

HEARING ON THE NOMINATIONS OF
RAYMOND M. JEFFERSON, TO BE AN
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF LABOR FOR
VETERANS EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING, AND
JOAN M. EVANS, TO BE AN
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
FOR CONGRESSIONAL AND LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

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WEDNESDAY, JULY 22, 2009

United States Senate,
Committee on Veterans Affairs,
Washington, D.C.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:06 a.m.,
in Room 418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Daniel K.
Akaka, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Akaka, Murray, Tester, Burris, Burr,
and Isakson.

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN AKAKA

Chairman Akaka. Aloha. Aloha and welcome to everyone
here this morning. The hearing of the Senate Committee on
Veterans Affairs will come to order.

This morning's hearing is to consider the President's
nomination of Raymond M. Jefferson to be Assistant Secretary
of Labor for Veterans Employment and Training. Following
Mr. Jefferson's testimony and questions from the committee,

we will turn to Joan Evans's nomination to be VA's Assistant Secretary of Congressional and Legislative Affairs.

I note that we have invited the members of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions to join with us this morning as the committee considers Mr. Jefferson's nomination. We share many common interests and issues, as well, with that committee, including this nomination. I am hopeful that our two committees and then the full Senate will move expeditiously to consider Mr. Jefferson's nomination.

This position of Assistant Secretary for Veterans Employment and Training is a demanding and difficult one. If confirmed, Mr. Jefferson will serve as the leading advocate for efforts to meet the employment needs of our nation's veterans. He will need to bring visibility and enthusiasm to the job in order to fulfill his job responsibilities.

From the enforcement of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act to the alarmingly high rate of unemployment among recently separated veterans, his responsibilities will be significant. The myriad needs of veterans who are service-connected disabled, homeless, or incarcerated will confront him, as will the concerns of women veterans and the spouses of active duty personnel. He will need to work in close cooperation with those

representing segments of the labor market as well as VA and DOD to ensure that veterans obtain good jobs and are able to pursue meaningful careers. At all times, it will be important that his office focuses on the difference between a career and just a job.

Following any opening remarks other members may care to make, I have the honor of formally introducing Mr. Jefferson to the committee. I will share more details on Mr. Jefferson's exemplary work and military experience. I believe strongly that his combined service in the public sector, private sector, and military make him an outstanding candidate for this position.

Mr. Jefferson, I look forward to your testimony today, your responses to questions from committee members, and to any post-hearing questions.

And now I would like to call on my friend, the Ranking Member, Senator Burr.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURR

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Aloha-- Chairman Akaka. Aloha.

Senator Burr. --and welcome to our witnesses, our nominees, and their families. More importantly, congratulations on your nomination. And more importantly, thank you for being with us today.

Although the positions for which you have been

nominated are two different departments, both contribute to a very important goal: Meeting the needs of those who have served and sacrificed on behalf of our nation. And I might say, Mr. Chairman, your offer for members of HELP to attend, I am the token representative of the HELP Committee--

[Laughter.]

Senator Burr. --so just pretend that I am wearing a dual hat today.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs, can help to advance that goal by fostering open communications between the VA and Congress. In part, that means ensuring that the Congressional requests are answered without hassle or delays. But it also means being proactive and alerting Congress about emerging trends, needs, or problems that may impact veterans in our home States and across the nation. This free flow of information will assist us in understanding what is working well at the VA and where improvements, more importantly, are needed. More importantly, it will allow us to work together to ensure that VA's programs and services are effective and are actually helping to improve the lives of our country's veterans and the lives of their families.

Ms. Evans, if confirmed, you will play a key role in advancing this type of communications and collaboration

between VA and Congress. Currently, I do have some concerns about whether VA is living up to President Obama's vision of, quote, "an unprecedented level of openness in government," unquote. So I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how the communication could be improved.

Now turning to you, Mr. Jefferson, I want to first thank you for your service and your personal sacrifice on behalf of the country. As the newest member of the Board of Visitors of West Point, I look forward to serving in that capacity as long as they will have me.

Also, I appreciate your willingness to take on the challenge of serving as the Department of Labor's Assistant Secretary for Veterans Employment and Training. That organization helps meet the needs of those who have served by administering employment and training programs for veterans, providing transition assistance to separating service members, and helping enforce laws that protect the employment rights of veterans and military personnel.

With veterans now experiencing unemployment rates of over eight percent, it is more important than ever that veterans are provided with whatever assistance they need to find quality, full-time employment. To that end, Mr. Jefferson, I would be interested in your views on what more can be done to make sure that veterans are being well served by the Department of Labor's employment and training

programs.

Also, our nation currently has thousands of Guard and Reserve members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, including over 4,000 members of the North Carolina Army National Guard right now, several of whom were killed in action in the past three weeks. Many of these citizen soldiers left behind valued civilian jobs when they answered the call from their country. And when they return, they deserve to be quickly and properly reinstated in their jobs as required by the Uniformed Service Employment and Reemployment Rights Act.

Mr. Jefferson, if confirmed, you would be in charge of helping resolve service members' concerns if USERRA violations do occur, and perhaps more importantly, in helping to prevent employers from violating this law in the first place. For all employers, particularly the Federal Government--and I will tell you that I was quite alarmed at the number of complaints that had been filed by Federal Government agencies throughout this up tempo deployment period--it is important that they understand this law and are doing everything they can to protect the employment rights of those who serve.

Mr. Jefferson, I look forward to your ideas on how we make this a reality nationwide.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate you calling this hearing to discuss the qualifications of both these nominees. I remain

committed to ensuring that we have a full complement of leaders, both VA and Veterans Employment Training Service, who will work every day to improve the lives of veterans and of veterans' families. I welcome both of our nominees.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.

It is my deep honor and privilege to introduce Ray Jefferson to the committee at this time. From his military experience to his pursuit of a career in public service, Mr. Jefferson has demonstrated a commitment to excellence and a spirit of selflessness that are rarely seen.

I have known Ray since he served as a White House Fellow in the year 2000 and I have enjoyed working with him immensely. By choosing to call Hawaii as home, he makes Hawaiians proud.

Ray graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1988 with a major in leadership. He served as an Army officer with the Infantry Rangers in Special Forces, holding leadership positions in the U.S. Presidential Honor Guard, Third Ranger Battalion, and First Special Forces Group. In 1995, while attempting to protect his teammates from a prematurely detonating hand grenade, he lost all five fingers on his left hand.

Following treatment and recuperation at Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu, Ray attended Harvard's Kennedy

School of Government, where he earned an M.P.A. in strategic management. Subsequently, he attended Harvard Business School where he earned an M.B.A. and was recognized with a Dean's Award for Exceptional Leadership and Service.

After graduation, Ray was selected as a White House fellow and worked as a Special Assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. He went on to serve as a Fulbright Fellow in Singapore. In 2003, the Governor of Hawaii appointed him to be the Deputy Director for the Department of Business Economic Development and Tourism. This position involved creating jobs, facilitating business development, diversifying the economy, and creating renewable energy initiatives.

He was selected by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell as one of the two inaugural recipients of the Harrison A. Schmidt Fulbright Alumni Leadership Award for Dedication to Public Service.

Mr. Jefferson has accumulated a wealth of experience in management, coordinating, and leadership. He brings with him an enthusiasm and zeal for the position to which he has been nominated that is really remarkable.

I am proud to consider him a friend and I recommend him to the committee without qualification. I look forward to working closely with him on meeting the employment needs of this nation's veterans and separating service members, as

well.

Mr. Jefferson, I understand that you have brought along a number of friends and associates this morning. Before I ask you to begin your remarks, could you please introduce them to the committee.

Senator Burr. Mr. Chairman, before he does that, could I say that Mr. Jefferson spent almost three years in North Carolina in different stints and I claim as my ownership to him--

[Laughter.]

