years, the VA geriatrics programs has provided Veterans with a comprehensive and integrated spectrum of services. Also of note is the VA's recent expansion of its successful Caregiver Program this year. Looking to the future, what is the VA doing to further strengthen its home and community based geriatric programs and diversify offerings to prepare for this increase in older veterans, a population particularly vulnerable to fragmented care?**

**RESPONSE:** VA must align its long-term strategic priorities to address veteran preferences for where they receive care, the financial implications of a growing elder population, and expanding access to Home and Community-Based Services. If confirmed, I will review the approach taken by VHA on this issue, and I will work with the Committee on this issue.

*Question 3.* **While I appreciate the Department of Veterans Affairs for working with my office to resolve over 1000 unprocessed or denied claims with ambulatory services companies over the last 18 months, I would like to find a way to prevent this issue from arising in the future. Given the issue is nationwide, how do you plan to improve the communication and relationships with providers who have hundreds of outstanding claims each? And how do you plan to improve the process for resolving claim disputes to help providers avoid the situation in which they have questions regarding their claims?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, it will be one of my priorities to ensure the timely and accurate payment of claims to VA's community care partners. Clearly, this has been an ongoing issue and I resolve to remove any barriers or obstacles preventing the remuneration to third-party providers.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Mike Rounds**

**For Witness:** Mr. Denis McDonough, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Nominee

*Question 1.* **My perspective is that VA has a dedicated workforce, but the bureaucracy often fails our veterans. Since I began serving in the Senate, I have witnessed many instances where veterans do not receive the benefits that they have earned and where providers do not receive the money they are owed. There seems to be an overarching perspective that veterans ought to prove their case to receive benefits, rather than that these benefits have been earned through service to the nation. Can I count on your support to change this mindset?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would approach every decision with the perspective that VA needs to improve outcomes for veterans. This means delivery of world-class health care to America's veterans, as measured by access, quality, and satisfaction; timely and accurate adjudication of benefits claims; and more aggressive efforts by VA and other agencies to increase access to mental health care, reduce stigma associated with that care, and reduce veteran suicide.

*Question 2.* **With your background, if confirmed, you will bring a keen organizational perspective to your position. Please provide your perspective on implementing VA reform through an actionable strategy, similar to what you did in the National SecurityCouncil**.

**RESPONSE:** For the last twenty years I have worked in leadership positions in the federal government on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. In those positions I have demonstrated an ability to work with and manage large and diverse teams and have demonstrated a particular ability to work with not just like-minded political appointees but also with career officials in national security agencies on complex and controversial policies and the implementation of those decisions. Specifically, I have overseen core management functions across the Federal government, including during periods of significant process changes, challenges and reform. I would bring that experience to VA, if confirmed, and would be an advocate for veterans in my leadership within the agency and across the federal government.

*Question 3.* **I am concerned that the Biden Administration is signaling that community care does not work. The veterans that my staff and I have interacted with greatly support community care. While they don't like the bureaucracy that is involved to receive authorizations for care, they are generally very happy with the care they receive. Given the positive picture veterans paint of the care they receive in the community, what will you do foster this program?**

**RESPONSE:** I believe that community care will continue to be a key part of how the department cares for veterans. If confirmed, I intend to implement the statutes that this Committee enacted consistent with your intention and to do that in consultation with you and VSOs.

*Question 4.* **Congress has given VA authority, under the CARES Act, to increase VA partnerships with telecom companies so that rural veterans, including those at greater risk for mental health issues, can get free, reliable internet access for telehealth care during the pandemic. If confirmed, would you remain committed to leveraging the CARES Act authorities given to the VA to take the necessary actions to partner with telecoms in rural areas in an effort to increase rural veteran access to telehealth?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, you have my commitment to leverage the CARES Act authorities given to VA to take the necessary actions to partner with telecoms in rural areas inan effort to increase rural veteran access to telehealth.

