

## Statement of Robert L. Wilkie

Nominee for Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Confirmation Hearing before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee

June 27, 2018

Mr. Chairman, Senator Tester and distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans Affairs. This is the third time I have appeared in the confirmation chair. Just as in 2006 and 2017, my wife Julie is with me. We have known each other since we were youngsters in North Carolina. Our high school was two blocks from the Veterans Hospital in Fayetteville. On our way to and from school we could not help but read the sign at the entrance –“**The price of freedom is visible here**”.

I am humbled today not only by the confidence placed in me by the President and the support of our Veterans Service Organizations, but to be introduced by Senator Tillis. No one better exemplifies what those of us who have come through the military world strive to be—a servant leader.

I have been privileged to experience military life from many angles, as the son of a gravely wounded combat soldier; as an officer; as a senior leader in the Pentagon, including leading the Defense Health Agency reform, and eight weeks as Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

My modest military service was inspired by my ancestors. I walked the field of Shiloh with my great grandfather, Colonel Abram Somerville. As a young captain of field artillery, he saw thousands perish in minutes in the Meuse Argonne in 1918. In the short time that I was privileged to know him, he impressed upon me the cost paid by ordinary Americans caught up in the incommunicable experience of war.

Mr. Chairman my own life changed when my father returned from his second combat tour in Vietnam. I was seven when we received a message that he had been terribly wounded. When he came home after a year in military hospitals, he weighed less than half of what he did when he left us. I watched his agonizing recovery and that experience was on my mind when I was asked to come to VA.

As Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs, I visited five VA hospitals across the country—met with the combined leadership of our three major VA components—Benefits, Health and Cemeteries—and visited our Claims Processing center in Baltimore and the Maryland Veterans Treatment Court presided over by my childhood friend, Judge Halee Weinstein.

It is clear that the Veterans population is changing faster than we realize. For the first time in forty years—half of our veterans are under the age of sixty-five. Of America’s twenty million veterans, ten percent are now women. The new generation is computer savvy and demands 21<sup>st</sup> century service—service that is quick, diverse and close to home. For the VA to thrive as an integrated health care network, it must be agile and adaptive.

More importantly, I experienced what can never be duplicated in the private sector—the communal aspect of VA. What does that mean? It means that when our veterans walk into any of VA facility they converse with men and women who speak the unique language of military service.

What are the priorities?

- Improve the culture—offer world class customer service
- Improve access to care through implementation of the MISSION Act and transformative IT Modernization such as the Electronic Health Records Program.
- Reduce the backlog of claims and payments.
- Business transformation including reform of the human resource systems

Mr. Chairman, the prime directive is customer service. When an American veteran comes to VA it is not up to him to employ a team of lawyers to get VA to say YES. It is up to VA to get the Veteran to YES—that is customer service.

Many of the issues I encountered as Acting Secretary were not with the quality of medical care but with getting our veterans through the door to reach that care. Those problems are administrative and bureaucratic. Alexander Hamilton said, “The true test of a good government, is its aptitude and tendency to produce a good administration.” That is where VA must go.

The new Electronic Health Record system is the first step to modernize our appointment system, it is also the template to get us started on the road to automate disability claims and our payment claims particularly to our providers in rural

America and those who administer emergency care. More importantly, the interoperability of the new electronic health records system will connect VA to the DOD, private doctors and private pharmacies to create a continuum of care and organize the healthcare around our veteran's needs. This is also our opportunity to turn the corner and be an industry leader on opioid abuse intervention and suicide prevention.

Business transformation to standardize our policies and procedures across the VISNs is also essential if we are to move past the mid-1990s compartmentalized model and give power to the professionals closest to our veterans. This means reforming human resource systems to give those same people more leeway to manage their budgets and recruit, retain and relocate the staff they need to serve veterans.

Transformation also means entering into more robust partnerships with our state and local communities to address Veteran homelessness, that particularly plagues our Vietnam Veterans who also suffer the highest rates of suicide.

We are also pledged to help veterans transition to a new life in education and non-military careers. If confirmed, I will leverage VA's strong partnership with Labor, Defense, and other agencies to carry out this pledge.

Mr. Chairman, as Secretary Mattis said when this Congress passed a \$700 billion Defense budget, there are no more excuses. You have infused VA with a \$200 billion budget, you have passed the Accountability Act—to shake up complacency—and you have passed the Mission Act to bring the institutional VA, community care and caregivers closer together. The future is up to the Department. If confirmed, I pledge to help build on your work.

I would like to close with a charge from President Eisenhower.

Five months after his inauguration, about forty Korean War Veterans climbed aboard the yacht Williamsburg—many were missing limbs, some were horribly disfigured. When Ike arrived at the pier, the Secret Service ran up the plank to separate the President from his troops. Seeing that, Eisenhower yelled “Halt! I know these men”. The agents retreated, and the soldiers gathered around the President. He addressed them at attention and said there was nothing the country could do for them to compensate for what they had given to America but, he said, **“You never put away your uniform. You must get well, to remind your countrymen every day that freedom is never free”**.

Mr. Chairman that is why VA must succeed--to remind Americans every day that freedom is not free.