Senator Burr. --as you might in Hawaii, because North Carolina is a much more memorable stop for anybody in the Army.

[Laughter.]

Chairman Akaka. With that and before I ask you to introduce your family and friends, let me ask Senator Murray for any opening remarks you may have.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR MURRAY

Senator Murray. Mr. Chairman, thank you so much.

Raymond, very nice to see you here and I am sorry I missed you in my office yesterday. We had a conflict with a vote. But I have read through your resume and I am very, very impressed in your taking on an issue that is extremely important to me in making sure that the men and women who serve us are rightfully and gainfully employed when they

come home. I will look forward to hearing your comments this morning and having a chance to ask a few questions.

But really, I really am looking forward to working with you, and Mr. Chairman, I just ask that my full statement be submitted for the record.

[The prepared statement of Senator Murray follows:]

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Chairman Akaka. Thank you. It will be included in the record.

Mr. Jefferson, will you please proceed with introducing your family and friends.

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TESTIMONY OF RAYMOND M. JEFFERSON, NOMINATED TO BE
AN ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF LABOR FOR VETERANS
EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, Senator. I would like to introduce my mother, Mrs. Nadia Jefferson. My mother is an Egyptian American and a lifelong public servant. She spent her life as a teacher's aide for physically challenged children and I am just very honored, Mom, to have you here today. Thank you.

I have quite a few, so let me just briefly mention, I would like to thank and acknowledge a good friend, Mr. Scott Gould, the Honorable Scott Gould, the Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs. We have been friends for quite some time and I know we are looking forward, if confirmed, to just having unprecedented interagency collaboration.

I would like to acknowledge many of my friends from the military academies, from West Point and also the Naval Academy, and we have quite a few members from both academies of the Class of 1988, so if the Class of 1988 would kindly stand up.

[Applause.]

Mr. Jefferson. We have some other--when I was going through the rehabilitation program, I had the privilege of attending the Harvard University, and the Director of Admissions for Harvard's Graduate School of Government came

down from Harvard today and I am very grateful to her to giving me the opportunity the opportunity to attend that school and accepting my humble application. Alexandra Martinez, thank you for being here.

[Applause.]

Mr. Jefferson. And just two more introductions. When I was going through graduate school, I had the privilege of participating in the Department of Veterans Affairs Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, and my case officer, Rick Repucci in Boston, just retired after 29 years with the VA. He flew down to be here today. He really helped me when I was getting my life back together, and Rick, thank you for your service.

[Applause.]

Mr. Jefferson. And I would finally like to acknowledge two veterans who are here today. Both of them were severely injured in the line of duty. One is my West Point classmate and good friend of 25 years, Tony Dinallo. Tony had a rappelling accident. He was dropped 50 feet. He was a complete paraplegic, and in the period of one year, he miraculously was able to work himself back to being fully functioning. Tony, thanks for being here today.

[Applause.]

Mr. Jefferson. And finally, it has just been a long journey from that hospital bed in Tripler back in 1995 to

this room today. When I was in the hospital, there was a gentleman who came to visit me. He had lost his leg. He was an amputee, and from the first days, he just gave me a lot of encouragement to keep going. I lost touch with him after 1995 and we just recently had a reunion about a month ago, and he is here today and his name is Nadir Ogundi from the United States Navy.

[Applause.]

Mr. Jefferson. I just want to acknowledge the many friends and family who are here today who for time reasons I haven't introduced, but their unfailing support and confidence have played a huge role in my life and I am very thankful and grateful. Thank you for being here.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you, Mr. Jefferson.

In addition, I, too, want to recognize Deputy Secretary Gould, who is with us today. I would like to welcome you, Secretary Gould. We appreciate you taking your valuable time to be here in support of these nominees. Thank you very much.

Before I administer the oath to Mr. Jefferson, I am going to ask Senator Tester for any opening remarks he may have.

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR TESTER

Senator Tester. Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I very

much appreciate that and I very much appreciate you being here today, Mr. Jefferson.

I have got to tell you that I was very impressed by you when we met in my office and I am further impressed by you packing the committee room. I think that speaks well of you and it speaks well of your commitment to them and their commitment to you. Friends are the most valuable commodity you can get, easiest to lose and hardest to get. So I think that speaks well for you.

I am not going to take a lot of time, Mr. Chairman. I will tell you that when Mr. Jefferson and I spoke in my office, we talked about rural America and veterans that live in rural America and how we can get them jobs. We have got a region in America called Montana that is as big as the Northeastern corridor where, quite honestly, we need to do a better job at helping our veterans find work.

I think there are five folks there. I would typically say we need more, but maybe we just need a different way of utilizing other people that can support them. I don't care how we do it. We just need to figure out ways that we can, through your position and through you working with not only the Labor Department, but the VA, can get these veterans back on their feet, and you know all about that.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Tester. So I just want to thank you for being

here today. I think there are many programs out there that can help our veterans. They need to be fully maximized to take care of the folks and help them get good-paying jobs once they reenter the civilian lifestyle again.

So I want to thank you for putting yourself up for this job. I will tell you that I have no doubt in my mind that you are going to do great things, and so I appreciate your willingness to serve.

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, Senator, very much.

Senator Akaka, sir, if I may humbly make one last introduction of some Kamaaina who have come here from Hawaii to be here, just the Takamura family, Jeanette and Karl Takamura, and Jeanette has previously served our nation as the Assistant Secretary for Health and Human Services. They have traveled from Hawaii to be here today.

[Applause.]

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Jefferson. Will you please rise to take the oath and raise your right hand.

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you will give at this hearing and any written answers or statements you provide in connection with this hearing will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. Jefferson. I do.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Let it be noted that the

witness responded in the affirmative.

Mr. Jefferson, could you please share your thoughts with us on what you view as the difference between a job and a career and what emphasis you place on each, if confirmed. I am sorry. Mr. Jefferson, will you please begin with your statement.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, Senator, and will gladly follow up with that question, as well, sir.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you.

Mr. Jefferson. Chairman Akaka, aloha.

Chairman Akaka. Aloha.

Mr. Jefferson. Ranking Member Burr and distinguished members of the committee, thank you. Thank you for your service to the veterans' community and thank you for considering my nomination here today.

Over the past two weeks, I have had the opportunity to meet with many members of the committee to learn from your priorities and also obtain the benefit of your ideas, advice, and insights. Those have been tremendously helpful and I am very appreciative.

I am humbled and honored by President Barack Obama's nomination to serve our country as the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans Employment and Training. Both of my parents were lifelong public servants and that had a huge impact on who I am and how I have come to be here today.

I have introduced my mother. I want to just acknowledge my father, who was an African American. He spent his career as the Deputy Director for the New York State Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. He passed away, but I know that he is here today in spirit.

I am here today because of a defining moment in my life. After graduating from West Point, I spent 11 years as an Army officer. There was a pivotal moment on October 18, 1995, that put into motion a series of events that have led me to be here today. While trying to protect my teammates from a defective hand grenade detonating prematurely, I lost all fingers on my left hand. But someone once wrote that every crisis is an opportunity to be reborn, and my personal journey as a veteran and an amputee provided me with firsthand knowledge on the needs that our veterans face.

In the early days of my accident, I was often worried, fearful, uncertain about my future and wondering if things would ever be all right again. But recuperation and moving forward has been the greatest, most positive journey of my life. The hardest decision that I had to make was believing it was possible, making a commitment to excellence, and just to continue striving to achieve my dreams.

When I was in that hospital in Tripler, I made a commitment to three things: Serving our nation as a leader in the public arena, helping other individuals and

organizations overcome challenges and achieve their potential, and participating in humanitarian endeavors.