*Question 5.* **Since 9/11, the amount of funding to address veteran mental health issues has grown dramatically. However, veteran suicide remains a constant challenge and is expected to increase with the onset of the COVID 19 Pandemic. As veteran suicides continue to rise, with seemingly no impact from increased VA funding, what changes if any would you make to address this crisis? How would you define success?**

**RESPONSE:** Suicide is a complex and deeply troubling problem facing our society at large. We must reduce barriers to seeking help and treatment for all those in need. If confirmed, I would direct VA to ensure that comprehensive health for veterans includes effective mental health, and to increase access to mental health services through VA as well as through community organizations. VA specifically has an important role in addressing the social determinants of health that directly impact risk factors for suicide. These include economic mobility, equitable compensation for service connected injuries, and a health care system that puts the veteran at the center of every decision. I believe using those resources and the networks that are being built in and around community care gives the department a unique opportunity to ensure that it is drawing on all the available resources to combat this national crisis.

*Question 6.* **In 1992, Congress created the Native American Direct Loan program. Since then, VA reports it has made about 1100 loans, with most recipients being Native Hawaiian veterans and veterans from the Northern Mariana Islands. Creating a federal direct loan program was intended to make homeownership more accessible to Native American veterans living on reservations, given that traditional mortgage lending is rare on trust lands due to their unique legal status. But this program has under-performed. Can you give me your commitment that, if confirmed, you will look into this program to assure that it is being resourced and prioritized to meet the Congress' intent?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. If confirmed, I commit to look into this program to assure that it is being resourcedand prioritized to meet Congress' intent.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Thom Tillis**

**Vaccine Prioritization**

**Background:**

**On December 19th, 2020, a number of veteran organizations sent the attached letter to the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Protocols (ACIP) raising the concern that the Veterans Health Administration would be unnecessarily limited in classifying various disabled veterans as "high-risk" if they do not fit into one of the high-risk conditions identified in the ACIP recommendations. In response, members of the ACIP specifically encouraged local communities delivering the vaccines (which VA effectively is for the patients they serve) to not consider the ACIP list as exhaustive, but specifically to considerhigh-risk conditions with smaller populations which wouldn't otherwise cover a population large enough to warrant ACIP identification.**

**During a January 14th, 2021 conference call between VHA and veteran organizations about vaccine distribution, VHA staff reported that the Department was compiling data about specific conditions which may not fit the ACIP categories, but which are just as high risk and prevalent among VHA's population. VHA staff indicated they were looking at that veteran specific data to possibly add more high-risk conditions.**

**Unfortunately, we are now receiving reports from the field that VHA leadership directed VHA patients only be given the vaccine under priority 1-C if they have one of the specific ACIP high-risk conditions, and no others.**

***Sent via email to*** ACIP@cdc.gov
***Submitted via*** www.regulations.gov

**RE: Docket CDC-2020-0124**

Dr. José R. Romero, MD, FAAP
Chair, Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road, NE
Atlanta, GA 30329-4027

Dear Chairman Romero and Members of the Advisory Committee:

The health and safety of our nation's disabled veterans, and the caregivers who support them, are a top priority for the below signed veteran serving organizations. We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP). The ACIP's official recommendations on the prioritization of groups for early COVID-19 vaccination is of paramount interest to our organizations, and the veterans and caregivers we serve.

We agree with the ACIP's interim guidance and assessment that health care personnel and residents of long-term care facilities receive the vaccine in this initial phase. And we agree with the Department of Veterans Affairs plan to follow that guidance for health care workers within the Veterans Health Administration, and residents of VA congregant living facilities.

We were especially interested in the apparent discussion by your Committee at it's 23 November 2020 meeting where the relative efficacy of prioritizing next either essential workers or adults 65 and older along with adults with high-risk medical conditions. While the discussion slides showed prioritizing high-risk adults and essential workers averted more infections, it also showed prioritizing 65+ adults and high-risk adults averted more deaths.

This is an especially important issue for disabled veterans, and the caregivers who serve them, and your guidance, and any ability to deviate among specific institutions like the VA, must address the unique health issues for disabled veterans and their caregivers. For disabled veterans, many have compromised immune and pulmonary systems, driving them to forgo their VA provided home health care for fear of infection. And the ailments and disabilities which place these disabled veterans at higher risk may not be clearly and easily classified, or are caused by toxic exposures for which there are not clearly defined diagnoses, and therefore many not fit easily into the clear-cut categories in the current ACIP high-risk condition list.

