

Statement of Christopher E. O'Connor
Nominee to be Assistant Secretary, Congressional and Legislative Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

June 21, 2016

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Blumenthal, Distinguished Members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for your consideration of my nomination to serve as the Department of Veterans Affairs Assistant Secretary for Congressional and Legislative Affairs. I am deeply humbled by President Obama's nomination and the confidence that both he and Secretary McDonald have shown in me.

I would like to recognize my family members that are with me today. My wife Debbie who has supported me for 32 years, many of those when I have been off somewhere else, my daughter Katie, who has one class left at University of Mary Washington till graduation, and my son Colin, who is a sophomore at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Their support has been invaluable to me.

I would also like to thank my parents Bernie and Jane O'Connor. My Dad is no longer with us. He was a World War II Marine who participated in the landings at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. I would also like to thank my father-in-law, Jack Keane, who is a Retired Marine and Vietnam Veteran. Both of them had a tremendous influence on me and taught me a great deal about leadership. And I am proud to say that my oldest son Brian, who was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps last summer, and is now going through flight training at NAS Pensacola, Florida, is carrying on a tradition of military service.

I was privileged to serve in the United States Marine Corps for over thirty years. During my career I was fortunate to serve with young men and women who truly represented the best there is about our Country. While I was in the Marine Corps I also worked congressional affairs, and there I learned first-hand the value of working together with Congress to solve problems, to take care of Marines, and create an unparalleled partnership.

When I was offered the opportunity to work at VA in early 2010, I quickly accepted it. I publically want to thank former Assistant Secretary Joan Mooney for giving me the chance to continue to serve those I served with. Working on, and in support of, Veterans issues was the right post-military duty for me. It has enabled me to continue to give back, to serve not only those I served with, but to serve my son's generation as well. This is a passion for me and something that is not about work, but about service, not about money, but about caring. It is about being part of something much bigger than yourself.

That is why I am firmly committed to carrying out the MyVA Transformation that Secretary McDonald has outlined for the Department. Placing the Veteran at the center of everything the Department does is the right thing to do. Under Secretary McDonald's leadership, and with Congressional support, the Department is changing, and that includes the Office of Government Relations. In accordance with MyVA, we reorganized the office in order to be more responsive to you, our customers. We created an Outreach Directorate that is aligned with the Department's five districts that focuses on those Members of Congress who are not members of VA's committees of jurisdiction. The reorganization has improved our interactions with those Member offices and helped to provide reliable points of contact for staff to turn to for information. MyVA is an irreversible change that is destined to make VA the number one customer service agency in the Federal Government and the employer of choice of Veterans and health care professionals. It is an honor to be part of this transformation journey; to see the change; and to be part of the solution.

I have been extremely fortunate to work on a daily basis in VA with a group of talented individuals in the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs who are dedicated to VA's mission, and care deeply for the Veterans they serve. I am very appreciative of everything they do on a daily basis, and for the support they have given me over the last two years.

During my tenure in VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs, I have tried to ensure there have been open lines of communication between the Department and Congress as we worked together on so many important issues

for Veterans. I have increased engagement, promoted increased access to senior leaders, and worked to create a collaborative relationship, especially with regards to Veterans centric legislation. Working closely together with your staffs on legislation, such as the Choice Program, has demonstrated how important the Congressional – VA partnership is for producing better results for Veterans. I firmly respect Congress' oversight role and if confirmed, will work tirelessly to improve the Department's responsiveness to Congressional requests for information. I know there have been times when we could have been more responsive, and I promise you I will work to improve upon our performance and to streamline internal VA processes that contribute to unnecessary delays in getting information to Congress.

In closing, my experiences in the Marine Corps working congressional affairs, as a base commander working with the local community and public leaders, and the knowledge I have gained in VA over the last six years, have given me the skills, leadership, and management experience to effectively lead the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs.

If confirmed, I look forward to working with you to further enhance the relationship between the Department and Congress, so that together, we can meet the needs of the Veterans we proudly serve. Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before you today and I look forward to your questions.