I want to acknowledge again just the significant impact the Department of Veterans Affairs had in my life. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program there was instrumental to me getting my life back together, and Rick, I am so glad that you could be here to see this today. I can personally attest to the success that is possible for veterans and transitioning service members when they have the support of a committed Federal agency and its staff to help them.

Transitioning from military to civilian life taught me firsthand the challenges that our service members and veterans may face. I understand, and I have been a part of the communities that we serve and those that we partner with. And I appreciate the importance of transitions and support to help create or recreate one's life.

So the vision for VETS: If confirmed, I am completely committed to supporting President Barack Obama's and Secretary Hilda Solis's promises to veterans of restoring our sacred trust with them and ensuring that we provide them with the best possible employment services. Secretary Solis and I are especially committed to ensuring we serve populations with unique needs, populations such as homeless veterans, women, veterans from rural communities, and

veterans who have been ill, wounded, or injured.

If confirmed, I will consider myself to have four primary responsibilities. First, leading the organization in a participative manner to make sure that we focus on peak performance, talent development, performance measurement and inspirational leadership.

Second, developing the vision and creating, communicating, and implementing the supporting strategy to achieve that vision and help today's transitioning service members and veterans succeed in the modern economy.

Three, advising the Secretary on relevant policy matters.

And four, reporting to the Secretary and this committee on the results of our efforts.

Should I have the privilege of being confirmed, VETS will be committed to the following. First, increasing access, awareness, and participation in its programs and in improving the employment outcomes for those participants.

Number two, helping transitioning service members to transition seamlessly into quality civilian employment and careers, with a special emphasis on green jobs and jobs of the future.

Three, boosting USERRA's impact by increasing the awareness of and commitment to it and reducing USERRA-related claims.

Four, investing in VETS team members to increase their potential and to ensure that they can have greater capacity to serve veterans and transitioning service members.

And finally, communicating and collaborating with other agencies of the Department of Labor and with all of our stakeholders, inside and outside government, with a particular emphasis on Congress and this committee, VSOs, State workforce agencies, the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense, the State workforce agencies, the private sector, nonprofits and other government agencies, so that we can better serve veterans and their employment needs.

In conclusion, I am committed and inspiring to help transitioning service members and veterans create meaningful lives, develop rewarding careers, and become productive citizens and leaders in their communities. Eleanor Roosevelt once said that the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. I believe that together, we can provide transitioning service members and veterans with the best possible service, and together, we can make sure when people like Cadet Sam Harrison finishes his military career and transitions to being the veteran, that he has the best possible services and resources available to him that our nation can provide.

Thank you very much. I look forward to answering your

questions, and if confirmed, the privilege of working with you. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jefferson follows:]

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Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Mr. Jefferson, for your testimony.

I would like to pose a question. Could you please share your thoughts with us on what you view as the difference between a job and a career and what emphasis you would place on each, if confirmed.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes. Senator, thank you very much for highlighting that difference for the committee and for the members here today. It is important that we make sure that all veterans have good jobs. That is a priority of Secretary Solis. But a greater service that we can provide is preparing them for careers.

And one of the differences is that careers have the opportunity for continuing and progressive growth, development, financial self-sufficiency, and opportunities. And emphasizing that and that preparation is something that we would like to do through our work with the CVOPs, Disabled Veterans Outreach Program, and the LVERs, the Local Veterans Employment Representatives, and also in the TAP program, to bring in new content that will empower veterans to manage their careers and have greater vision for themselves than they previously thought possible.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much for that response.

You have indicated that you believe that performance measurement and best practice benchmarking can help

organizations provide the best service possible and make the greatest impact. Could you explain how these processes might be applied to LVERs and DVOPs, especially since they are actually employees of the various States?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes. Senator, thank you for highlighting that. It is an issue that I have been thinking about and have some ideas on. From serving as Deputy Secretary of Commerce with DBEDT in Hawaii, I have a keen appreciation for the dynamics of State and local service providers. But how can we look at other models for service delivery? And scanning to see for related service deliver organizations in other sectors, the private and the nonprofit, which ones have the greatest outcomes, looking at what they do and then bringing that information in, teaching our DVOPs and our LVERs through the NVTI, National Veterans Training Institute, and also through concurrent and refresher training, and also looking how we can emphasize and incorporate new modalities, such as pure learning, maybe incorporating some new IT solutions so best practices are taught and disseminated and shared much more efficiently. We want to identify what is the best process out there and bring those to our DVOPs and LVERs.

Chairman Akaka. VA estimates that 131,000 veterans are homeless on any given night. Struggles with obtaining and maintaining suitable employment after service is one of the

many factors that contribute to a veteran becoming homeless. If confirmed, how do you plan to strengthen the Veterans Employment and Training Program to combat these troubling statistics?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes. Senator, one veteran who is homeless is too much. I think there are several things that need to be done. One is strengthening the partnership with service delivery organizations, working more closely with Veterans Affairs, working more closely with Housing and Urban Development to take an interagency approach, not a single agency approach but an interagency approach.

Number two, identifying those organizations that have the highest success rates of helping homeless veterans, learning what they are doing, sharing and disseminating those best practices. Some of those are grantees of ours, we have some relationships with. But looking at who has the highest outcomes for helping veterans end homelessness the quickest and disseminating those best practices in an interagency manner.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much. Have you given any thought to the employment needs of the spouses of active duty service members who are deployed and how VETS might address them?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, Senator, we have. One of the programs that we have which could be extremely helpful to

spouses is the Transition Assistance Program. Spouses can participate in that program. What I would like to explore is what is the degree of awareness about that opportunity and to look at how we can increase awareness of the program, increase spousal involvement, and also highlight the success stories and the positive outcomes of that involvement.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much.

Let me call on the Ranking Member for his questions.

Senator Burr?

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Again, Ray, welcome.

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, sir.

Senator Burr. The first question, housekeeping, as Ranking Member, I do have some responsibilities to my members on this side of the aisle to actively do oversight, as does the full committee, with regard to the activities of the Veterans Employment and Training Services. This tends to lead me or my staff to make certain requests at times. If confirmed, do you pledge to ensure that my staff and I will be provided with requested information in a timely manner?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir, I absolutely do.

Senator Burr. If confirmed, will you be proactive in alerting this committee, including both sides of the aisle, to any significant trends, problems, or other issues

regarding the law and programs administered by the Veterans Employment and Training Service?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, Senator, I do.

Senator Burr. I thank you for those answers.

Ray, last year, Congress passed a law that I authored that would require Federal executive branch agencies to ensure that their human resource personnel are trained in the rights and obligations under the Uniformed Service Employment and Reemployment Rights Act. In my view, this will help prevent USERRA violations from occurring in the first place. But it is my understanding that some agencies have been slow to implement this new training requirement.

Do you agree that the best steps that we can take to protect USERRA rights of military personnel and veterans is to prevent them in the first place?

Mr. Jefferson. Senator, I think that is critically important, and one of the things that we want to do is to increase awareness and commitment of employers' responsibilities under USERRA. If confirmed, I would look to strengthen the relationship with OPM so that we can provide that training and technical assistance to Federal Government agencies, other government agencies, partner with the private sector to ensure that they understand and are committed to that, and that prevention is a key component of reducing USERRA-related claims.

Senator Burr. Do you agree that that starts with the proper training of human resources personnel to ensuring that they understand the law?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, Senator. I think that that is a critical component in the process.

Senator Burr. And I have your commitment that you will work aggressively to make sure that any agencies that might have been slow to take on the letter of the law actually do go through that training process?

Mr. Jefferson. Senator, one of my first priorities will be to do a complete evaluation of the program to identify any agencies which have been slow to implement that process and to take appropriate action to encourage and to complete that process.

Senator Burr. Great. Thank you.

