

**Statement of Raymond M. Jefferson
Nominee for Under Secretary for Benefits
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

**Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Hearing to Consider Pending Nominations
April 27, 2022**

Chairman Tester, Ranking Member Moran, Distinguished Members of the Committee on Veterans Affairs:

Thank you for your service to our nation, your commitment to our nation's Veterans, and your consideration of my nomination. I am honored to seek your advice and consent for the privilege of serving our Veterans as the Under Secretary for Benefits.

This week, I had the opportunity to meet with many of you and your staffs. I've listened carefully as you shared your priorities and concerns, and benefited from your advice, ideas and insights about how the team at VBA can enhance our service in accomplishing the mission of providing benefits to Servicemembers, Veterans and their Families, Caregivers and Survivors. Your unwavering support and commitment to helping Veterans and Veteran-serving organizations is inspiring.

I am honored and humbled to be nominated by President Biden to serve as the Under Secretary for Benefits. I am also deeply grateful for the confidence both the President and Secretary McDonough have in me to help them achieve their vision for VA. I also want to acknowledge First Lady Dr. Jill Biden's and Vice-President Kamala Harris' heartfelt commitment to our nation's Servicemembers, Veterans and their Families, Caregivers and Survivors.

I am joined today by my mother, Mrs. Nadia Jefferson of Guilderland, New York. My mother is Egyptian-American – she immigrated to America and spent her career here as a teacher's aide for physically-challenged children. My father, an African-American, was the Deputy Director for New York State's Department of Mental Health. His father worked as a butler and a chauffeur, and his mother worked as a maid. My father passed away several years ago, but I know he is here in spirit and proud of what he sees. Both my mother and father were lifelong public servants. I am a product of their upbringing, and of America's public school system. I also want to acknowledge and thank my other family members,

friends and mentors for their steadfast support throughout my life, and to express my appreciation for the many teachers who invested in my education. They have each played a role in my being here today.

Distinguished Members of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, I come before you today to ask for the privilege of serving our nation's Veterans. I am passionate about serving Veterans – and about the opportunity to do so with the team at VBA in particular – because it was a VBA program that transformed my life.

My own personal story of service started when I graduated from West Point in 1988 with a major in leadership, commissioned in the infantry, and then held leadership positions in the Presidential Honor Guard, 75th Ranger Regiment and 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne). On Friday, October 18, 1995, while attempting to protect my teammates from a defective hand-grenade that was detonating prematurely during a classified Special Forces training mission, I lost all five fingers on my left, non-dominant hand. That moment changed my life forever.

My personal journey as a disabled Veteran and an amputee has given me a firsthand understanding and appreciation for the needs that our Veterans have and the challenges that many Veterans experience as they seek services from VBA. The initial days after my accident were not easy – they were often filled with sadness, worry and uncertainty about my future.

At the time, I thought my life was over and that there was nothing to live for. I was afraid that things would never be okay again. That experience taught me humility, empathy, and the importance of being able to ask for help.

I know personally what it's like to have your life changed in an instant and to struggle to put it back together.

I know how difficult it can be for a Veteran to ask for help.

I know what it's like to lose your sense of direction and the sense of purpose, meaning and significance that comes from being in the military.

And I know this journey is one that many other Veterans have experienced.

I can relate to Veterans and Servicemembers who are going through unplanned or difficult life transitions, because I've gone through them myself.

During that time, I received tremendous support throughout my recuperation from my family, friends, the Army and also people at the Department of Veterans Affairs. That support, and many answered prayers, were the reasons that I was able to move forward and build a meaningful life.

By participating in the Veterans Benefits Administration's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program (now called Veteran Readiness and Employment, or VR&E), I was able to receive the support and financial assistance needed to build a future for myself and to achieve a dream – earning an MBA and an MPA from Harvard University. I know firsthand the power, potential and capability that VBA's programs and services have to transform the lives of Veterans and transitioning Servicemembers – to help us achieve our goals and to realize our dreams in the next phase of our lives. The name of my Voc Rehab counselor was Rick Reppucci and we've stayed in touch to this very day.

My life's purpose is to help people and organizations to **dream big**, overcome their challenges and achieve their potential. This is exactly what VBA's VR&E program enabled me to do. It played an invaluable role in preparing me to later serve as a White House Fellow and Special Assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, the Deputy Director for the State of Hawaii's Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism (DBEDT) and a Leadership Consultant with one of the world's premier consulting firms.

Today, my service to Veterans continues through my role as co-founder and Chair of a nonprofit endeavor called the Service Academies Global Summit – the first time in history that graduates of all five U.S. service academies come together for professional development, networking and service to society.

I've been a recipient of VA benefits or had engagement with VA in some manner for over 22 years. In addition to VR&E, I also receive VA disability compensation and medical care.

In 2008, I had the privilege of being nominated by President Barack Obama, and being confirmed by this distinguished committee, to serve as the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Veterans' Employment and Training at the U.S. Department of Labor. During that hearing, I promised to work in a close, collaborative manner with Congress and our other partners and stakeholders to achieve the best possible outcomes for Veterans and transitioning Servicemembers so that they succeed. Once confirmed, I kept my promise, and worked in an inclusive, bipartisan manner to get results and achieve better outcomes, doing so by working with the Members

and staff of this committee; the agency team; the VSOs and Military Service Organizations; other federal departments like VA, DoD, and OPM; the private sector, state agencies, nonprofits and other stakeholders. By working together then, we were able to make a difference that is still lasting today.

