

Ranking Member Richard Burr

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Statement of Ranking Member Richard Burr

January 14, 2009

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to you and to our colleagues. I look forward to working with all of you during the 111th Congress to improve the lives of our nation's veterans and their families.

Also, welcome to you, General Shinseki, and congratulations on your nomination to serve as the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. I have met with you personally and have reviewed your extensive credentials, and I believe it is clear that you have the experience, leadership skills, and determination needed to serve in this very important and challenging position.

As the head of VA, you would be entrusted with one of the most noble mission's of our Federal government - caring for the men and women who have served and sacrificed on behalf of our entire nation. That means providing veterans and their families with a broad range of benefits and services they may need to live full and productive lives and making sure that our fallen heroes are honored and memorialized. But, as we'll discuss today, the next Secretary will face many serious challenges in carrying out that mission.

With our nation continuing to fight conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have men and women returning home with the physical and psychological wounds of war. For those who leave the military, the goal must be to ensure they are quickly and effectively provided with the benefits and services they need to return to civilian life as closely as possible to how they left it.

Unfortunately, too many wounded servicemembers do not experience a "seamless transition" from active duty to civilian life. General, I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can prevent these wounded warriors from falling through the cracks.

Our nation is also facing the highest unemployment rates in nearly 16 years, which may lead veterans who lose their jobs to seek health care from VA for the first time. General, as Secretary, your charge would be to ensure that as more veterans come into the system, the quality of health care provided by VA does not deteriorate. This challenge will be even greater in states -- like North Carolina - where the number of veterans is growing and where VA's capacity is already stressed.

In addition, the next Secretary will be responsible for implementing the new Post-9/11 GI Bill. At a minimum, that means making sure veterans and their families will receive the

correct amount of benefits on time. But it also means providing user-friendly benefits that allow veterans and their families to make the educational choices that best meet their needs.

General, considering all the challenges that lie ahead, I appreciate your willingness to serve our nation in this important role. I congratulate you again on your nomination and look forward to working with you on behalf of our nation's veterans and their families.

I thank the Chair.