In your prehearing questions, you stated that the Department of Labor, and I quote, "strongly opposes transferring the responsibility of investigating these USERRA cases from the Department of Labor to the Office of Special Counsel." Yet in 25 cases this fiscal year, the Department of Labor has exceeded the statutory 60-day limit for referring cases to the Office of Special Counsel out of the 128 Federal USERRA cases closed in fiscal year 2009, to date.

If transferring control of Federal USERRA claims to the

Office of Special Counsel could help expedite a just resolution of those cases, wouldn't veterans be better served to do that?

Mr. Jefferson. Well, Senator, thank you for highlighting that issue. I actually feel that there are two points here to address. First is doing a complete assessment of the process to determine why there have been those extended procedures required and to go ahead and streamline it so all investigations are completed in the appropriate period of time.

But there is a fundamental reason why I believe that that responsibility should not be transferred. In addition to doing investigations, that also provides the veterans and transitioning service members with additional programs and resources that could be very helpful to them in finding and obtaining not just a job, but a career, which is our fundamental goal. So I believe that we need to maintain the current responsibility because of the other services and resources, benefits we provide, but to look at how that process can be improved and improve it as rapidly as possible.

Senator Burr. If a year from now we have got the same percentage number of cases that have not been referred and they exceed the statutory 60-day limit, what question should I ask of you then?

Mr. Jefferson. Senator, if--our commitment is to ensure that there is no need to ask that question within the year, sir, because we will have resolved it. We will have resolved it prior--previously to that. And we also want to work very closely with you and your office to keep you informed every step of the way.

Senator Burr. With your incredible passion to get this done--

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Burr. --can I assume that if we still do have a problem a year from now, then it is a territorial dispute versus a lack of will?

Mr. Jefferson. I think, sir, if a year from now there--a problem still exists, we will look at some new and innovative approaches to resolve it.

Senator Burr. Thank you.

Mr. Jefferson. But I want to give you my full commitment, sir, that USERRA is a priority, that doing everything we can in every step of the process to ensure there is commitment to it, that all partners and all sectors are involved and aware, and that we produce the outcomes that our veterans deserve when they come back, which is that the job they left and the benefits are available to them.

Senator Burr. I thank you for that commitment and I thank the Chair.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burr.
And now I will call on Senator Murray for her questions.

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

Mr. Jefferson, would you share with us what you think is the biggest challenge facing the VETS office in helping veterans with their employment goals?

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, Senator. Being very candid with you, since my accident, I don't look at things in challenges as much as I look at them in opportunities. But I feel that we have some significant opportunities.

One significant opportunity is to engage more strongly with the private sector. You can do all kinds of wonderful things to improve your programs and prepare a veteran or a transitioning service member for career success. But when he or she goes out, if they cannot find a job within a reasonable period of time, it is demoralizing. So engaging with private sector organizations to increase their awareness of what veterans can provide and their commitment to hire veterans is a huge priority.

Second, looking at how all of our programs could be improved to incorporate best practices and increase the outcomes.

And third, the partnerships. This is not a priority or a role that vets can do alone. We need to engage with our

friends inside, outside government, VSOs, State workforce agencies, nonprofits, to do this in partnership.

I think those are three significant things that we can do to increase our service to veterans and transitioning service members.

Senator Murray. Let me focus on one of them, the private sector.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes.

Senator Murray. I mean, I talk to veterans all the time--

Mr. Jefferson. Yes.

Senator Murray. --and they want to be employed, they want a job, they want to be productive. And I talk to Chambers of Commerce and they have no idea that veterans are even out there. I made a pledge to many of our Iraqi and Afghan veterans coming home that I would never leave a Chamber of Commerce or Rotary meeting without telling them they have to hire a vet.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes.

Senator Murray. How do we engage the private sector better? How do we let them know about the many men and women who have got great skills?

Mr. Jefferson. Well, thank you, Senator. I know that is an area that we can collaborate on, and I also feel very strongly about. I think there are several things. One is

looking at where are those organizations that private sector leaders turn to for sources of information and increased awareness. One is YPO-WPO, Young Presence Organization-World Presence Organization. It is a CEO organization. So engaging with them to find out what information do you need from us? Is it a massive resume database? How can we take the tremendously talented individuals who are out there and make them--make it easy for you to contact them and hire them?

So having dialogue with organizations that represent private sector interests, going to those large organizations that have a history of hiring the most veterans and looking at how we can do potentially pilot programs to streamline veterans' hiring. And also speaking to the veterans and working with the VSOs to find out where are the veterans experiencing the challenges in the process and working it from both ends so together we can come towards the middle.

Senator Murray. Well, it is a big challenge, but I am really glad that you are going to take that on because I think there are a lot of opportunities left, simply because the two groups, veterans and the people who employ veterans, our private companies, don't know that each other exists.

Mr. Jefferson. Exactly, Senator, and that is something we want to address, and also just to encourage the assistance and the ideas of this committee as we do that.

Senator Murray. Okay, great. You know the Federal Government has a huge patchwork of programs available today, including the one you are going to head up. You talked a little bit about streamlining and collaborating. How do you do that with the other Federal agencies so that people are working better together?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes. Well, Senator, I think that is a -it is an immediate priority and it is a hugely important one. I think part of this involves personal relationships, and I have been fortunate to have some existing relationships with many of these agencies, very grateful to have the Honorable Scott Gould here today. And I think convening a dialogue, where we become aware of what one another is doing, how can we partner, where there is redundancy, creating focal points so veterans do not have to figure out what all the different opportunities are that are available to them, but maybe we have a one-stop kind of information center.

But it is not just information. We want to make sure that it is easy for veterans to physically access programs and resources and to get everything they need in an integrated, simple manner to get those employment opportunities and those career opportunities that the Senator spoke about earlier.

Senator Murray. Okay, good. I look forward to hearing

how you see that going and anything we can do to help encourage that, as well.

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, Senator. I appreciate and welcome in advance that assistance.

Senator Murray. Okay, and I appreciate your comments about TAP and working with spouses, as well. If you are not working with the spouses and the families, we often lose a lot of the resources, so I look forward to hearing more on what you are going to be able to do there, as well.

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Murray. Mr. Chairman, I look forward to supporting this nominee, and hopefully we can move him quickly through the process once we have the committee hearing and get you to work for our veterans.

Mr. Jefferson. Great, Senator.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Murray, and thank you for urging us to move expeditiously, which we will.

Mr. Jefferson. All right, Senator.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you.

Now, I would like to call on Senator Isakson for any statement and questions.

Senator Isakson. My only statement is we are lucky to have people like Mr. Jefferson who want to serve the country. You are to be commended on your record and you are

especially to be commended on your attitude. I have listened to your remarks and attitude is directly proportionate to your altitude and you have got a high altitude and I like that a lot.

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, sir.

Senator Isakson. Senator Murray just asked you a question and you gave an answer that included, to me, one of the keys to this whole transition to jobs. You mentioned one-stop. Senator Murray and I are on the Labor Committee and the Subcommittee on Occupational Safety and we oversee the Workforce Investment Act, where a few years ago there were pilots developed around the country for one-stop shops for people seeking employment and employment training. We had a hearing just a couple of days ago on that.

Right now, in my State of Georgia, for example, and I just happen to have this on my mind because our Labor Commissioner spoke, of the 400,000 unemployed people that went through our Department of Labor, they had reemployed 261,000 in an economy that is very down because they had a one-stop place where the unemployed people could go that they could get training information, they could get employment information, they could get every resource they needed at one place.

I don't think that exists. I think there are, like Senator Murray said, multiple attempts to help veterans with

jobs, but I don't know that there is a one-stop coordinated place. I know in the transition from DOD health care to VA health care, we experienced a lot of problems with people falling through the cracks because there wasn't a good transition.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Isakson. That is being worked out now and it is better, but it is being worked out through an ombudsman or a central approach. I would like for you to comment on the concept of a one-stop shop where everybody that wants to help veterans comes together to make it simple for the veteran to transition to the private sector.