For the caregivers to these veterans (and even to active duty military personnel), they are in the unique position of being so designated by the Department of Veterans Affairs (and Defense), and being responsible for supporting many of their activities of daily living compromised by their disabilities. During the pandemic, when those families determined they had to terminate home health care, the caregiver took on even greater responsibility, including what would likely be considered direct medical care. We would argue they can almost be considered additional healthcare workers to meet the gaps in health care caused by the pandemic.

**Given that, we respectfully request ACIP consider the unique ailments and situations of disabled veterans in the prioritization of High-Risk Adults. Specifically, we believe high-risk adult disabled veterans should be considered for inclusion in Phase A-1(b). Further, we respectfully request ACIPconsider some process by which Veterans Health Administration providers can classify disabled veterans as "high-risk" even if they do not fit into one of the high-risk conditions identified by ACIP. Finally, we respectfully request ACIP consider adding caregivers to the appropriate phase forwhich the disabled veterans they support would be eligible, and to support their receiving a vaccine with their disabled veteran.**

We believe the Veterans Health Administration has laid out a clear and cogent plan to immunize its health care workers and the veterans it serves. Their plan clearly draws from your Committee's guidance, and we believe your consideration of these specific issues will best help

VHA best support the veterans who have sacrificed health and wellness for their country, and the caregivers who support them. Should you have any questions or require additional information, please Bob Carey atB.Carey@IndependenceFund.org.

Thank you for your attention to these concerns. The veteran and military serving organizations belowstand ready to assist as you consider how best to safely and efficiently distribute vaccines to prevent COVID-19 infections amongst military personnel, veterans, and the caregivers who support them.

Sincerely,

The Independence Fund
American Retirees
Association Armed Forces
Marketing Council
Armed Forces Retirees
AssociationHealing Household
6
Heroes Athletic Association
Military Order of the Purple
HeartMilitary Order of the
World Wars Reserve Officers
Association
Sea Service Family
Foundation TREA: The
Enlisted Association
VetsFirst

*Question 1.* **Will VHA identify additional high-risk conditions beyond those identified by CDC and ACIP to qualify veterans for higher priority access to COVID vaccines?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will look into VA's plan for distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to veterans and employees. I pledge to communicate with this Committee on this issue if confirmed. VA must work closely with the CDC, and advocate that prioritization favors older and medically vulnerable veterans.

*Question 2.* **If so, when will that updated guidance be given, and will you share that with our office and the veteran organizations?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will investigate the approach taken by VHA on this issue, and

I will communicate the timing of updated guidance to you and the Committee.

**GI Bill Oversight Reforms**

**Background:**

**Last December Congress passed the Johnny Isakson and David R. Roe, MD Veterans HealthCare and Benefits Improvement Act, which requires VA and State Approving Agencies to develop and execute a risk-based survey of approved colleges and universities to ensure their programs are providing quality training/education that leads to good paying jobs. This new model of oversight, which will replace the compliance and risk-based survey approach, was developed by the National Association of State Approving Agencies in partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs and other organizations from the public and private sector.**

*Question 3.* **May I have your commitment that you will work with your staff and NASAA to ensure this new Risk Based Survey model and method is fully implemented next year to ensure our Veterans are protected from bad actors and are provided with access to only quality education and training?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I commit to work with your staff and NASAA to ensure the statute is implemented as intended by Congress and to ensure that our veterans are protected from bad actors.

**Service Dogs**

**Background:**

**Last Congress, I introduced the K9s for Veterans Therapy Act, which would require the VA to implement a pilot program to assess the effectiveness of addressing post-deployment mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder through a method where veterans train service dogs for veterans with disabilities. There is great interest in the use of service dogs for veterans, from dogs who assist veterans with physical tasks to dogs who alleviate post-deployment mental health and cognitive conditions. For example, the VA recently completed a clinical trial examining the efficacy of service dogs versus emotional support dogs in mitigating PTSD symptoms in veterans; the monographs are currently in review at the National Academies of Sciences.**

*Question 4.* **What do you see as the optimal role for the VA in advancing the knowledge and best practices of service dog interventions for veterans, scaling up such programs throughout the country, and ensuring that every veteran who wants a service dog can get one?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will look into VA's role and current policies around this issue. I will approach decision making by considering the goals of increased access and improved outcomes for veterans, and will work with this Committee on the way forward in this area.

