

Ranking Member Richard Burr

Burr Opening Statement at Veterans' Committee Hearing On Pending Nominations

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to you and our colleagues. Also, welcome to our nominees and to your family and friends who have joined us today. Congratulations on your nominations and thank you for being here.

Although the positions for which you have been nominated are at 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.

The Department of Veterans Affairs Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs can help to advance that goal by fostering open communications between VA and Congress. In part, that means ensuring that Congressional requests are answered without hassles or delays. But it also means being proactive in 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's working well at VA and where improvements 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 veterans and their families.

Mrs. Evans, if confirmed, you would play a key role in advancing this type of communication 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." So, I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how communications could be improved.

Turning to you, Mr. Jefferson, I first want to thank you for your service and your personal sacrifices on behalf of our country. 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 servicemembers, and helping enforce laws that protect the employment rights of veterans and military personnel.

With veterans now experiencing unemployment rates of over 8%, it is more important than ever that veterans are provided with whatever assistance they need to find quality jobs. To that end, Mr. Jefferson, I would be interested in your views on what more can be done to make sure 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. Many of these "citizen-soldiers" left behind valued civilian jobs when they answered the nation's call.

And, when they return, they deserve to be quickly and properly reinstated in their jobs, as required by the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act.

Mr. Jefferson, if confirmed, you would be charged with helping resolve servicemembers' 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, 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 about how to make that a reality nation-wide.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate you calling this hearing to discuss the qualifications of these two nominees. I remain committed to ensuring that we have a full complement of leaders at both VA and the Veterans' Employment and Training Service who will work every day to improve the lives of veterans and their families.

I thank the chair.

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