Mr. Jefferson. Senator, I really appreciate you bringing that point up. These are hugely valuable resources, and I had the privilege of working with a lot of them as Deputy Secretary of Commerce in Hawaii. So one of the things I am committed to doing is getting the different service providers together, look at what one another is doing, how can we work, share resources, space, things such as that, and developing a model so that veterans and transitioning service members, when they go back to their home towns, can go to one place, get resources, training, information in a way that is very simple and effective and help encourage them to make that transition or to find that career as quickly as possible.

I think they are hugely important. I think it begins with dialogue to see how can we create those partnership, and creating those partnerships. I think pilot programs are a very effective way to demonstrate the validity and feasibility of new initiatives and new ideas.

Senator Isakson. Well, you just hit the second key word I was going to bring up when you said pilot programs. You talked about your defining moment in your personal journey.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Isakson. We are in a defining moment right now in terms of veterans' employment. We are in a severe recession at a time where we have the largest number of veterans coming back of any time since Vietnam--

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Isakson. --I would imagine, because of the size of the deployment we have now. So when you combine a significant recession with double-digit unemployment and a high number of veterans returning, that is a defining moment for you and the responsibility you are nominated to take.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Isakson. And you mentioned pilot program. You know, when our pilots and our helicopter pilots and our munitions officers and our nuclear plant officers come out of the military, there is no limit to the job opportunities

they have because of the skill they have.

Mr. Jefferson. Mm-hmm.

Senator Isakson. We also have a number of people down the skill ladder that are trained for jobs that are out there, but I don't think sometimes we have the pilot programs with the private sector and the DOD to foster them. For example, and I think I am correct on this, Marriott has a deal with the Navy with regard to the KP duty and the kitchen police and the chefs for culinary arts, where Naval enlisted personnel who work in the mess hall leave there with the skills that Marriott looks for in their food service operations.

So one of the things I would encourage you to do is find as many areas as you can where you can be a catalyst for pilot programs in the branches of the service for training for all skill levels, not just the high skill levels, but down the skill level chain so those partnership can be open opportunities when service members leave the service.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Isakson. If you do that, I think we will provide some jobs and I look forward to voting for your nomination and I endorse Senator Murray's comments. The sooner, the better.

Mr. Jefferson. All right. Thank you, Senator. I

appreciate that.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator.

Let me call on Senator Burris for any statement and questions you may have.

Senator Burris. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I will be rather brief, but I want to welcome the distinguished appointee.

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, sir.

Senator Burris. You live in Hawaii now, is that correct?

Mr. Jefferson. Well, I am presently in Washington, but that is home and I will be going back there for Christmas, sir. Yes, that is home.

[Laughter.]

Senator Burris. So you take off back there during the wintertime.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

Senator Burris. And you have a home there, which means you leave us here to freeze, right?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir.

[Laughter.]

Senator Burris. Tell me this. If you are confirmed, in terms of employment, what Senator Isakson just made mention, that seemed to be a major concern of our veterans. I am getting all kinds of requests from veterans into my

office about them coming back, some of them the jobs might not be there. The employer may have promoted other people ahead of them. And so I just wonder whether or not we can really assess, and I don't have any specifics, but we will certainly be in touch with you when you are confirmed--not if you are confirmed--to really work with you in this regard. So is that something we have agreed to here, Mr. Jefferson?

Mr. Jefferson. Absolutely, Senator.

Senator Burris. Okay, because I am concerned about these individuals coming back who served their country, now have to try to take care of their families and they cannot get gainful employment. Of course, the economy is bad, too, which adds to it. Employers have to replace them when they are gone away. But we cannot leave them out there to suffer.

And you are also involved with training. So will you be looking at putting programs together in community colleges especially across the States? Do you have any specific programs that you are aware of that are going on in Veterans Affairs now?

Mr. Jefferson. Senator, first of all, thank you for your comments and thank you for outlining a variety of things that we want to address. I genuinely appreciate that.

I think the first thing, sir, which you touched on is that when transitioning service members come back or veterans, is information and access, making sure they are aware of the programs and resources available to them and they can access those programs, whether they are in the inner city, in a downtown area, or in rural areas. So information access.

Second, when they go into those programs, making sure we provide them with the best possible training modalities so that they have success. And just as the Senator said earlier, whether they are coming from a--they have a lot of education or they are leaving as a senior officer or maybe it is someone who has less time in service, we want to make sure that our programs provide effective solutions for people at all levels in their career and all backgrounds.

And then third, making sure that we measure and monitor those outcomes and the feedback from the veterans and also the VSOs, including them as full partners. So we have a cyclical process of getting feedback, adjusting and incorporating the processes so that it reflects best practices, and continuing to do it in that manner.

I think those things, sir, and that approach will help us provide the best possible service and the best possible results for veterans.

Senator Burris. Now, when were you nominated by the

President for this position? How long ago?

Mr. Jefferson. Sir, I believe the intent to nominate was April 17, and that the actual nomination--

Senator Burris. April, and this is now July?

Mr. Jefferson. Yes, sir. And the actual nomination, sir, I believe was in early June. I might be mistaken on the dates.

Senator Burris. Early June, because I am trying to look at this--Mr. Chairman, I am going to look at this timetable that we have between nominations and confirmations. I have interviewed a lot of individuals who were nominated early on, some of them left their jobs, and the nomination process is taking so long that some of those people are a little concerned. Some of them did leave their jobs, thank goodness, because of the length of the process. But I just always ask this question, what is the length of the process in terms of getting them nominated, getting them confirmed, and getting them on the job. So I hope that somewhere down the line, we can take a look at that.

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

Chairman Akaka. I thank you very much for your questions and concerns, Senator Burris.

Mr. Jefferson. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman Akaka. I want to thank you very much, Mr. Jefferson, for your testimony and your responsiveness to the

committee. I want again to say how much I am looking forward and the committee is looking forward to working with you in your new position as we address the employment and transition needs of our nation's veterans.

Mr. Jefferson. Yes.

Chairman Akaka. I will be working with my colleagues from the HELP Committee as we proceed on your nomination and I intend to do all that I can to bring it to the full Senate during this legislative period so that you can begin your important work as soon as possible. I urge you to respond as soon as you can to any post-hearing questions that are submitted to you.

After a short break, we will convene a second hearing on the second nomination pending before us this morning. With that, this hearing is adjourned.

[Off the record.]

Chairman Akaka. This hearing by the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs will come to order.

We are now moving to consider the President's nomination of Joan Evans for the position of Assistant Secretary of Congressional and Legislative Affairs at VA. This position is an important one to this committee because it is a key office for promoting transparency and collaboration between VA and Congress.

If confirmed, Ms. Evans will be responsible for

advising senior Department officials on developing and maintaining VA's relationship with members of Congress and Congressional committees. She will provide advice on Congressional interest in VA policy and program development and implementation, while overseeing the management of all Congressional hearings and ensuring that Congress receives pertinent and timely information about VA programs and policy issues.

The Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs provides support and assistance with respect to specific legislative activity. It monitors the status of pending legislation affecting VA and it works closely with the Legislative Advisor in developing the Department's annual legislative program. In short, the office Ms. Evans is nominated to head is VA's front door for those of us in Congress.

Our colleague, Senator Wyden, is joining us this morning and he will formally introduce Ms. Evans to the committee. Therefore, I will not go into detail about her background. I do note, however, that her long and substantial experience on the staff of Congresswoman Hooley should serve her well. If she should be confirmed, she will bring with her knowledge of and appreciation for the importance that this office has in our day-to-day operations with VA.

