

**** OPENING STATEMENT ****

- I call this hearing of the United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs to order.
- Welcome everyone. I appreciate those of you here, and those participating or watching remotely.
- The purpose of this hearing will be to hear from the President's nominee to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Denis R. McDonough.
- 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 the timely care, services and benefits they have earned and deserve.
- Today, we are here to determine whether you are the right person 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.
- At this time, I ask Unanimous Consent that those questions and responses be made part of the record of this hearing.

- The transition period between Administrations can often lead to a degree of turmoil and confusion, and can generate uncertainty inside and outside an agency.
- Today, 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 under a year, the responsibility of ensuring VA has everything it needs to treat veterans and care for its employees will rest on your shoulders.
- 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 there are now more than 8,300 veteran families who are without their loved ones – including the more than 3,100 VA has cared for within its walls.
- Denis – your chief responsibility during this unprecedented time is to save as many lives as possible.

- That includes advocating within the administration for VA's fair share of vaccines and ensuring deployment of those vaccines is near flawless.
- And it means making sure front-line workers have everything they need to care for sick veterans and protect themselves from the 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 the coronavirus.
- This virus is taking a toll on those VA heroes who care for our vets, and we are entrusting you with their safety.
- I am pleased the Administration has kept on Dr. Richard Stone to help ensure a smooth transition for veterans seeking VA care for the normal ailments in life and for those suffering from the coronavirus.
- But it will be some time until you have a full leadership team in place so there will be a lot riding on your shoulders.
- In the meantime, you will be assisted by a capable group of civil servants who will help you take stock of where things stand and implement reforms where needed.

- One area that will need 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 that this important area gets the attention it needs.
- Additionally, this Committee reaffirmed its bipartisan reputation in the last Congress through passage of several historic reforms - from the 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.
- Implementation of these recent reforms must be consistent with Congressional intent and must be swift. Veterans are counting on that.
- There are other critical reforms that have been in the works for years and need serious attention – from expansion of the caregiver program to the Electronic Health Record Modernization effort that has taken way too long and cost taxpayers way too much.
- But above all, I want to leave you with one last thought.
- During your predecessor's nomination hearing, I told him that the sacred mission of serving veterans and

their families must always transcend personal agendas or political affiliations.

- In the end, I believe he lost sight of that. And I called him out. I will hold you to that same standard.
- Though there is a great political divide in this nation, veterans across the country and Members on both sides of the aisle are united by a very basic expectation – that the next VA Secretary be an individual of honesty, integrity and vision, who listens to 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, and thank you again for your willingness to serve on behalf of our nation's veterans.