*Question 5.* **What are the areas of greatest need currently in this field?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will look into this issue, taking into account veteran

preferences and existing data and information at VA, and provide a thorough response to this question.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Dan Sullivan**

*Question 1.* **With the large distances that rural Alaskans routinely have to travel to receive emergency care, do you support the continuation of the equitable adjustment put in place by Sec. Wilkie that allows the VA to cover travel expense for air and ground ambulance for Veterans who are not travel eligible?**

**RESPONSE:** While I am not specifically aware of the policies in place on this issue, if confirmed, I will review the information with a focus on increasing access and improving outcomes for the veterans.

*Question 2.* **Alaska has the highest cost of health care in the country and a limited number of healthcare providers and health care infrastructure. It does, however, have a unique Joint Venture relationship between the VA and the DoD. Do you support the integration of such resources into something like a Federal Healthcare System to create greater efficiency for both Department's eligible populations?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would be open to considering an integrated partnership approach to serving veterans.

*Question 3.* **Upon confirmation, can commit that you'll also take a serious look at supporting the something similar to the North Chicago model for Alaska?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes, if confirmed, I will commit to exploring this issue with VA, DoD, and Congress.

*Question 4.* **The Biden Campaign plan on presumptive conditions specifically includes those associated with burn pit exposure. In addition to the National Academies report on the Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry, the DoD and VA have regularly mentioned that the agencies have 12 active studies focusing on airborne hazards and open burn pits, and over 30 studies focusing on respiratory health in the deployed environment. If confirmed, can you commit that you'll follow up with me immediately with a timeline for when these VA reports are to be finalized and the findings of these reports when they're available?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. I believe we must do right by veterans. Under the laws established by Congress, VA has an obligation to those who are injured or made ill by toxic chemicals

while serving our county. If confirmed, I will investigate the reports you have mentioned and provide timelines for when they are expected to be finalized.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Marsha Blackburn**

**Information Technology**

*Question 1.* **Mr. McDonough, it is my understanding that the Electronic Health Record (EHR) rollout has been paused as tiger teams assess the sustained and significant loss of system productivity. If confirmed, how do you intend to coordinate across the network to manage resources, meet objectives, and mitigate risks in EHR implementation?**

**RESPONSE:** I am committed to working with Congress, both collaboratively and transparently if confirmed. This is a major initiative, to which you have dedicated significant resources, and you should have access to metrics, milestones, and implementation timeline. If confirmed, I would look to data from the initial rollout and feedback from clinicians and veterans, as well as teams that I understand are already reviewing the implementation, to inform the way forward. If the initial results are not what we want, if confirmed, I would assemble an advisory team of external and internal health IT experts with experience in this arena to ensure VA uses industry best practices to further avoid potential pitfalls and develop an effective change management strategy to ensure the system is adopted properly across the VA to best serve veterans.

*Question 2.* **Mr. McDonough, if confirmed, what are your specific short- and long-term goals to address interoperability and uninterrupted health information exchange between DoD and VA?**

**RESPONSE:** In order to fully and accurately respond to this question, I would rely on data that will be available to me once confirmed. If confirmed, I will work with my leadership team, DoD partners, and the Office of the Electronic Health Record Modernization to develop short and long-term goals to ensure maximum interoperability between both departments and report back to this Committee.

*Question 3.* **Mr. McDonough, as the transition from VistA to Cerner EHR progresses, about 30% of VistA (the non-EHR functionality) will continue to provide system support across the VA. If confirmed, will you ensure a detailed plan, with established milestones and time-bound goals, exists to manage the individual interoperability requirements at each site –ahead of site rollout? Will**

**you commit to reviewing any existing VistA transition plans, and to regular communication and transparency with Congress as plans are piloted and validated?**

**RESPONSE:** Yes. These types of plans will be critical to ensuring that EHRM roll out has minimal impact on veteran care. If confirmed, I will review the EHRM development and implementation plan and the VistA transition plan to ensure VA has proper cutover to the new system without affecting veterans safety to care. I will direct regular communication and transparency with Congress as the initiative moves forward.

*Question 4.* **Do you believe the Chief Technology Officer and Chief Information Officer roles within VA are defined well enough to tackle current and future modernization efforts? How would you improve or empower these roles, if confirmed?**

**RESPONSE:** In my view, if we look at veterans at the center of the decision-making process, the role of information technology and the CIO is to support the customer-facing components across VA to facilitate access for veterans and to improve outcomes for veterans. All decisions about IT should flow from those two objectives. If confirmed, I would clarify roles in a way that empowers them to engage in initiatives that support those efforts, and would welcome input from the Committee on specific concerns as that happens.

