

L. Tammy Duckworth, Designate to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, Department of Veterans Affairs

Opening Statement of L. Tammy Duckworth designate to be Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs  
Before the  
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
April 1, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today. I am deeply honored and humbled that President Obama has given me this opportunity to serve our nation's Veterans. Since my time at Walter Reed, when this Committee first called on me to testify on behalf of my fellow Wounded Warriors, I have been privileged to answer your questions and assist you in caring for our brave military men and women. I plan to continue this important partnership with you in my new role at the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

A significant part of my duties will be to transform the Public Affairs functions at the Department of Veterans Affairs to fulfill President Obama's and Secretary Shinseki's commitment to a 21st Century agency with candor, transparency and integrity. Not only will DVA be responsive to this Committee's concerns, the Department will also be proactive in communicating with you, and with our Veterans. In order to become a 21st Century organization, DVA will have to change some past methods used to communicate with other government agencies, the Congress, the media, and most importantly, our Veterans. The things that DVA already does well, we will continue. However, with the changing demographics of our Veteran population, we will develop the communication strategies that best reach our newest Veterans where they live, work and play. It is no longer enough to hand out brochures at demobilization ceremonies. We must develop social networking strategies, use non-traditional outlets such as blogs, and employ the wide variety of new media available to get the message of available benefits to our Veterans.

Just as our nation learned from our Vietnam Veterans that we must love the Warrior regardless of our personal stand on the war, we must also learn the lesson of how DVA lost contact with so many Vietnam Veterans and apply that lesson today. We are in a critical time when we still have the ability to reach out to the generation of post-9/11 Veterans. If we send the message incorrectly, we risk angering or disappointing these Vets to the point where they turn their backs on VA, as so many did after Vietnam. The upcoming roll-out of the Post-9/11 GI Bill is a critical example. If our Vets are not given the correct information on qualifications and application processes, they will become frustrated and have their worst stereotypes of the DVA bureaucracy reinforced. Most tragically, if we do not reach out in the correct way to our Veterans suffering from Traumatic Brain Injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, they will turn away and not access the care that they need for these wounds.

The second component of my position at DVA will be to develop partnerships with other federal and state agencies as well as with non-governmental organizations. As a result of my past work with Veterans, I recognize that the greatest frustration with DVA is not the quality of the care provided. In fact, DVA medical care is among the best in the country. The frustration is with gaining access to that care.

Local governmental agencies should become allies with the Department of Veterans Affairs in helping our Veterans access their DVA benefits. In my new job, I will use my past experience and relationships with the State Directors of Veterans Affairs, with County Veteran Service Officers, with Veteran Service Organizations as well as with organizations that have not traditionally partnered with DVA, such as Rotary International or the Lions Clubs. If DVA cannot be in every storefront of every hometown across America, we will find partners who are and who can help us distribute the tools that our Veterans need to gain access to the healthcare and benefits that they have earned through their service. No Veteran should ever have his access to DVA services blocked because of geography. Just as it did not matter where my hometown was when I enlisted, where I live now should not prevent me from getting the DVA services that I need and earned. Intergovernmental partnerships will be key in fulfilling our nation's obligations to our Veterans.

In the Army, my job did not start and end with flying helicopters. My job was to carry out the mission assigned to me and to take care of my Soldiers. I view this opportunity to serve in the Department of Veterans Affairs the same way. I am nominated to be Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, but ultimately my job will be to support the mission of serving our Veterans. I live every day knowing that I should have died in that dusty field north of Baghdad and am alive today only because my buddies would not leave me behind. I intend to honor their heroism by doing everything that I can to make sure that this nation stands by those who have served and leaves no Veteran behind. Thank you for this opportunity to come before you today, and God Bless our troops who are in harm's way around the world.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.