

Ranking Member Richard Burr

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. Welcome to you and to our colleagues. Also, I'd like to welcome our two nominees, Mr. Gould and Major Duckworth, and their friends and family members. Congratulations to both of you on your nominations. Thank you for being here today and, more importantly, thank you for your service to our nation.

As you know, the Committee's charge today is to evaluate your qualifications to serve in two very important positions at the Department of Veterans Affairs – Deputy Secretary and Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs.

Mr. Gould, if confirmed as the Deputy Secretary, you would serve as VA's Chief Operating Officer, managing VA's day-to-day activities. That means you would play a vital role in making sure that VA is effectively providing veterans and their families with a wide range of benefits and services. In overseeing these efforts to care for those who have served and sacrificed for our nation, it's clear you would face many challenges.

For starters, our nation is experiencing high unemployment rates, even higher among some of our veterans. This may lead veterans who lose their jobs to look to VA for health care for the first time. As these and other veterans come to VA, the quality of health care simply cannot be allowed to decline. That will be particularly challenging in states -- like North Carolina -- where the veteran population is growing and VA's capacity to serve them is already stressed.

We also continue to have men and women coming home from war with devastating physical and psychological wounds. For those who leave the military, we owe it to them to quickly and effectively provide the benefits and services they need to smoothly return to civilian life. But, unfortunately, too many wounded servicemembers do not experience a "seamless transition" from active duty. So, more must be done to make sure wounded warriors are not falling through the cracks.

In addition, VA is preparing for the new Post-9/11 GI Bill to take effect this fall. At a minimum, VA must make sure that veterans and their families using this program will receive their benefits on time and without mistakes. But, for VA to truly be successful, veterans and their families also must receive timely, accurate, and user-friendly information, to help them use their benefits in a way that best meets their needs.

Mr. Gould, I look forward to hearing from you today about how you would tackle these and other challenges so that veterans and their families would be well-served by VA during your tenure and in the future.

Turning to you, Major Duckworth, the position you seek also plays an important role in ensuring that veterans and their families are being well-served by VA. As the Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs, one of your most important responsibilities would be to provide veterans and their families with up-to-date information about VA's activities, benefits, and services. This is critical because VA programs cannot help improve the lives of veterans if veterans don't know about them.

In this role, you would also be responsible for fostering partnerships with organizations around

the country that are willing to work with VA in carrying out its noble mission. We have veterans in all corners of the nation, including very rural areas, and many could benefit tremendously from these efforts.

Major Duckworth, I look forward to hearing more about how you would carry out these and other important functions. Thank you again for being here and for your courageous service to our nation.

Mr. Chairman, in closing I want to thank you for calling this hearing. I think we can all agree that we need leaders in place at VA who will work every day to meet and exceed the needs of our nation's veterans and their families and, more importantly, to actually improve their lives. I look forward to working with you to make that happen.