

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement Chairman Patty Murray

Hearing: Nomination of Margaret Bartley to be Judge of United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims and Coral Wong Pietsch to be Judge of United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims
March 28, 2012

“Good morning. Welcome to today’s hearing to consider the nominations of Ms. Margaret Bartley and General Coral Wong Pietsch to be Judges of the United States Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. I am pleased to welcome the nominees and their families here today, and I congratulate each of you on your nomination.

The nominees sitting before us have impressive resumes, strong credentials and a long history of service. We’ll learn more about their qualifications during introductions, so I won’t spend time repeating what we’ll hear shortly. As we begin today’s hearing, I think it is important to recognize some of the realities facing the larger disability claims system and, as a result, the Court.

It’s no secret that there are severe problems with the claims system and some continuing trends that can’t be ignored. We know that it takes VA too long to issue decisions, we know that VA’s error rate remains far too high, and we also know that the number and complexity of claims being filed continues to grow. These are the facts. Given the increasing number of claims, VA’s error rate, and that every veteran has an absolute right to appeal an adverse decision of the Board, there is no shortage of potential cases that may reach the Court in the very near future.

And so the problems with the larger disability claims system become the problems of the Court. As our nominees know, the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims holds the special responsibility as the only national court that reviews veterans’ benefits decisions. The importance and impact of this mandate are clear. For many veterans, the Court is seen as their last hope after fighting for months, years and in some cases decades to obtain the benefits they have earned. They look to the Court for a fair and equitable resolution of their claim.

These nominations are of such great importance because of the vital role the Court plays in service to our Nation’s veterans. The Court has been asked to meet its unique obligations under the pressure of an increasing workload. As the number of claims decided by the Board has increased, so has the number of appeals being filed at the Court.

Given the substantial workload that each judge carries, these vacancies have to be filled by qualified, competent, and motivated individuals. And, given the size of the backlog and the number of claims being filed, we will no doubt continue to see a growth in the number of appeals over time. This is why we owe it to our veterans to proceed with these nominations in a timely manner.

In closing, I would note that the nominees have each completed the Committee’s extensive judicial questionnaires, all of which will appear in the record of today’s hearing. There will also

be an opportunity to submit post hearing questions. I would ask that the nominees respond to any questions as quickly as possible in order for the Committee to be able to move forward with their confirmations.

Thank you again for appearing before us today. With that, I will turn to Ranking Member Burr for his opening statement.”