

Michael J. Kussman, MD, MS, MACP, Acting Under Secretary for Health, Department of Veterans Affairs

Statement of
Michael J. Kussman, MD, MS, MACP
Acting Under Secretary for Health
Department of Veterans Affairs
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Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Craig, members of the Committee and its staff. Good morning.

Before I begin my statement, may I mention that my wife Ginny; my son Josh and his fiancé, Laura; and my daughter Deana and her husband Steve are all here with me today. Their love and support-especially Ginny's-have made it possible for me to serve my country faithfully and well throughout my career. Without their help, I could not possibly have qualified for the office for which I have the honor of being considered.

Mr. Chairman, I began my career with the United States Army back in 1970. Like many at that time, I was drafted and served my two-year tour honorably before leaving the service. I finished my medical training, went into private practice for a few years, and then volunteered to return to the Army in 1979. I came back because I realized, as a physician and a healer, that being an Army doctor allowed me to practice my profession while being of service to our Nation's greatest heroes-our service members.

I am proud of my military service; and privileged to have worked my way through the ranks to be selected as a General Officer. When I transitioned from the military, I wanted to continue to serve. The Veterans Health Administration offered me that opportunity in 2000, and I could not have been more grateful.

When I joined VHA, the agency was in the process of successfully redefining itself as the standard of care by which all other health care providers must be measured. Just last month, for example, a new book was published. It is titled "The Best Care Anywhere: why VA health care is better than yours." I am truly fortunate to have been chosen to carry the standard for this great organization.

From my perspective, VHA not only offers the best health care anywhere, but we have the best people anywhere as well. With the proper resources, and the support we receive from the Senate, the House, the President, and the Veterans Service Organizations, we can continue to set the benchmark for quality care for the Nation and the world.

Mr. Chairman, soon after I came to VA, our nation went to war. We have been at war for more than four years now. Our losses-while they may not be as numerous as those of past wars-have nonetheless affected the lives of thousands of America's heroes and their families.

Our Department has no more important mission than to restore those who have been injured or made ill as a result of their service in this war to their highest possible level of functioning. Personally and professionally, I accept responsibility for VHA's readiness to provide these heroes with the level of care they have earned through their service and the sacrifices they have made in defense of our freedom. That is why I am here.

Our care for OIF/OEF veterans has not been perfect by any means. We continue to learn what world-class care means to this new generation of service members and veterans-and to their families. Their expectations have raised the bar for our success, and we must continue to improve in order to meet those expectations.

When things have not gone well for individual veterans, I have listened intently-and then done whatever I could to insure that whatever mistakes we made will never happen again. It's true we've made some errors, but we have accepted responsibility for those errors, and we will fix them properly, whatever the cost may be. We have learned-and we will continue to learn--from what we have done wrong. If you confirm me as Under Secretary, that is how we will do business throughout my tenure.

Make no mistake, however-I believe VHA has done an exceptional job of meeting the needs of our newest generation of veterans, and we have received remarkable support from the President and from Congress. But we still face many challenges. Among them are:

To improve our level of collaboration with our partners at the Department of Defense;

To enhance our ability to treat veterans with severe traumatic brain injuries, and to detect mild to moderate TBI where brain injuries are not immediately apparent;

To continue our search for the most effective therapies for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and ensure those therapies are quickly distributed throughout our system and elsewhere;

To improve access for all enrolled veterans to our world-class care, from our newest veterans to our oldest; and

To meet the goal of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health to emphasize recovery, not stabilization, for every mentally ill veteran.

As Acting Under Secretary, I have established four priorities for improvement to our system, to help us meet today's challenges---and tomorrow's.

First, I have made leadership-responsible, accountable, demonstrated leadership-the key to VHA's future success. We have many fine leaders in our organization; but the men and women who are willing to accept positions of leadership in our organization must also understand the

responsibilities they are asked to accept as leaders. I am committed to getting the right people in the right positions for the good of our entire organization.

Second, I believe that of VA's four missions: patient care, education, research, and emergency management-patient care is by far the most important. To meet the needs of the veterans it is our privilege to serve, we must bring the quality of our care, and our ability to provide that care, to a higher level.

We are now focusing on some basic questions: are our waiting times, and our wait time measures, appropriate; are customers satisfied with their service; and are employees satisfied with their work. I believe, and I know members of Congress believe, we can do better in these areas.

Third, I do not believe that the quality of our business processes matches the quality of the health care we provide. Among other things, we must be able to properly handle the sensitive personal information our veterans entrust to us.

Every VA employee, especially our managers and supervisors, has a duty and responsibility to protect sensitive and confidential information. I have worked with Secretary Nicholson and others to ensure that VHA is in the first rank of those who are helping to make our Department the gold standard in information security.

And finally, I want to be sure that in measuring performance, we are measuring the right things. Our performance measurement system is the best in health care---but we must continue to be vigilant in this area, especially where lives are at stake.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, let me close by thanking you, Secretary Nicholson, and the President, for the privilege I have been given to continue to serve America's heroes at the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am deeply humbled that the search committee chose me from among many qualified candidates, and by the President's willingness to nominate me to lead the finest health care system in America.

If I am confirmed as Under Secretary, I promise to work with you and all members of Congress to build a health care system that will meet the needs of all veterans and their families-the men and women it is VHA's privilege, and our honor, to serve.