

Chairman Patty Murray

Opening Statement of Chairman Murray
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing on the Nominations of
Allison Hickey, Brig Gen USAF (Ret), to be Under Secretary for Benefits and
Steve Muro, to be Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs
April 6th, 2011

Welcome to today's hearing to consider the nominations of Brigadier General Allison Hickey to be Under Secretary for Benefits and Steve Muro to be Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs.

Before we begin, I want to make one quick announcement about a step the Committee is taking to both embrace new technology and save Committee funds on the endless stacks of paper those of us here in Congress are all too familiar with.

Today marks the first Committee hearing that members will be using electronic tablets for testimony background on the nominees, and other resources.

This hearing also marks an important transition into filing paperwork digitally so that it is easily available for members, staff, and our veterans.

As Chairman, I believe that it is important - particularly at a time when we are counting on the VA to make some very big and overdue changes to their IT systems - that we as a committee are taking whatever steps we can to improve the sharing of information.

I am told that we are the first Committee in the Senate to make these changes, and my hope is that it will be the first of many for this Committee aimed at improving hearings, access to information, and resources for veterans.

General Hickey, thank you for being here and welcome.

I want to say at the outset, that I commend you for accepting this nomination because, if confirmed, you will have a tremendously difficult job in front of you.

Without question, I believe that the VA disability claims system is broken.

It's broken when we have veterans waiting an average of 190 days for a claim to be adjudicated.

(over)

It's broken when we have nearly one million veterans currently caught in a backlog that continues to climb.

And it's broken when our veterans have simply lost faith in the system.

If confirmed, you will be looked upon to fix this broken system AND to reduce the skyrocketing backlog of claims that it has produced.

You will be asked to think boldly about a problem that has vexed your predecessors.

And you will need to move quickly on innovative solutions – including viable technological changes – if we are going to begin to turn this problem around.

It will not be easy.

In fact, just last month I got a first-hand look at the problem you face.

During a trip to the Seattle Regional VA Office I saw the impact that paper alone has on an employee's ability to process a claim.

I saw huge files, as thick as phone books, but completely devoid of organization – making it impossible to find anything easily, and even harder to develop into paperless files.

I heard about claims that should be getting expedited treatment but that clearly were not.

In fact, it took the Regional Office nearly nine months to expedite the claim for a veteran terminally ill with cancer.

The veteran's claim was finally granted, three days after the veteran died.

This is wholly unacceptable and needs to change.

Our veterans, especially those who are most vulnerable;

Those who are terminally ill or homeless or in danger of becoming homeless – deserve better than the way that some VA offices are treating them.

And I know from my many years on this committee that this problem is not in one pocket of the country – it's widespread.

The problems I saw in Seattle are not just an isolated incident, it is one example of a problem that has plagued the VA.

And it is a problem that is growing.

The VA knew that more Agent Orange claims would be coming into the system but the claims have still overwhelmed the new case workers that Congress provided funding to hire.

The VA knows more and more OIF and OEF veterans will be making claims, and we need assurance that VA is preparing for this influx of new claims.

(Over)

General Hickey, while I am impressed by the credentials you bring to this job, I have to believe this is a job like no other you have had before and a challenge that you may not face again.

But it is one of the biggest we have to meet.

If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with you to address this issue, because we cannot allow our veterans to wait for the benefits they have earned any longer.

Mr. Muro, thank you for also joining with us today.

Mr. Muro, if confirmed, you will be responsible for maintaining the high-level of service and customer satisfaction in the National Cemetery Administration.

Obviously, over the last year - and again last week - we have read with horror about the disgraceful management of Arlington National Cemetery.

Unorganized records and sloppy management there have led to a tragedy not only for the families of service members buried on those hallowed grounds but for our country as a whole.

I believe that we need to get Arlington on track.

Arlington must be known as a place of comfort to families, efficiency of administration, and a model of customer service equal to that of VA's National Cemeteries which you will be tasked with managing.

I look forward to hearing from you about what we can do to ensure that these management failures never happen at our VA cemeteries.

I also look forward to discussing the other challenges you will face, including meeting the unprecedented need for additional capacity in heavily populated urban areas.

Again, I want to thank both General Hickey and Mr. Muro for being here today. I look forward to your testimony.