

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Gould, I tell you the same thing I told Secretary Shinseki during his confirmation hearing - assuming your confirmation as the next Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, you will face tremendous challenges. In my view, leading VA is one of the most challenging jobs, in or out of government, and that is especially true in a time of war like now.

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

Panel II

We will move now to the nomination of Tammy Duckworth to be the Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs within the Department of Veterans Affairs. Ms. Duckworth is no stranger to this Committee, having testified before us on three occasions - most recently in November 2007 - when she offered her thoughts on the issue of seamless transition. As someone with deep roots in my home state of Hawai'i, I know she brings the spirit of aloha, which will serve her well if confirmed by the Senate.

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

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

We recently heard of instances in Miami and Murfreesboro, Tennessee where thousands of veterans were potentially exposed to infections following colonoscopy. These are serious situations, and I have asked the Inspector General to investigate the facts and circumstances.

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

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

In addition to being the "public face," this Assistant Secretary also represents VA across the entire federal government, as well as with state and local governments. If confirmed, Ms. Duckworth will need to interact effectively with many agencies, from DoD to SBA to represent the issues and interests of veterans, including on matters such as homelessness, unemployment, housing, disability policy and health care.

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

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