I am hopeful that our committee and then the full Senate will move quickly to consider Ms. Evans' nomination for this important job.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs, I welcome you, Ms. Evans, and your family.

Ms. Evans. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. Before I ask for your introductions, let me call on Senator Burr for any opening statements and then Senator Murray.

Senator Burr. Mr. Chairman, I sort of included both of my statements in the original statement. I welcome Joan Evans' nomination. I welcome the opportunity for her to be here for her hearing. I question the wisdom of having Ron Wyden introduce her--

[Laughter.]

Senator Burr. --but that comes from an equal amount of experience with him over the years--

Senator Wyden. The story of my life.

[Laughter.]

Senator Burr. --but we won't hold that against her as she goes through this nomination hearing. I thank the Chair.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much.

Senator Murray?

Senator Murray. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and

Ms. Evans, welcome to this committee. I want to congratulate you on your nomination and applaud you for your willingness to take on this challenging and rewarding job. I can guarantee that once you are there, you will be hearing a lot from me. I really want to make sure that our veterans get the best care possible and I know we will count on you to help make sure that happens.

I just want to say one thing. The VA is an organization of people and those in leadership will shape the cultures of the organization that they lead. During Secretary Shinseki's confirmation hearing, I spoke about the need to overhaul the bureaucratic culture at the VA, and since his confirmation, he has said on numerous occasions that one of his top priorities really is to transform the VA into a truly 21st century organization. While I am sure that it goes without saying, I did want to stress with you today how important it is that the VA works with Congress as part of that cultural and organizational shift that we are seeing.

You know, in the past, too often the VA was reactive, not proactive, when they informed Congress about the publicly potentially embarrassing internal issues. I don't care if Republicans or Democrats are in charge. A tendency to downplay the problems at the VA was a serious disservice to all the veterans who count on this agency to do the good

job.

So I hope that, if confirmed, you are really willing to change that culture and change that dynamic so that the VA is open and proactive and is out there in front making sure we know as members of Congress what we need to know so that we can serve the veterans the best way possible.

So I look forward to hearing your opening statement and seeing the questions and answers, but I really appreciate your taking this on and willing to help the men and women who served our country. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Murray.

I am delighted at this time to recognize our colleague and friend from Oregon--oh, I am sorry. Senator Burris, any opening statement you may have.

Senator Burris. I was listening to you, Mr. Chairman. I did interview Ms. Evans yesterday. I had a great conversation with her and expressed to Joan that we are definitely concerned about the legislative package that will be coming out of this Congress to benefit our veterans. We are going to continue to seek to improve the family relationship with veterans, the housing relationship with veterans, the health care relationship with veterans, and you coming from the Congress with knowledge of how we work will be very beneficial, I am pretty sure, in helping us to make sure that our veterans are taken care of.

As I said to you, Joan, the only way we can do what we do in America is because these people have done what they have done for us and we have to take care of them. We cannot have them struggling, can't get health care, can't find decent places to live, can't get jobs. So if there is something we can do legislatively, I am hoping that you would lead that charge. I look forward to your testimony and your confirmation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burris.

And now I will recognize our colleague and friend from Oregon, Senator Wyden, who will introduce Ms. Evans to the committee.

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STATEMENT OF HON. RON WYDEN, A U.S. SENATOR FROM
THE STATE OF OREGON

Senator Wyden. Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. I think it would be cruel and unusual punishment to give you and four great advocates for veterans a big speech. If I could, I would just put my prepared remarks into the record and perhaps just kind of summarize my big concerns.

Chairman Akaka. Aloha and welcome to the committee.

Senator Wyden. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you in particular to you and your colleagues for making this committee the bully pulpit for America's veterans, the place where veterans are going to be heard, where there is going to be a voice for their concerns, where we are going to go through the debates in the United States Congress and they are always going to be at the table because of the leadership that you provide and that of your colleagues. And for that, we are very grateful. And in particular, you and I go back well over 20 years being friends. Just know how much I appreciate your service to America's veterans.

By way of Joan Mooney, I think I would just like to start by saying that I think her story is a great American story. It represents really the best of our country's values, and I am just going to highlight a few points.

She is the daughter of a Coast Guard veteran. She is the wife of an Oregon National Guardsman. So she

understands kind of the working challenges of America's families. She has been a wife, for example, facing her husband's deployment, multiple deployments, and knows the feeling of a missing link in your home and family while they are away, and I think that is a particularly important contribution. I have heard Senator Murray talk about this over the years, that so often, we forget about the families and we don't really remember what the families are wrestling with. From the standpoint of Joan's service to the country, she is the embodiment of the military families that our country is striving to protect.

For this position, the Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Congressional and Legislative Affairs, I think her background is a textbook for what we are looking for in this particular position. She began working in the House, where we first met, in 1987 in the office of Congressman Terry Bruce. You probably remember Terry. He served on the Commerce Committee with a number of us. She also served as Chief of Staff to Illinois Congressman John Cox.

In addition to that, when she joined Congresswoman Hooley, who has been an inspiration to many veterans, she became the go-to person in our Congressional delegation on veterans issues. In fact, between Ms. Evans and Congresswoman Hooley, all of us together in the Oregon Congressional delegation have tried to step in and pick up

on their work because they did so much good work for so long, they have left us with big shoes, and suffice it to say, an awful lot of veterans in our State are asking now who is going to step up and start doing the work again that Congresswoman Hooley, particularly with Joan Evans, was able to do.

I can't tell you, Mr. Chairman and colleagues, how many times Joan Mooney came to my house in Oregon at eight o'clock in the morning, with kids in the back, full of ice chests for sandwiches because we were going to go off to some small town in Oregon and try to advocate for veterans. That is what she did. That is what her approach to public service is all about, riding shotgun literally and figuratively for the causes that are important to veterans.

Congresswoman Hooley was a serious consensus-building lawmaker who was interested in solving problems rather than engaging in partisan politics. Congresswoman Hooley has retired. She has gone home to our great Northwest, where Senator Murray knows all former elected officials return. But the same fierce advocacy for veterans remains here in Washington, D.C. with Joan Evans.

So it is a great honor, not just for myself, but for Oregon, to be able to recommend Joan Evans for this key position. She is going to serve our country and our veterans very, very well, and I thank you for the chance to

be able to come and particularly to have the honor to introduce the next great Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Joan Evans.

[The prepared statement of Senator Wyden follows:]
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Ms. Evans. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Wyden, for your introduction. It was very personal and we are very grateful for that. I just want you to know we will move as quickly we can on the nomination confirmation. Thank you. I know you are a busy man, so you are free to leave.

Ms. Evans, before you begin your testimony, I know that you have some family and friends with you this morning and I would invite you to introduce them to the committee.

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TESTIMONY OF JOAN M. EVANS, NOMINATED TO BE AN
ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR
CONGRESSIONAL AND LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

Ms. Evans. Thank you, sir. I have my husband here, Major Paul Evans of the Oregon Air National Guard; my daughter, Katherine Mooney, and I have a number of friends that are colleagues from the House and Senate: Priscilla Ross, Pam Pryor, Susan Butler, Will Stone, Rochelle Darnet, who is here, Perry Finney Brody, Noel Brazil, Christina Metzler, Faye Frankfurt.

And I particularly want to say thank you to our team at VA for coming today, our Deputy Secretary, Scott Gould, Deputy Assistant Secretary Julie Anderson, OCLA staff, Acting Assistant Secretary Danny Devine and Mary Kay Stack; and Office of the Secretary's staff Peter Levin, Covey Langley, Hally Schneier, and Bill Hiers.

And I would also like to extend a thank you to the Governor of Oregon's staff, Dan DiSimone, who is also here. Thank you.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much.

As you know, we do administer an oath, and may I ask you if you will rise and take the oath, raise your right hand.