*Question 5.* **Mr. McDonough, how does your professional experience inform your ability to meld the nation's largest healthcare system with 21st century technology?**

**RESPONSE:** As White House Chief of Staff, I worked closely with Information Technology leaders across the federal government to modernize our systems to keep pace with the rest of industry. As an example, the US Digital Service we launched during my time as Chief of Staff, which was continued under the Trump Administration, and whose goal is to draw on expertise in the private sector to use design and technology to deliver better services to the American people. US Digital Services transforms critical, public-facing services, rethinks how the Government buys digital services, and brings in top technical talent into civic service. This type of innovative and transformative approach is necessary at VA as well.

**Acquisition Management**

*Question 6.* **Mr. McDonough, I have a deep concern for the VA's supply chain management and broken acquisition practices, especially the use of Government Purchase Cards (GPCs) that have a documented history of mismanagement and misuse. Do you believe the VA's current acquisition processes reflect a high-quality system of best practices, and do they effectively utilize taxpayer dollars?**

**RESPONSE:** I share your concern, as VA is on the GAO's high-risk list for acquisition management, which highlights the fact that the VA has work to do to become more efficient and effective with supply chain and acquisition management. If confirmed, I will direct the Department to take steps necessary to remove VA from

GAO's high-risk rating, and will seek opportunities to leverage best practices in this area

*Question 7.* **Mr. McDonough, what are your specific goals, long- and short-term, related to acquisition reform within the VA?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I would direct my staff to execute steps required to get removed from GAO high-risk list for acquisition management, operationalize the enterprise requirements process and make it a part of VA's permanent senior governance process and assess the scope and organization structure of the acquisition workforce.
With the information gained from these initiatives, I will develop specific goals related to acquisition reform supporting VA's mission and share them with the Committee.

*Question 8.* **Mr. McDonough, business systems transformation will get at the root of many endemic issues plaguing VA process, including supply chain management. What is your commitment, if confirmed, to the development of clear, scalable, and adjustable process maps that are agile enough to improve VA's transformation over time?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will support efforts to modernize and transform the business systems at the VA. These processes must be agile enough to adjust to meet the changing demands of veterans.

**Budget and Spending**

*Question 9.* **Mr. McDonough, in the last decade, the Department of Veterans Affairs' budget has nearly doubled – going from $122 billion in FY2011, to $243 billion in FY2021. If confirmed, what specific objectives would you set to ensure transparency with Congress, and accountability in execution of spending?**

**RESPONSE:** I understand that information from VA is necessary to support this Committee in its constitutional duty to perform oversight of the Department. In order for that to happen, VA must provide timely, complete, and accurate information. If confirmed, while that will be my goal, there may be occasions when you are provided incomplete initial information in an effort to ensure you have a timely response, and then a more full response once all the facts are available. If confirmed, I will work to restore trust between VA and this Committee by establishing regular lines of communication.

*Question 10.* **Mr. McDonough, if confirmed, what would be your biggest budgetary priorities and why?**

**RESPONSE:** My priorities would be consistent with what the President has described as his vision for VA: delivery of world-class health care to America's veterans, as measured by access, quality, and satisfaction; timely and accurate adjudication of benefits claims; and more aggressive efforts by VA and other agencies to increase access to mental health care, reduce stigma associated with that care, and reduce veteran suicide. If confirmed, I

will work to (1) achieve the right balance between care provided in the community and care provided through VA to ensure that veterans have timely access to the highest, world-quality, healthcare services. I will (2) provide women veterans with access to the services they need, in a welcoming environment. I will (3) work diligently to implement a whole of government approach to fight suicide, including (4) timely access to mental health services at VA and in the community. I will (5) increase support to families, caregivers, and survivors as partners in caring for veterans to ensure they receive the services they need for themselves and for the veterans they love.

**Post-Hearing Questions for the Record**

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee**
**Hearing to Consider Pending Nomination of Denis R. McDonough**
**January 27, 2021**

**From Senator Kevin Cramer**

**Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT) and other innovative therapies:**

*Question 1.* **How do you see Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy playing a role in the future of the VA?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I look forward to reviewing the data from VA use of this treatment to date. It is important that the Department remain innovative when considering treatment for these types of challenging injuries.

