

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray

Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Hearing: Nomination of Dr. Tommy Sowers to be Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs

July 18, 2012

“Good morning and welcome to today’s hearing to consider the nomination of Dr. Tommy Sowers to be Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs for the Department of Veterans Affairs. I am pleased to welcome Dr. Sowers and his numerous family members and friends. I also want to recognize our former colleague, Senator Max Cleland.

In a moment, we will hear all about the nominee’s qualifications when he is introduced by Senator McCaskill.

I will also spend a moment talking about the office he has been nominated to lead and the issues he will confront, if confirmed. As the second largest department in the federal government, VA’s reach is extensive.

The Department of Veterans Affairs: serves more than 8 million veterans’ health care needs every year, delivers compensation and pension benefits to more than 4 million veterans, provides life insurance to approximately 7 million active duty members and veterans, provides burial honors for nearly 120,000 veterans and eligible family members, and delivers more than 10 billion dollars’ worth of education assistance every year.

Dr. Sowers, you have been nominated to lead an office that is charged with providing veterans and their families with the latest information on all of the services, benefits and programs VA offers, for an organization that, as the Secretary often says, is the equivalent of a Fortune 15 company. If confirmed as the Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, you will play a key role in meeting the President’s challenge of transforming VA.

One of the key responsibilities of this position is to oversee the Department's outreach efforts. In recent years, the Department has increased its efforts to transform from a reactive to a proactive organization by creating an Outreach Office to make more veterans aware of their benefits. It has also increasingly focused on new and social media, like Facebook and Twitter. However, with nearly 50 percent of eligible Iraq and Afghanistan veterans still not using VA health care, the Department clearly has more work to do if it is going to expand its reach to more veterans, regardless of where they live or how they access information

As Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, you will be called upon to publicly respond to incidents, both good and bad, that will have a direct impact on the level of trust veterans place in VA.

Members of this Committee have seen all too often how isolated incidents at local VA facilities, and the failure to respond with sufficient information in response to those incidents, have negatively impacted the perception of VA as a whole.

In addition to serving as a spokesman for VA, you will also have responsibility for overseeing the Department's relationships with the rest of the federal government, including DoD, as well as with state and local governments. These relationships are critical to the Department's ability to deliver the highest quality care and benefits to this country's veterans, and cut across issues ranging from homelessness and housing issues, to small business and seamless transition issues.

This is an important position, and one whose impact will be felt by veterans of all generations all across the country.

I look forward to hearing your testimony and learning about your plans, if confirmed.”