



**For Immediate Release**  
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## **Statement of Chairman Bernard Sanders**

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Hearing: Pending Nominations before the Committee  
November 6, 2013

*“Good morning. Welcome to today’s hearing to consider the nominations of: Sloan Gibson to be Deputy Secretary, Linda Schwartz to be Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning, and Constance Tobias to be Chairman of the Board of Veterans’ Appeals.*

*I am pleased to welcome the nominees and their families and friends here today. We’ll learn more about their qualifications during introductions, so I won’t spend time repeating what we’ll learn shortly. I’ll keep my statement brief in order to get to the nominees’ testimony.*

*But as we begin today’s hearing, I think it is important to recognize some of the realities facing VA. Overall, I think VA provides excellent, cost-effective health care. However, we know it takes VA too long to issue claims decisions. We know it takes the Board too long to decide appeals. We know VA and DoD have spent years on an integrated electronic health record with very little to show for their efforts. We know VA has difficulty managing major construction projects. We know far too many veterans still do not know about the benefits and health care for which they are entitled, and so on and so forth. This is the world you may be stepping into.*

*As the second highest ranking person at VA, the Deputy Secretary has traditionally been VA’s chief operating officer.*

*Mr. Gibson, the individual who fills this position must be able to oversee and ensure the optimal function of and seamless collaboration between all of VA’s offices, including its health care system, benefits programs and national cemeteries.*

*And as you know, this individual has traditionally served as the Department’s lead in collaborative efforts with DoD, which is an enormous undertaking but vitally important. It is important that we choose a leader with the energy and tenacity to help guide the Department in all of its noble endeavors. Our veterans deserve no less.*

*The Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning will also play an integral role in these efforts, as he or she is responsible for providing advice, plans, and reports to the Secretary, and other senior leaders, that guide future Department policies, and strategies.*

*Dr. Schwartz, the individual who fills this role will need to work closely with the Deputy Secretary to make sure we reach the benchmark goals we have set and continue to improve the quality of VA services and benefits along the way.*

*And as you know, this position oversees the VA/DoD Collaboration Service. A good deal of effort must be spent on addressing the age old problem of how to best work with DoD in order to meet the needs of our veterans.*

*Even as the claims process is expedited and accuracy improves, there will always be a need to allow veterans to appeal decisions made by the Department.*

*The Chairman of the Board of Veterans' Appeals is an important position because, for many veterans, the Board is the first step in a long struggle to appeal a decision they disagree with.*

*Ms. Tobias, it's no secret that the Board's case load has continued to increase along with the increase in the number of veterans filing for benefits. VA's budget materials indicate that over 45,000 veterans will appeal during the next fiscal year. The time it takes to resolve an appeal stood at an average of 866 days last year. And the remand rate remains far too high.*

*Despite a plan, aggressive action, and some progress to speed the delivery and improve the accuracy of initial benefit decisions, VA has not taken sufficient action to address the appeals workload.*

*Much, much more must be done to ensure the Board quickly and accurately adjudicates these appeals."*