

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Burr

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for bringing the Committee together to examine the qualifications of Robert McDonald to serve as the next Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Welcome to you, Mr. McDonald, and thank you for your willingness to take the reins at the Department of Veterans Affairs at this critical time.

As you acknowledge in your testimony, VA is an agency in crisis. Over the past few months, the nation has been rocked by revelations that the Veterans Health Administration was manipulating its wait-time data, leaving tens of thousands of veterans waiting for the care they need and deserve. In the wake of this scandal, it has become clear that VA officials failed for years to act on warnings of a national scheduling crisis. The President's own team found that this was fueled by a corrosive culture, in which officials tended to "minimize problems or refuse to acknowledge problems all together."

Although VA has started taking steps to improve access to care, much more work is needed to understand and resolve the full scope of issues facing VA health care. The on-going internal evaluation by VA and investigations by other offices will be critical in that effort. As the head of VA, Mr. McDonald, it will be essential that you embrace the findings of these investigations and urgently work to bring about needed reforms.

Perhaps more importantly, you must usher in a new culture throughout VA. Employees at all levels must be willing to proactively identify and address problems in every corner of this vast Department. We need a culture where warning signs will not be ignored and twisting performance metrics to make it appear that veterans are being well served will not be tolerated. This paradigm shift is needed not only on the health care side of VA, but on the benefits side as well.

In recent weeks, the Inspector General and Government Accountability Office have shed light on a number of troubling issues at the Veterans Benefits Administration, which suggest that VBA is not upholding its responsibilities to veterans or to taxpayers. Work that is not counted in the disability claims backlog is piling up; hundreds of millions in taxpayer dollars have been improperly paid out; and there are serious questions about the integrity of VA's data on the backlog and the quality of its decisions. But, in response, VA continues to tout its suspect data as "proof" that VBA is working well.

My hope and expectation, Mr. McDonald, is that you will not allow VA to ignore the signs of deep dysfunction at VBA, but will work to resolve any systemic problems. More broadly, your charge moving forward will be to ensure that this entire Department - from top to bottom - is re-focused on providing our nation's veterans with the high-quality service they have earned and they deserve. I look forward to working with you to help VA live up to the expectations of veterans and of a nation grateful for their service.

I thank the Chair and yield back.