

Margaret Bartley, Nominee for Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims

Opening Statement of Margaret Bartley  
Nominee for Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims  
United States Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs  
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Thank you Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members of the Committee. I am honored to have been nominated by the President to be a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims and I'm thankful for the opportunity to appear before you as you consider me for that position.

With me today is my husband Charlie, who served as a Marine Corps Reservist, and my daughters Eve and Muriel. I am indebted to them for their support, patience and love. I also want to thank my large extended family for their support and enthusiasm about my nomination. I especially thank those who have taken time to mentor me over the years, in particular, Ron Abrams and Bart Stichman of National Veterans Legal Services Program, and retired Judge Jonathan Steinberg. Also, I want to thank all of my co-workers and friends who are here today to support me.

While my father, godfather and many other family members served in the armed forces, I never considered veterans benefits law as a career until my third year of law school. During that year I participated in a public interest clinical program that focused on providing representation to veterans who were appealing their denial of benefits. At the time, this was 1991-1992, it was the only veterans benefits law school clinic in the country. I handled two appeals while in law school, one before the Board of Veterans' Appeals and one before the newly formed Court of Veterans Appeals. Both of the veterans I represented obtained relief on appeal. They were rewarded for pursuing their appeals and, likewise, I found the experience greatly rewarding. It was a privilege to use my skills to help these honorable men who had contributed several years of their lives to protecting our Nation.

My experiences in the clinic determined my career path. Since that time, I have worked to help veterans obtain entitlement to benefits and have endeavored to fulfill the final wish of so many veterans, which is to ensure that their surviving spouse receives death benefits. Much of my focus has been on helping service officers, the lay representatives who work for veterans service organizations and state departments of veterans affairs, handle claims and appeals. I develop advocacy strategies based on Veterans Court decisions and provide advice to service officers working in VA regional offices.

In addition, as the Director of Outreach & Education for the Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program, I train and advise lawyers who provide free representation to veterans and survivors at

the Court. The Program helps to reduce the Court's pro se rate while giving individual veterans the tremendous benefit of free skilled legal assistance.

During my 18 1/2 years working in veterans law, it has been an honor to exchange ideas with and work with veterans, veterans service organizations, veterans service officers, lawyers who represent veterans, and VA and other government employees.

I understand the great significance of the role of a judge on the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims. It is significant to individual veterans who lodge appeals with the Court expecting to receive a just decision, and to thousands of service members and veterans and their families, who may eventually be impacted by a precedent decision of the Court. Similarly, the Court's work is of significance to all in the U.S. who support the veterans benefits system with their tax dollars. I hope and believe that my professional experience and my personal commitment to and understanding of veterans law will prepare me to meet the challenges and responsibilities inherent in the role of Veterans Court judge.

In my career thus far, I have been a vigorous advocate for veterans on a variety of issues. If confirmed, I would apply the same vigor that I have used as an advocate to providing fair-minded and impartial review of Board of Veterans' Appeals decisions concerning entitlement to VA benefits.

I thank the Committee for the consideration it is giving to my nomination. If confirmed, I would do my utmost to work with other judges and with Court staff to provide prompt and judicious review of Board decisions.

Chairman Murray, I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you or Members of the Committee may have.