

Testimony of the Honorable Linda Spoonster Schwartz
Nominee to be Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
November 6, 2013

Good morning Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am deeply honored that President Obama has nominated me for the position of Assistant Secretary for Policy and Planning at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). I am energized by the opportunity to serve as part of Secretary Shinseki's leadership team to continue to transform the Department of Veterans Affairs to meet the many challenges Veterans face in the 21st century.

I currently serve as the Commissioner of Veteran Affairs for the State of Connecticut. I was first appointed Commissioner in 2003 and reappointed in 2007 and 2011, having the distinct honor of serving three Connecticut Governors. My life is deeply rooted in my profession as a nurse, my service in the United States Air Force and my advocacy for America's Veterans.

I have used VA health care and benefits programs since I was medically retired from the U.S. Air Force in 1986 after sustaining injuries in an aircraft accident while serving as an Air Force Flight Nurse. At that time VA was the only care available to me because my husband, a self-employed Veteran, had no health coverage and the health plan provided by my employer would not cover the cost of care associated with injuries incurred in the line of military duty.

I became an advocate because I saw firsthand how hard it was for many Veterans at the time to navigate a system they did not fully understand. Even though I was quite ill, the nurse in me knew there were better methods and avenues for health care which could, and should, have been implemented. Because my injuries were so severe, I was

not able to continue practicing “hands-on” bedside nursing. This was very difficult to accept and seemed to be the end of my professional life. However, I was referred to the VA Vocational Rehabilitation Program which gave me a great deal of support as I pursued a Doctorate in Public Health at the Yale School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut. During my studies, I acquired new skills and tools to understand health care systems. Statistical data and research was a very important component to both my course of study and my advocacy. We often hear the mantra “speak truth to power” but I learned that words are empty if you don’t have the facts to back them up. Thus my advocacy for Veterans has been both my vocation and my scholarly pursuit.

I understand well the vital mission that the VA’s Office for Policy and Planning (OPP) has in developing strategic plans; coordinating strategic resource allocation; producing verifiable data and predictive models; integrating business processes and programs; and delivering unbiased program analyses and evaluations to provide the reliable information needed to make informed decisions on VA programs and services. I am a firm believer in accountability: accountability to Veterans, accountability to Congress and accountability to the American people. As a researcher, I am a seeker of truth. I use data, science and evidence-based research to guide my thinking and conclusions. However, I believe that this information must also be tempered with the realities of providing services to Veterans that are consistent with delivery systems available in the 21st century. For VA to accomplish its core mission of serving our Veterans, it is imperative that accountability, quality, and effectiveness continue to be a priority at every service level. Housed within OPP are several “business lines” which are tasked with analysis and evaluation. I welcome the opportunity to review the activities of these offices to continue to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of VA’s services and programs.

The needs of today’s Veterans and their families are growing. Just as our military has changed, the needs of our Veterans and their families have changed, and VA is transforming as an organization to meet them. In order to assure that Veterans across this Nation receive the very best VA has to offer, we must continue to challenge the

status quo. Today's Veterans and their families have a vast array of needs and concerns which can range from housing and transportation to childcare and short-term financial and employment issues. We need to build on existing partnerships with Federal and State government agencies, our Veteran Service Organizations, the private-sector, communities, volunteers, and faith-based community. Partnerships are cost-effective and efficient utilization of existing resources is imperative to creating a quality continuum of care for all of America's Veterans. These partnerships help VA to address issues at the local level where Veterans live and work.

I believe VA's interagency collaboration with the Department of Defense (DOD) must continue to be a major priority. These relationships are a vital foundation for serving Veterans now and in the future. Congress has authorized benefits and programs which are worthy of the sacrifices Veterans have made to win and sustain the freedoms we all enjoy. The dialogue between VA and DOD remains a key element to how the Servicemember will receive those services and benefits. If confirmed, the interface with DOD will be one of my top priorities.

The face of America's Veteran population is changing dramatically and the expectation for service delivery is no longer based on perceptions, traditions and accepted standards that were applicable 50 years ago. I believe VA can keep pace with the expectations of its consumer base by continuing to create and nurture an atmosphere for new ideas and initiatives that meet the broad range of issues and problems facing Veterans of every generation.

Upon entering his position, Secretary Shinseki set in motion an aggressive and ambitious transformation of VA. I am honored to be asked to assist in this continued effort of change to ensure Veterans now and in the future receive the respect, care and assistance they have earned and deserve. Veterans are in every town and city in this Nation; these are our friends, family members, and neighbors. Addressing the needs of Veterans is greatly influenced by where they live, economic conditions, access to transportation, and the care available in their immediate location.

For the past 40 years, I have devoted my life and profession to caring for others as a practicing nurse, researcher and as an advocate for Veterans. “Keeping faith” with the men and women who have served and are serving in the military has been the fundamental and overriding purpose of my work and a “guide star” for my life journey. These experiences will be a positive addition to VA’s leadership team. As one who remembers the evolution from the Veterans Administration to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, I see that this is an opportune time to effect meaningful change. Challenging the status quo and assuring a continuum of services that are worthy of the Veterans we serve are what I intend to impact through leadership, collaboration and a team approach.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.