

**Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Hearing**  
**Hearing to Consider the Nomination of Denis McDonough to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs**

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Jerry Moran  
Wednesday, January 27, 2021

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*(As Prepared for Delivery)*

“Thank you, Senator, and now Chairman, Tester. Congratulations and I look forward to continuing to work together to serve our nation’s veterans.

“Mr. McDonough, welcome. No mission is nobler than the one you will lead if confirmed, so I thank you and your family for your willingness to re-enter government service.

“We are going into this new Congress with new leadership and a new administration. The challenges we aim to address on behalf of our veterans will be a mix of those existing, ongoing issues we still struggle to sort out, alongside new challenges and new opportunities for our country to not only honor veterans for the service they provided, but to harness their values and talents to help them lead again.

“Mr. McDonough, in 2014 your White House Deputy Chief of Staff, Rob Nabors, reviewed the nationwide wait-time scandal and described the root causes using phrases such as ‘little transparency’, ‘corrosive culture’, ‘lack of accountability across all grade levels’, and ‘significant and chronic system failures.’

“Six years later, thanks to the collective efforts of three VA Secretaries and thousands of dedicated employees, it is fair to say VA looks very different now than it did then. Employee engagement is at its highest level in over a decade. VA ranks 6 out of 17 among large government organizations as a best place to work, a vast improvement in just four years. And patient trust in VA health care is now over 90 percent. Your job, if confirmed, will be to solidify and build off these improvements.

“At the same time, several major modernization programs are underway with Electronic Health Record Modernization, Financial Business Transformation, Caregiver expansion, and Community Care Networks, just to name a few. These and other modernization efforts will require billions of dollars per year on top of VA’s regular operations just to catch VA up with the latest best practices. VA needs strong leadership to make certain these investments achieve results and do not waste taxpayer dollars.

“With the help of our VSO partners, Congress has enacted several recent reforms to improve mental health care, protect educational assistance, enhance disability and survivors’ benefits, and expand burial benefits. The next Secretary of Veterans Affairs must be ready on day one to advance and build on the progress that has been made over the last four years, must ensure that the laws are faithfully executed, and must measure results so we know veterans are benefitting as intended.

“Additionally, the next secretary must continue the fight against COVID-19, support an already-strained workforce, deliver timely vaccinations to VA patients, and be ready to assist the civilian health care system in places where it is overburdened. Furthermore, backlogs in health care and benefit claim appointments that have piled up due to the pandemic must be addressed as we return to a more stable operating environment in the coming months.

“A top concern for me, and for many of my colleagues, is how VA will care for veterans living in rural communities. Before coming to the Senate, I represented a Congressional district roughly the size of Illinois with no VA Medical Center. I look at VA through the eyes of our Kansas veterans and the feedback I receive in speaking to them is that health care access has always been a challenge. VA provides excellent health care in its own facilities, but those facilities are not in every community. The MISSION Act gives veterans the permanent choice to utilize community health care providers when it makes sense for them and NOT when it is convenient for VA bureaucrats. I asked President Biden and will also ask for your commitment to uphold the law by

supporting this commonsense notion that it's the veteran who should be at the center of their health care decisions.

“We know that public health measures that reduce the spread of COVID also increase the risk of social isolation and mental health conditions. VA has tools it can use to help. Community care authorities, telehealth options, and funding provided by Congress can work together to mitigate the pandemic's impact on veterans' physical, mental, social, and economic health.

“Furthermore, programs like the GI Bill, Veteran Readiness and Employment, and the Transition Assistance Program can help veterans transition out of the military successfully and help launch them on what VA terms a ‘Solid Start’ entering the civilian world. Research has shown higher incomes likely lead to better health outcomes, so investing in these programs doesn't just aid veterans in transition, it helps their long-term well-being and can reduce the burden on VA's health system.

“I would ask that you consider not just how VA is doing at delivering the benefits provided by law, but also what outcomes we are trying to achieve for veterans with these benefits and if we are doing enough to measure those outcomes relative to the benefits VA is providing.

“Again, congratulations on your nomination, and thank you for your commitment to our nation's veterans. Caring for veterans has always been a unifying force during my time in Congress. It is my great hope that it will continue to be if you are confirmed as Secretary.

“Mr. McDonough, I look forward to hearing your statement and engaging with you further on these questions during the hearing

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman.”

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