*Question 2.* **Can I count on you to work with me to ensure this therapy does not fall through the cracks?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I commit to reviewing the analysis of the treatment consistent with the intent of the John Scott legislation, and then work with you to identify the best way to deliver the kind of innovative care needed.

*Question 3.* **Are you willing to discuss and explore other innovative therapies for our veterans? I worry sticking with the status-quo, especially within a bureaucracy as large as the VA, ends up working against our veterans rather than for them. Are you willing to work with me to ensure the system works for – not against – our veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** I do not intend to simply maintain the status quo, if confirmed. I willlook to challenge assumptions and view all questions through the lens of

innovation that supports increased access and improved outcomes for veterans.

**Rural Veterans and Native American Veteran Populations:**

*Question 4.* **How do you plan to address the needs of rural veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** Veterans deserve access to high quality, convenient care regardless of where they live. Increasing access for rural and highly rural veterans requires at least three steps. First, VA must leverage partnerships with community providers. Success here means doing a much better job than has been done to date to promptly and accurately remunerate care in the community. Second, the Department has to build on the progress to date in telehealth and virtual care, which will also require thinking creatively about how to facilitate use of these technologies when access to internet service is limited. Key to that will be making full use of the authorities and funding provided in the CARES Act and partnering with FCC to increase access. Lastly, there must be much faster progress made on recruiting and retaining talent to staff existing rural VA facilities. Each of these lines of effort will be priorities for VA if I am confirmed.

*Question 5.* **How do you plan to address the needs of Native American veterans?**

**RESPONSE:** Meeting the standard of excellent care and provision of benefits that the President, Congress and the country expect of VA is not possible without providing such excellence for every veteran – particularly our Native American veterans. If confirmed, I will take proactive efforts to reduce disparities, and make clear that these initiatives should be prioritized across the Department. I will solicit input from Tribal veterans and their tribal leaders to learn how best the Department can serve them and will push for adequate funding for initiatives designed to support all minority veterans. I will also leverage the Department's partnerships with HIS and other federal agencies to ensure Tribal veterans have access to testing, care, and vaccinations.

**Telehealth and COVID-19:**

*Question 6.* **How do you plan to address the needs of our veterans during the time of this pandemic? What is working? What isn't working? What could be better?**

**RESPONSE:** Handling the pandemic on behalf of veterans will be among my first priorities, if confirmed. That means ensuring VA staff has access to PPE and safety protocols, quickly hiring new staff as needed to meet veteran care demand and leveraging telehealth and other innovative care models to support continued access to treatment. All veterans should have access to testing, care, and to vaccines. Distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to veterans and employees will be among the most important initial decisions I would make, if confirmed. The existing distribution system must be leveraged to ensure that adequate supply is delivered wherever veterans are-- including highly rural veterans.

*Question 7.* **How do you see telehealth playing a role in the future of the VA post-COVID?**

**RESPONSE:** COVID-19 led to a significant expansion of telehealth across the country in order to safely provide continued access to care. I do believe there is room for telehealth to grow as an essential component of overall care for veterans. If confirmed, I will work with VA stakeholders to permanently expand telehealth toprovide veterans with an option to receive services within their own homes.

**CBOCs:**

*Question 8.* **How do you plan to address the needs of CBOC's?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I look forward to better understanding the unique needs of VACBOCs, and their relationships to the communities they serve. In order to meet the goal of increased access and improved outcomes, we must appropriately staff and resource CBOCs so that they are well positions to meet the needs of the local veterans.

**General:**

*Question 9.* **What can we do, as members of the VA Committee, to support your efforts in order to best help our Veterans? Are there any gaps? And if so, how can we address and help fill in those gaps?**

**RESPONSE:** If confirmed, I will ask this Committee to support my top three goals for VA: delivery of world-class health care to America's veterans, as measured by access, quality, and satisfaction; timely and accurate adjudication of benefits claims; and more aggressive efforts by VA and other agencies to increase access to mental health care, reduce stigma associated with that care, and reduce veteran suicide.
I would welcome the opportunity to engage with you, if confirmed, once I have identified any gaps or necessary expansion of authorities.

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