

BUSINESS MEETING

THURSDAY, JANUARY 23, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:02 a.m., in Room SR-418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry Moran, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Moran, Boozman, Cassidy, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Cramer, Tuberville, Banks, Sheehy, Blumenthal, Murray, Sanders, Hirono, Hassan, King, Gallego, and Slotkin.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS

Chairman MORAN. A quorum is present, so that allows me to call this business meeting to order. I don't want to disadvantage any of the folks who are here and here on time, but we will have a roll call vote. So, we need every member or proxy here, and we do not have proxies for anyone that's absent.

So, as specified in the notice provided by Committee—to Committee members last week, the only item on our agenda this morning is the nomination of the Honorable Douglas A. Collins to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs. I will be voting in support of Congressman Collins nomination. I appreciate his firsthand experience. I appreciate what he brings to the table as a veteran, as a military chaplain, a lawyer, and a lawmaker.

I also appreciate his commitment to putting veterans first and to being forthright and transparent with this Committee. I was particularly pleased even on the most difficult questions. He made his point, but he made his point in a way that I found non-offensive, and indicating a cooperation and willingness to listen, and an intense desire to make certain that this Committee is kept informed.

I think we can work together with the new Secretary to improve the lives of veterans and their families, caregivers, and survivors.

I now yield to the Ranking Member, Senator Blumenthal, if he wishes to offer any opening comments.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Do you want me to make a motion first? Chairman MORAN. You could make the comments and then the motion.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm going to support Doug Collins to be our next VA Secretary. I was impressed

by many of his answers and commitments to continue the forward progress for our veterans, which has been such a bipartisan cause, particularly in seeking expansion of the PACT Act for toxic-exposed veterans, upgrading the VA facilities nationwide, delivering more resource to prevent veterans' homelessness, and utilizing every resource possible to stop veterans' suicide.

And, hopefully, he'll be the kind of advocate that we really are going to need in this era when the challenges will be greater than ever before, fiscally, and the pressure to scale back, to cut costs, to pursue harmful policies that may negatively affect our veterans will also be greater.

If he's confirmed, as I expect he will be, I welcome the opportunity to work and advocate with him in the administration and improve services for veterans in Connecticut and across the country, and especially, as I know every member of this Committee is interested in doing, building, and rebuilding, and renovating the infrastructure and facilities that are so important.

I continue to have serious, really intense concerns about the hiring freeze that has been apparently implemented in the Trump administration. Whatever the effects on other departments or agencies, all of you know how dire the need is for the doctors, the nurses, the attendants, everybody involved in the VA healthcare system. There are openings now. They need to be filled, particularly for mental healthcare. Delaying these medical appointments and benefits is, in some cases, denial of those benefits because health is such an urgent need for many of our veterans, particularly our older veterans.

Despite the assurances the VA benefits would be exempt, we're now hearing that there is a hiring freeze at the VBA, making it more difficult for veterans to access their earned benefits, including the benefits promised by the PACT Act. And I will address this issue on a continuing basis with the nominee.

I'm also concerned that the Trump administration will overturn the regulations that allows the VA to provide abortion counseling and care to veterans in cases of rape, incest, and risk to life or health of the veteran. I know I'm not alone on this Committee in that concern. We're going to be watching. And although the nominee gave us less than a completely explicit or clear answer, he did promise to let us know if there was going to be reconsideration of this rule. And the rule, of course, is a rule. If it's to be overturned, it has to be by the same rulemaking process that was pursued to make the rule.

So, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for conducting the hearing and this meeting in such a bipartisan way, and I think Mr. Collins will be off to a good start.

Chairman MORAN. Ranking Member, thank you very much for your cooperation. And let me just point out that we have asked the transition team, and now the administration, to further define and provide us with information about what the consequences, or what the intention, or what the specifics are of this hiring freeze. The words say that nothing will prohibit veterans from receiving veterans' benefits. We'll find out what that exactly means.

But I'd also say that it would be useful to have Secretary Collins confirmed in a position to advocate for his department and for the

veterans that that department serves. And he indicated a willingness to do so. He testified that no one on the veteran's side is going to miss their healthcare provider because of any new hiring freeze.

I'd also indicate that the Biden administration, after record hiring in 2023, the Biden administration implemented a net zero growth strategy in 2024, and had the goal of reducing the VA workforce by 10,000 employees. This was due to both budgetary concerns and the VA's leadership that the VA had necessary workforce to fill its mission. It will be our job to make sure that we know what the facts are and whether they're sufficient staffing to make sure that veterans receive the care and benefits that they deserve, and this Committee needs to do its work.

But the bottom line is, I think that having the Secretary confirmed by this Committee and then by the Senate, puts us in a better position to make sure that those positions are known by us, and that when necessary, we're capable of advocating for any of our concerns.

So, let me invite a motion on the pending nomination.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Mr. Chairman, I move that the Committee on Veterans Affairs favorably reports the nomination of the Honorable Douglas A. Collins to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal. Is there a second?

Senator HIRONO. Excuse me.

Chairman MORAN. Yes.

Senator HIRONO. Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MORAN. Senator Hirono.

Senator HIRONO. Point of personal privilege. Would it be appropriate to make comments after the vote?

Chairman MORAN. It will be.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. There was a second that was made. So, the motion is made and seconded. Any debate on the motion? If none, once the debate has concluded, we will invite those who want to say something to do so. The vote is now on the motion that the Committee favorably report the pending nomination. There's been a request for a roll call vote, and the clerk will call the roll.

The CLERK. Mr. Boozman?

Senator BOOZMAN. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Cassidy?

Senator CASSIDY. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Tillis?

Senator TILLIS. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Sullivan?

Senator SULLIVAN. [No response.]

The CLERK. Mrs. Blackburn?

Senator BLACKBURN. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Cramer?

Senator CRAMER. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Tuberville?

Senator TUBERVILLE. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Banks?

Senator BANKS. Yes.

The CLERK. Mr. Sheehy?

Senator SHEEHY. Yes.

The CLERK. Mr. Blumenthal?

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Aye.

The CLERK. Mrs. Murray?

Senator MURRAY. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Sanders?

Senator SANDERS. Aye.

The CLERK. Ms. Hirono?

Senator HIRONO. No.

The CLERK. Ms. Hassan?

Senator HASSAN. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. King?

Senator KING. Aye. Senator Sullivan has arrived.

The CLERK. Mr. Sullivan?

Senator SULLIVAN. Aye. Thanks.

The CLERK. Ms. Duckworth?

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Aye, by proxy.

The CLERK. Mr. Gallego?

Senator GALLEGO. Aye.

The CLERK. Ms. Slotkin?

Senator SLOTKIN. Aye.

The CLERK. Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MORAN. Aye.

The CLERK. On this vote the ayes are 18, and the nays are 1.

Chairman MORAN. The motion to favorably report is agreed to. That concludes the business of our meeting, but I will recognize Senator Hirono for her remarks.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you very much. I voted no against this nomination because Congressman Collins plans for VA are not in line with what, I believe, are right for veterans in Hawaii and across the country, and not what my constituents support.

Among my concerns, overturning VA's interim final rule on abortion and further privatizing of the VA care. As with his predecessors, if Congressman Collins is confirmed, I will, of course, work with him as a member of this Committee to make the quality of life better for veterans in Hawaii and all across our country. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you for your remarks. Are there others who wish to make any remarks? If there's no Committee member who seeks recognition, the meeting is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 9:12 a.m., the Committee was adjourned.]