

**Statement of Dr. Tamara Bonzanto, RN, DNP
Nominee for Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs- Office of Accountability and
Whistleblower Protection**

**Before the Committee on Veterans Affairs
United States Senate
September 5, 2018**

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and Distinguished Members of the Committee on Veterans Affairs, I want to thank you for the opportunity and privilege to come before you and seek your endorsement to serve as the Assistant Secretary of VA Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection. I am honored to have been nominated by President Trump, and I am thankful for the opportunity to have met individually with many of you following my nomination. This committee's support and commitment to our Nations veterans and their families are encouraging and greatly appreciated.

I am joined here today by my husband Benjamin Bonzanto, an Army Combat Veteran, who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, my twins Lilliana and Sophia, my brother Christopher, and my mentor Dr. BethAnn Swan. My eldest daughter Alexandra is not here, and I want to wish her well on her first day in high school.

I am honored to be testifying before the United States Senate, and I want to tell you my American story. I grew up in Piporo, a small village in Trinidad, in a poor area with poor prospects and limited educational opportunities. I migrated with my family to this great nation when I was fifteen years old. I am the eldest of four children and my parents could not afford my education beyond high school. During a high school college fair, I told a

Navy recruiter my dilemma, and he had a solution- on September 4th, 2001, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy and was on my way to boot camp. I served as a Hospital Corpsman in a variety of roles and was honorably discharged in 2006. After active duty service, I earned my Bachelor of Science degree in nursing from the Jefferson College of Nursing at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. I continued my work in healthcare with the Philadelphia Housing Authority as a nurse case manager.

In 2012 my passion for assisting service members brought me back to the military as a contracted nurse case manager for the Army Reserves. While in this role I became an expert in coordinating soldiers' healthcare between the Department of Defense, Department of Veteran Affairs, and civilian health care providers in 13 northeastern states. I also served as a medical readiness advisor to the Army Reserves in the Northeast Region.

In 2015, after my contract ended, I left my family in New Jersey and came to Capitol Hill when a nationwide VA health care access crisis was revealed. My unique blend of experiences and passion for the mission made me the ideal choice to become the House on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation, healthcare investigator. During my time on the committee, I was also committed to continuing my education and completed a Master of Science in Nursing and Doctor of Nursing Practice-Community Systems Administration.

In this role, I witnessed first-hand the work of VA employees and the impact it has on the everyday lives of our Nation's Veterans. As a Veteran and the wife of a combat Veteran, I have seen and experienced the commitment of hardworking VA employees. As a veteran myself, I utilized the Post 9/11 GI bill to complete my undergraduate and a graduate degrees in

nursing. After my husband's combat tours, he also accessed healthcare services and used his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits to complete a graduate degree. After service to our country, we relied on VA for services and benefits to help us integrate into civilian life. Professionally, I have worked with countless service men and women, veterans and their families to coordinate care and service with VA. I know and understand the importance of VA's mission. As a nurse, I have seen the struggles service members experience when integrating into civilian life after war and military service. I can say from personal experience that the battle continues after our Soldiers and Sailors return home. The physical, psychological and emotional wounds of war haunt our service men and women years after service and VA has a critical role to in delivering quality healthcare and timely benefits.

I have been asked on numerous occasions, why do you want this position? I have put much thought into this, and I know this will not be an easy task. I agreed to take on this mission because my fellow veterans deserve a healthcare and benefits system where there is trust, advocacy, transparency, and accountability. Every era of veterans have struggled at some point to access services within VA, and I do not want history to keep repeating. We need to change our approach to serving veterans, and I see this office as the catalyst for changing the culture in VA. As a Registered Nurse, I understand the importance of having transparency, advocacy, and accountability in healthcare. The Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection has the potential to improve communication and employee engagement, build trust, enhance advocacy and improve transparency with both VA employees and the Veterans they serve. I see many opportunities to bring stakeholders from all aspects of VA to the table to have meaningful dialogues about improving the delivery of services.

If confirmed I am committed to collaborating with both internal and external stakeholders to support a working environment where employees feel safe identifying concerns and comfortable with the processes for reviewing or investigating concerns.

Whistleblowers have been an essential part of our oversight work in Congress, and I value their commitment to improving care and services for my fellow veterans. I want VA to be a place where an employee can trust that their chain of command will be honest and have integrity. Veterans and employees should feel safe reporting concerns about the services they receive.

In the next few months, the Veteran's Health Administration will be undergoing significant transformation, with the planning and implementation of the Mission Act, Caregiver expansion, transformative IT Modernization and the implementation of the Electronic Health Records Program. The Veterans Benefits Administration will be focused on reducing the claims and appeals backlog. We cannot afford to keep the status quo; we need all hands on deck committed to executing the President's and the Secretary's priorities for our Nation's Veterans.

If confirmed, I pledge to work with the Secretary and internal stakeholders to improve customer service and the culture of VA and improve communication with external stakeholders, including Office of Special Counsel, the VA Office of Inspector General, the Government Accountability Office and Congress. I am also committed to improving collaboration with VA Human Resources and Administration to develop policies and processes to guide OAWP operations and improve OAWP staff training.

Serving this country provided me with the opportunity to become educated and live my American dream. I understand the importance of public service and as a nurse I am passion about caring for people.

I am committed to continuing advocating for veterans and VA employees. I know what it takes to leave your family and serve in the military. My shipmates became my family when I joined the Navy, and I have lifelong brother and sisters who are still serving this great country. I want them and all Veterans to know that after their service, the VA will be here to fulfill President Lincoln's promise "To care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan"

Thank you all for this opportunity, and I look forward to your questions.