

**Statement of Shereef M. Elnahal, Nominee for Under Secretary for Health of the Department
of Veterans Affairs**

**Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Hearing to Consider Pending Nominations
April 27, 2022**

Good Afternoon, Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, and distinguished members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. It is an honor to appear before you as the President's nominee for Under Secretary of Health.

I would first like to thank you for the productive meetings I've had with many of you. I appreciated learning more about what you see as the most critical health issues facing Veterans across the nation. Advancing the quality and safety of health care for Veterans is a tremendous responsibility and I am privileged to be called upon to do so, if confirmed.

I would like to take a moment to introduce my family members who are here, and without whom I would not be here before you. First my wife Marwa, who is my companion, life partner, and best friend. She is joined by my three children, who are the light of my life. I am also joined by my mother, to whom I am eternally grateful for the values and work ethic she instilled in me, as well as my brother Kareem, sister Sarah, uncle Hisham, aunt Suzie, and my mother-in-law Soheir, all of whom support me immensely, and whom I love very much.

As all of you know, the health challenges that Veterans face could not be more pressing. The nation is still grappling with a pandemic. The VA and this Committee are working through the hard challenges of access to care, VA infrastructure, and the largest electronic health record implementation in history.

I am excited for the opportunity to take on these challenges if confirmed. In short, I would not be sitting before this committee if not for Veterans and VA. As a medical student, I served Veterans at the West Roxbury VA, which was among my first clinical rotations. I remember meeting a Veteran there who had traveled more than an hour with crushing chest pain before arriving in that emergency room. He knew and I knew that he was likely having a heart attack. After he was stable, I asked him why he had chosen to come to that hospital over several others that were closer to him. He told me he did not see himself being treated anywhere else. That the VA was "his hospital, with his doctors and nurses," and that he trusted the VA over any option. I will never forget that moment. It encouraged me to always work for organizations which have THAT effect on people.

Since then, many experiences taught me how our military members lead with grit and resilience. But I was able to see this service firsthand at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, as COVID was spreading rapidly in Newark, my hospital was overrun with patients and staffing shortages. At that time, we knew little about this virus, and it hit our community hard. A saving grace for us were the women and men in uniform—US Army reserve clinicians—who

came and helped staff our hospital through the worst of the crisis. I also worked with National Guard members to build a field hospital for surge capacity. And again this past Winter, as Omicron was surging, active duty Army clinicians came to us again with the support of the Biden administration. Each time, my staff and I were reminded of what these heroes in uniform do for us every day. They protect us and they keep us safe, and that fact was no longer abstract for my staff. If confirmed, this opportunity would be part of my own way of paying their service forward to Veterans across the nation.

I've held different vantage points relevant to this opportunity throughout my life: as a patient, as a physician, and as a healthcare administrator. I was diagnosed with Type I diabetes when I was 12 years old. And although I was blessed with many supports, I've still had my fair share of hard times as a patient. I know what it means when President Biden says that health care is a basic human right—for me, that belief is personal. Later in life, when I started as a medical resident, I immediately noticed that despite the best intentions and exceptional skills of my fellow health professionals, the systems of care around us were letting patients fall through the cracks. That is why I have dedicated my career to improving those systems of care.

This mission led me back to VA, and VA made me the health care leader I am today. VA prepared me to serve as New Jersey's health commissioner—a responsibility that called for protecting the health and well-being of 9 million people—at a scale similar to the number of Veterans I would serve if confirmed. As part of that role, I ran the state's psychiatric hospital system, where we were able to reduce violent assaults, curb overcrowding, hire hundreds of new clinicians, invest millions in capital to improve the environment of care, and standardize trauma-informed care across the hospital system.

I then moved to lead University Hospital in Newark, NJ—a Level 1 trauma center and the main source of health care for a vulnerable community. In addition to leading the hospital through the pandemic, before I arrived, this hospital was under the oversight of a state monitor for failures in care quality, patient safety, financial performance, and poor community trust. Together, my workforce and I turned that hospital around by investing in a culture of respect and accountability. The result was an improvement in the hospital's Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grade and a financial turnaround that resulted in a more than \$50M improvement in operating margin in less than 2 years.

I know what it's like to lead hospitals in both the government and non-profit sectors—to shoulder all the pressure of executing a sacred health care mission on behalf of vulnerable people. I know the challenge and task of leading large and diverse workforces. I know that the most essential ingredient to successful leadership is a true belief in, and respect for, front-line heroes who shoulder the mission at the point of care, and I know the Secretary shares this vision front and center.

Veterans deserve an Under Secretary for Health who can execute on the mutual priorities of this Committee and the administration. But Veterans also deserve a VHA leader who has more faith in the health system and its people than anyone else on the planet. I believe VA is a national treasure, and that this is true *because* of its people. I believe VHA can be the best health care system in the nation. I am more than honored to be sitting here now as a candidate for this role,

and I am encouraged that with all of you on this Committee as colleagues and partners, we would improve Veterans lives together.
Thank you for considering my nomination, and now, I would be happy to answer your questions.