Do you swear or affirm that the testimony you will give to this hearing and any written answers or statements you

provide in connection with this hearing will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Ms. Evans. I do.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. Let it be noted that the witness responded in the affirmative.

Ms. Evans, will you begin with your testimony.

Ms. Evans. Thank you. Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr, and distinguished members on the Committee on Veterans Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for your consideration of my nomination to serve as VA's Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs.

I would also like to express my family's gratitude to our Senator, Ron Wyden, for his gracious introduction and for the care and concern he extended to my family during Paul's overseas deployments. Oregon veterans and their families have an outstanding advocate in Senator Wyden, who has ably stepped in Congresswoman Hooley's shoes to fill that void.

I am deeply humbled by President Barack Obama's nomination and the confidence both he and Secretary Shinseki have shown in me. If confirmed, it will be my honor to serve this committee and the Congress as your chief resource in accessing information from the second-largest Federal agency.

During the last few weeks, I have been privileged to meet personally with many of you and your staff, receiving invaluable guidance and beginning what I trust will be an ongoing dialogue, if confirmed. I have worked on Capitol Hill for nearly two decades, from leading the Washington office for Illinois Congressman Terry Bruce through serving as Chief of Staff to Oregon Congresswoman Darlene Hooley, the first Oregon Democrat on the House Veterans Affairs Committee and Ranking Member of its Oversight and Investigations Panel.

While working for Congresswoman Hooley, I met and married my husband, Paul Evans, who is here today with my daughter, Kate. Since 9/11, Paul was mobilized for 24 months in Operation Noble Eagle and has served in three combat missions in Iraq and Afghanistan with the Oregon Air National Guard. He chairs Governor Kulongoski's Veterans Services Task Force and is the Governor's Chief Policy Advisor for Emergency Management, Military, and Veterans. He remains Director of Operations at the 116th Air Control Squadron at Camp Rilea on the beautiful Oregon coast.

My marriage to Paul has given me a keen appreciation for the sacrifices of American veterans. I was also made mindful of the challenges families face as a part-time caregiver for my father, an atomic veteran with a service-connected cancer, and for my mother, who predeceased him,

putting his health care needs above her own. My grandfather, a World War II veteran, found care and compassion in a VA hospital at the end of his life.

Through these experiences, I am firmly committed to President Obama and Secretary Shinseki's vision for transforming VA into a 21st century organization that is veteran-centric, results driven, and forward looking. If confirmed as Secretary Shinseki's principal Congressional advisor, I will work to ensure the office is a highly effective partner to Congress in meeting the needs of the nation's veterans.

I understand your need for quick and complete information about issues and events. I also understand the frustrations of veterans and their families seeking services and benefits from offices that are overly bureaucratic and seem to take forever to process simple requests.

By improving outreach to members of Congress, their staffs, and committees, OCLA can help VA leaders better understand and engage with Congress in policy matters. Our work should be based on a commitment to appropriate and timely responses. We should also shine a light on potential or upcoming issues.

I appreciate the work of the Chairman, Ranking Member, and committee members, and I greatly value your leadership in honoring the service and sacrifice of our nation's

veterans. If confirmed, my mission will be to ensure that Secretary Shinseki as well as Congress and its authorizing and appropriating committees have everything they need to perform their respective roles efficiently and effectively, fulfilling the sacred trust with our nation's heroes.

Thank you for your consideration, and I am pleased to answer any questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Evans follows:]

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Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much for your testimony, Ms. Evans.

Ms. Evans, in your answers to my prehearing questions, you acknowledge the importance of informing Congress about emerging issues and stated that this should be done in a timely manner. Please tell the committee what you would consider to be adequate advance notice regarding such issues.

Ms. Evans. I would consider as problems arise to be on the phone quickly to let you know, particularly as fully as we can. Sometimes that may mean gathering more information, but as soon as word comes out to get it to you for review.

Chairman Akaka. Would you ever consider a press release as adequate and timely advance notice to Congress, as was done in the case of the prostate cancer treatment program in Philadelphia?

Ms. Evans. Thank you for the question. Coming from the perspective of a House staffer, I wouldn't consider that adequate advance notice. I know how busy staffs and Senators and members are and things need to be brought to their attention, and I think personal communication is the best way to do that.

Chairman Akaka. In one of your answers to a prehearing question, you stated that you believe VA's senior leadership and most members of OCLA see benefits in updating the focus

of the office and expanding the staff to be more proactive in its outreach to member offices. Can you explain to the committee what these benefits are?

Ms. Evans. Thank you. I believe that the benefits that outreach provides is knowing on the front lines what is going on in States and districts with members and with their veterans. So to me, getting as close to the veteran as you can to find out information is most helpful. So what I would like to do, I think, is develop close relationships not only with committee staff here in the Senate Veterans and House Veterans Affairs Committees as well as the appropriating committees, getting to know members of the personal office staff as well as folks back home in the State working in the State and district offices.

Chairman Akaka. In one of your answers to prehearing questions, you discussed your belief that VHA needs a more centralized structure. Do you believe that right now the central office has a handle on activities at the health care networks? Does it have knowledge of what is occurring, for instance, at VA medical centers?

Ms. Evans. Well, thank you, sir, and I think under the tremendous leadership of Secretary Shinseki, Deputy Secretary Scott Gould, and the entire leadership team, they have done yeoman's work at this point in bringing together all elements for a transformation. We have done--they have

had VISN briefs with almost half the VISNs at this point, bringing up leadership from State and regional offices, getting to know them, discovering problems. So I think we are well on our way.

Chairman Akaka. You mention in your prehearing questions former Speaker Tip O'Neill's views on constituent service. With this in mind, how long should a Senate office wait for responses to casework sent to the liaison office for assistance?

Ms. Evans. That, sir, depends on--I would say depends on the case. I think they should be handled as expeditiously as possible and staff should be reviewing and forcing decisions on those. Some pieces of casework are more complex as others, so as timely a manner as possible. Right now, I would have to get into the office and see what the hold-ups are, and I look forward, if confirmed, to working with you and your staff to best meet your needs and the needs of veterans.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you for your responses.

I call on Senator Burr for his questions.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Joan, welcome.

Ms. Evans. Thank you.

Senator Burr. Truly, we are delighted to have you. Housekeeping in the first question, if I may. As

Ranking Member, I have some responsibilities to my side of the aisle from the standpoint of oversight as it relates to the Veterans Administration. It often leads me or my staff to ask of the VA for certain information. If confirmed, do you pledge to ensure that my staff and I will be provided the requested information to the fullest extent permitted by the law without hassle and delays?

Ms. Evans. Yes, I do, sir.

Senator Burr. If confirmed, how would you ask your staff to prioritize requests from various members? Would it depend at all on whether the request is from the majority or minority?

Ms. Evans. No, sir.

Senator Burr. And if confirmed, will you make it a priority to look into any pending requests for information from me or other members of the committee to ensure that those requests are fulfilled as soon as possible?

Ms. Evans. Yes, sir.

Senator Burr. And if confirmed, will you be proactive in alerting the committee, including both sides of the aisle, to any significant trends, problems, or other issues at the VA?

Ms. Evans. Yes, sir.

Senator Burr. I thank you for those answers.

Joan, my staff recently asked the Office of Legislative

Affairs about information of VA involvement with a company that was reported to have conducted unauthorized clinical trials. OCLA had a knee-jerk response that was the information could not be provided without, and I quote, "a written request signed by the Chair and specifying the reasonable particularity the oversight purpose for which the records are sought," unquote. Now, OCLA later changed its tune and said that they couldn't find any relevant information. My staff was able then to get the requested information from the Inspector General's office. Do you believe this was handled correctly?

Ms. Evans. Well, thank you for presenting that situation. I am not familiar with it. My pledge to you would be, whether on a formal or informal basis, to work with you and your staff to ensure that you have everything that you need to do your job effectively and efficiently.