- 1) We created and launched the “Hiring Our Heroes” program in 2011 in partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, which is still ongoing and has provided employment to over 617,000 Veterans and Military Spouses to date.
- 2) In 2011, we completely transformed and revamped what was then the obsolete, 19-year-old, Transition Assistance Program’s Employment Workshop, benchmarked it to national and global best practices such as having an Individual Transition Plan, and it now better serves about 200,000 Veterans and transitioning Service Members annually.
- 3) We also implemented a performance management system that allowed us to assess the effectiveness of every program and region, established a comprehensive talent development and culture change program, created a partnership with Job Corps to increase employment outcomes for young Veterans and launched a Rural Veterans Employment Outreach Initiative to connect in-person with Veterans in rural areas to inform them of their employment benefits and help them access those benefits.

Before proceeding further, I want to recognize two very important groups. First, I would like to recognize the 25,000 team members who work at VBA and rose to the occasion during the time of Covid. In FY 2021, they provided services and benefits to over 16 million Veterans, their Families, Caregivers, Survivors and transitioning Servicemembers. VBA is currently being co-led by Tom Murphy, the Acting Under Secretary for Benefits, and Mike Frueh, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Benefits. Together, Tom and Mike have over 30 years of distinguished service to VBA and Veterans. I honor and respect what VBA’s leadership team and team members do each and every day to serve our nation’s Veterans.

The second group I want to honor and recognize is the many national Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and the numerous Military Service Organizations. Their work is noble, and they provide a necessary and invaluable combination of services to the men and women who have served our nation, and their Families, Caregivers and Survivors. Their counsel has been invaluable to me over the years

and I'm grateful for the friendships that we've formed. If confirmed, I would continue to engage with them proactively and regularly to seek their advice on addressing challenges, making improvements and enhancing Veterans' overall experience at VBA.

Secretary McDonough is committed to making VA the premier agency for ensuring the well-being of America's Veterans, working to eliminate Veteran homelessness and reduce suicides, for VA to welcome ALL Veterans, and to helping our Veterans build civilian lives of opportunity with the education and jobs worthy of their skills and talents. I believe in and share these commitments.

If confirmed, I commit to the following:

- 1) First, everything I do will be done with transparency and accountability throughout. I agree with Secretary McDonough that these must be the life-blood of the VA, and I pledge to lead with a high level of openness with this Committee, Veterans, and VA team members.
- 2) I believe a vision should be created in collaboration with the team that's going to execute it along with input from key stakeholders, subject matter experts and the communities VBA serves. I will engage those communities, VBA team members, Congress, the VSOs, Military Service Organizations, and other stakeholders. I will also spend time in the field listening directly to Veterans, team members and other stakeholders. Understanding VBA's culture will be integral to our success.
- 3) I will strive to exemplify servant leadership with a focus on
 - 1) providing the best possible outcomes and experience for the Veterans, Families, Caregivers, Survivors and transitioning Servicemembers who VBA serves, and
 - 2) helping VBA and its culture to become even more innovative and inspiring for VBA's team members so they can achieve their potential, perform at their best, and derive a deep sense of purpose, meaning and significance from being part of VA.
- 4) VA's core values are Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence, better known as I-CARE. I will serve, lead, manage and innovate so that we at VBA will fully live and manifest these five core values in our interactions with and service to Veterans.

- 5) VBA is part of a team at VA, and I would be committed to working with my colleagues and other offices within VA in a collaborative and synergistic manner. Moreover, I would endeavor to have the best possible relationship with the Under Secretary for Health and the Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs so that VBA, VHA and NCA – and the senior staffs of our organizations – work together as effectively and productively as possible.

At the same time that I would be learning more about VBA and the opportunities for improvement, we know that there are already important matters that will require attention.

- 1) The first of these priorities is addressing the claims backlog, preparing for pending legislation, such as the PACT Act, and improving the overall efficiency, proficiency and accuracy of claims processing, which includes Veterans' satisfaction.
- 2) A second priority would be further enhancing the effectiveness and outcomes from VBA's programs in the areas of transition, employment and economic development.
- 3) I believe VA is a national treasure. A third priority would be leading the organization and helping it to continue develop in a manner that is continual, progressive and dynamic – one that synchronizes people, processes, programs, technology and performance measurement. The team members at VBA, many of whom are Veterans, are our greatest asset. The VBA team deserves the best training, the right tools and an inspiring work environment that reflects the noble purpose of the work they do. If confirmed, my aspiration will be that VBA becomes among the best places to work in the federal government, a place that recruits and retains talented people who come because they share the passion for serving Veterans, the commitment to public service, the expectation of excellence and because they appreciate VBA's reputation for valuing team members and helping them to achieve their potential.

President Biden has said that our commitment to Veterans is our most solemn promise as a nation. VBA's service to Veterans powerfully honors that promise. If I am confirmed, our success will be measured by the impact our programs have on helping Veterans and transitioning Service Members build civilian lives of opportunity and achieve their dreams and aspirations.

Distinguished Members of this Committee, I am prepared to fulfill the responsibilities of the Under Secretary role and to steward the agency, its people, programs and resources in the manner that Veterans deserve and to which Secretary McDonough is committed.

I'm grateful to this Committee for its long history of unwavering, bipartisan commitment to Veterans and I look forward to your questions.