

ROBERT E. WALLACE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WASHINGTON OFFICE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

STATEMENT OF

ROBERT E. WALLACE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
WASHINGTON OFFICE  
VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE

WITH RESPECT TO

THE NOMINATION OF MICHAEL J. KUSSMAN, M.D.

WASHINGTON, DC

MAY 16, 2007

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

I am pleased to appear before you today representing the 2.4 million men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW) and our Auxiliaries. I am here to discuss the nomination of Brigadier General Michael J. Kussman, M.D (United States Army Ret.) to be the Under Secretary for Health for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

It is my privilege to offer the strong support of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States for Dr. Kussman, a man we believe is clearly qualified for this vital position, and whom we feel sincerely and honestly cares about veterans and the issues that confront them. He will be an excellent Under Secretary for Health.

I am also pleased to note for the record that my colleagues of the AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America and the Vietnam Veterans of America join with the VFW in supporting Dr. Kussman's nomination.

I come before you today, not just as a veterans advocate, but as a VA shareholder. I earned my stock when I wore the uniform of this great nation, like millions of other veterans have. Just as a shareholder of a corporation wants the best leadership for the company they have invested in, veterans demand strong, effective and efficient leadership of the Department in which we all have so much invested.

We have all witnessed over the years problems that VHA has encountered. So many times the issues could have been prevented if there were true leadership, management and accountability at all levels of the system. Dr. Kussman's experience demonstrates that he possesses these and many other qualities that make him the right person for the position. His years of service in the United States Army rising to the rank of Brigadier General of the Medical Corps shows he is a

leader, knows how to work with others, and knows how to manage people, holding them accountable and motivating them.

Dr. Kussman was selected as the top candidate for this position by an independent search committee, a requirement of Congress. You made this a requirement, I believe, to ensure the highest quality and most professional candidates would be recommended for this position, and that no undue influence would play into the process.

I did not serve on this search committee; however, I have served on search committees in the past, and can attest to the fierce independence of the process. Dr. Kussman's selection as the top candidate of the three recommended to the Secretary is a strong indication that his credentials and interview impressed the committee -- many of whom are not involved in the day-to-day operation of VHA. It further demonstrates that they too felt he would be a capable, independent and effective leader.

The VFW's support for Dr. Kussman is not just based on the search committee's recommendation. That just reaffirmed our beliefs that he is the right person for the position. Our beliefs are based on our personal experiences interacting with him on health care issues faced by our nation's veterans.

Dr. Kussman cares deeply about veterans and the issues confronting their health care and well-being. He is highly responsive to their needs. In conversations, you can tell his sincerity. When we differ on policy issues or have policy-related questions, he does not hesitate to give us a fair hearing, and is open to ideas whether he ultimately agrees with us or not.

That is all we -- VA's shareholders -- can ask for from the head of the Veterans Health Administration.

That truly is his strength. He cares passionately about VA's mission to help veterans and their dependents. And he takes criticism of the system personally, leading him to strive for excellence, and in doing so to motivate others. He is not full of excuses when mistakes are made, and we have found that he takes a personal approach to solving problems, ensuring that the best care is provided to veterans in VA.

Dr. Kussman can rightfully pride himself on the high quality of veterans' health care. Since 2000, he has been part of VHA, a period in which VHA has rightfully been lauded for the high quality of its health care. Many articles in major publications have said VHA delivers the best care any where.

- A 2004 RAND study found that VA hospitals outperformed private facilities in over 294 categories of care.
- The 2006 American Customer Satisfaction Index found that veterans had a 10% higher satisfaction rate with VA health care than the general public has with private hospitals.
- VA is at the forefront of advances in medical records technology, and their electronic medical records system is the envy of the medical care field.
- VA health care is significantly cheaper per patient than private health care and efficiency of service has kept the increase in per patient costs far below the overall costs of medical inflation.

His personal philosophy is to continue to improve on these facts and the quality of care delivered, and to never allow the care given to our nation's veterans to diminish, just improve.

Certainly the system is not perfect. Access, especially for specialty care, continues to be a challenge; although we would argue that this is a function of a lack of dedicated and on-time resources, not one of administration. Once in the system, veterans are very pleased and typically receive the best of care. There have been some high profile examples recently where this has not been the case, and I do not want to make light of them, but we are confident that Dr. Kussman's leadership, and his strong desire and dedication to improving VA health care will do much to fix these situations. Dr. Kussman has demonstrated a deep concern about the health issues facing all veterans, especially those with specialized needs, and those serving today. He wants to have VA learn more about traumatic brain injuries as well as improve on the delivery of mental health care.

One of the challenges he will face is finding qualified clinicians who fully understand the new challenges brought on by the war, and to help the thousands of returning service members who need first-rate mental health care and specialized services. We are confident that he is up to the challenge.

We feel that his years of experience managing health care facilities and systems give him the knowledge and experience to understand the business side of VHA and how to best use taxpayer's money in an efficient way while still delivering high-quality health care. Those years of experience demonstrate that he is more than qualified to lead the thousands of hard-working and dedicated employees within VHA.

Further, we believe he is a man who will not be afraid to butt heads with the Office of Management and Budget for proper funding, the Congress or the Department of Defense (DOD).

Many of the issues and challenges VHA faces today will be helped by Dr. Kussman's military experience. All of us in Washington have been talking about a true system where DOD and VA create a seamless transition for military personnel to veterans' status. We believe that if anyone can make that happen, it is Dr. Kussman, because he understands both systems and knows the necessity of creating such a system for the care and treatment of our wounded warriors, ensuring that they receive the benefits they have rightly earned by their honorable service to our nation.

The VFW sincerely believes Dr. Michael Kussman is the right person to lead the Veterans Health Administration and we cast our unanimous votes -- our shares -- for his immediate confirmation.

Mr. Chairman, as I mentioned earlier, the VFW is joined by the AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Vietnam Veterans of America in strongly supporting the nomination of Dr. Michael Kussman for the position of Under Secretary for Health, Veterans Health Administration, Department of Veterans Affairs.

We urge this committee to favorably report his nomination to the full Senate, and we would ask your colleagues to confirm him as the Under Secretary of Health without delay.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.