Senator Burr. Can I ask, do you believe that it probably should have been a proper response to tell us what could be provided legally versus what cannot be?

Ms. Evans. Yes.

Senator Burr. Thank you. General Shinseki has indicated that his goal for Congressional inquiries is to respond within two weeks, and I realize casework is significantly different than this. Over the past several months, it has taken VA much longer than two weeks to

respond to many of the requests for information from my office. If confirmed, what specific steps would you take to ensure that these types of requests are answered in a timely manner?

Ms. Evans. One of the things is to establish a good tracking system to follow up with people. I think the thing that everybody--nobody wants any surprises and people don't appreciate radio silence--

Senator Burr. How important do you believe a free flow of information between the agency and Congress is?

Ms. Evans. I think it is critical for both branches of government to do their job effectively.

Senator Burr. Would it be your intention to foster a collaborative relationship between the VA and Congress?

Ms. Evans. Absolutely, sir.

Senator Burr. In a recent letter, General Shinseki indicated that he asked the VA staff to review current procedures for responding to Congressional requests and to, and I quote, "adjust them to ensure prompt response and follow-up," unquote. Are you aware of a review of this type?

Ms. Evans. Well, currently, Senator Burr, I am in the Office of the Secretary, so I am working directly with the Secretary not on this issue. So I can't comment on that. I am not familiar with it.

Senator Burr. Well, I would ask you, upon your confirmation, would you make a special effort to review the status of that review?

Ms. Evans. Yes, sir.

Senator Burr. Thank you. In response to prehearing questions, you mentioned, and I quote, "the culture of a large, slow-moving institution," unquote, as one of the factors that leads to delays in responding to Congressional inquiries. What steps would you take to ensure that this culture does not prevent the VA from meeting the Secretary's goals of responding to Congress within two weeks?

Ms. Evans. Well, if confirmed, I hope to go down to OCLA, work in the system, get to know the processes, see the obstacles that the Congressional relations officers and the liaisons are faced with when doing their job. They are all dedicated, very hard working people who want to do their job efficiently and effectively. So my goal would be to work with members of the committee and their staffs as well as members of Congress in personal offices who don't have the good fortune of being on this committee to know what their concerns are and how we can best answer them.

Senator Burr. I thank you for your honesty and candor today, and Mr. Chairman, I look forward to the opportunity to have Ms. Evans before us for her confirmation.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much. Thank you,

Senator Burr.

Now I would like to call on Senator Burr. May I say, Senator Burr, you made some remarks about the nomination process. I just want you to know that Ray Jefferson's nomination was received by us on June 9 and Ms. Evans on June 23. That is a pretty rapid pace for all the paperwork that has to occur before we have this hearing, and so we put them together and have had this hearing set up today. I must tell you that we have to wait until we receive what we call the official notice from the White House on these nominations before we can proceed with the paperwork. But I would tell you that we have really moved it as rapidly as we could.

Senator Burr. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just talked with her yesterday and she told me that, but there was some concern, and I am sorry Senator Burr left, because I was deeply concerned about the nomination of Tammy Duckworth that took all that time. That is what we were--

Chairman Akaka. This is time for your questions.

Senator Burr. Yes, sir. Thank you.

And Mr. Chairman, the nominee also has an Illinois connection. She worked for Congressman Terry Bruce, who was a very good friend of mine. And when she told me that, I said, well, my vote is assured. If she can work for Terry, she will have to have a couple of medals.

[Laughter.]

Ms. Evans. No.

Senator Burris. That is my buddy.

Joan, tell me this, because I am concerned. I had requested information from one of the hearings and there was the person at the VA who was in charge of construction and this request was made at least two months ago in reference to minority contractors and I had requested that we get a breakdown of who was doing the work on these construction sites for the VA, and not only that, but a breakdown of the dollar amount, the ethnicity of the contractor, whether Hispanic, Asian, black, or female. To this day, I don't think I have received that information. You are currently in the Veterans Affairs Office right now. You work for the Secretary, is that correct?

Ms. Evans. Yes, sir.

Senator Burris. And I know that if you are confirmed, you probably could do that. But I just wonder, in listening to what Senator Burr raised, whether or not this is a pattern as to how the VA will respond to Congress, respond to a Senator. So you having come from this legislative side and now coming over to the executive side, I just hope that there would be, as far as you are concerned, a little better treatment, or information flowing on a timely basis. Is that something that, if you are confirmed, that you can

state to us unequivocally that that would take place?

Ms. Evans. Yes, sir. I will work to act as expeditiously as the team can get together and also to keep you informed along the way.

Senator Burris. Because I am still looking for that information and I would hope that when you would go back, my staff would be in touch with you, because I don't recall specifically the young lady who was here--we surely have a record of it--and request information, and I am still looking for the information. I don't know what the hold-up is and why there is. Maybe they don't have it. If they don't have it, then we ought to know it because then we want to move to make sure that any of the construction that is taking place would open up the opportunity for minority contractors to do a lot of that work. That is what I am concerned about.

That is the end of my questioning, Mr. Chairman, because I do have to take leave and make another appointment.

Good luck to you and we look forward to working with you, Joan.

Ms. Evans. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Burris. By the way, my Legislative Director, Ken Montoya, told me to come down here and make sure I asked you that question.

[Laughter.]

Ms. Evans. Thank you.

Senator Burris. So you can blame Ken for that. He told me he was your buddy, too.

Ms. Evans. Yes. Thank you, sir.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you very much, Senator Burris. We are really grateful for your part on this committee and your thoughts are really welcomed.

Ms. Evans, I would just like to ask you a few questions about--one of them is on outreach and another is on casework.

Ms. Evans. Yes, sir.

Chairman Akaka. On casework, do you believe constituent casework should fall within the two-week suggested turn-around for Congressional correspondence?

Ms. Evans. Sir, I think that depends on the case and the complexity of it, but I think that all casework should be handled as expeditiously as any other request.

Chairman Akaka. Thank you. And about outreach, do you plan to improve outreach to members of Congress and their staffs?

Ms. Evans. Yes, sir. If confirmed, I personally would like to establish a goal of offering to meet with every member of the House and the Senate or their designated staff personally to find out what their concerns are and to

evaluate those as we look at transforming OCLA.

Chairman Akaka. I certainly appreciate that.

There is something that I would like to seek clarification on, on subject matter experts. Can you please clarify something about direct communication between VA subject matter experts and members of Congress and their staff. Do you believe there are circumstances where OCLA would not be involved in responding to questions from Congress, and if so, when would direct communication with VA experts be appropriate?

Ms. Evans. Well, thank you, sir. What I would like to do, if confirmed, is to work with your staff leadership as well as the leadership in the VA to come up with an appropriate and timely system so that we meet your request with the depth of knowledge you are looking for.

Chairman Akaka. Well, I really appreciate that. As you know, with the new administration and we are trying real hard to do all we can for veterans across the country, and what we are seeking to do is to work together as much as we can to do the job. If we find better ways to do it, we will. So we would appreciate that close communications between VA and the Congress and for us particularly with the Senate.

I appreciate you and your family being here and your friends, and I should say your supporters, too. I want to

thank you for your participation in today's hearing. I appreciate your desire to serve our nation's veterans.

For the information of members and staff, I would like to move this nomination as soon as possible. To that end, I ask that any post-hearing questions for either nominee be sent to the committee's Legislative Clerk by the end of business tomorrow so we can move. I urge both nominees to provide answers to any post-hearing questions as soon as possible so that the committee can report the nominations to the full committee.

Thank you again. This hearing is adjourned.

Ms. Evans. Thank you.

[Whereupon, at 11:48 a.m., the committee was adjourned.]

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